

the space between us

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by [noisehues](#)

Summary

When the Hollander family trip to Moscow comes to an end, 8-year-old Shane swears he's never going to see Ilya again. He parts from his summer friend with a heavy heart and the certainty that that's the end of their budding friendship.

Over a decade later, Ilya walks into his life again, all grown and handsome; his thick accent is a hint, but what gives his identity away is the bracelet tied around his wrist. There should be no reason for Ilya to be in Montreal, *and yet* here he is.

Shane takes a deep breath and reintroduces himself, completely unaware of the whirlwind Ilya is about to take him in.

Notes

okay, so. in case you're not aware, hollanov has consumed my entire life. this fic wasn't supposed to be this long (famous last words), but i also have no idea what i expected when i started writing it. i just let them take a life of their own and i was merely their vessel for storytelling. please be kind to me and them and treat them tenderly. burnout has been beating my ass, and i'm just happy that i was even able to finish this

also, just fyi: they call each other by their first names throughout the entire story! so don't expect any canon freakout from being called by their first names pls

i might have forgotten some tags but that's literally me every time i write anything. i'll keep adding if i recall any important ones!

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See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

Shane is eight the first and only time he sets foot in Moscow. He remembers the flowers blooming in beautiful colors, and the sky being the brightest above him all summer. Shane is eight, and he doesn't know why he's in Russia—this unfamiliar place he doesn't speak the language of.

It's hard for him to adapt, but that may be because he's just a child. Or maybe it's because he doesn't like the way people look at him.

He stands behind his mom at the grocery store when she tries to buy him cereal one morning, because it's the one thing he trusts to eat these days, and watches as the cashiers give her a nasty look before ripping the money out of her hands. They leave the store with the cereal and no change, and Shane wishes he could apologize to his mom. Her hand is a firm grasp in his, though, reassuring in a way Shane has long learned to find comfort in.

He doesn't open his mouth to complain even once.

Shane doesn't ask his mom why they're here because it doesn't seem appropriate to; it feels almost impossible to ask why his dad is never home. Or, well, in their temporary summer home with them. There are two bedrooms in the small apartment, but Shane is more often than not sharing a bed with his mom when sleeping seems like the biggest challenge he's ever been through. When the night hours drag on too late and his dad still isn't back.

Shane is eight and in a foreign country, but even then he can tell that his mother is doing her best, so he ends up having a decent enough summer away from home. Shane is away from the comfort of his bedroom, of his friends, of everything he's ever known. He's in an unfamiliar place, slightly overstimulated, and he's grateful for every grain of normalcy his mom tries to bring his way.

For a while, though, it doesn't seem like it will help. His mom leaves the apartment at around nine, with Shane in tow, his eyes locked onto the gravel path that takes them to the local park. The screaming of the other children there bothers Shane in ways he can't quite put into words, so he chooses to hide behind his mom's long skirt. It's not like she can communicate with the other moms in the park; she speaks as much Russian as eight-year-old Shane does.

By the end of their first week there, once Shane is starting to miss their home, things seem to flip on its head. Or, at least, that's what it feels like to him when he sees the little Russian boy with blue eyes tug harshly at the hand of the adult with him before he rushes up to Shane. His eyes are filled with curiosity, his hands frantic as he gestures around the very few toys Shane had brought to the park with him.

He doesn't know what the boy is saying. His smile is bright, his gestures grand, but the words get lost in translation in Shane's small brain. That doesn't stop them from interacting, not at all; that first day at the park, they make do with the noises their mouths can make and the gestures their hands can translate into universal expressions. Shane may not understand a single thing this Russian boy says, but he would like to believe that he found a friend in him.

Until he tries to get his hands on Shane's toy truck, that is. The gift his dad had given him the day he turned six, and he refused to part with ever since. His mom didn't even want to let him bring it to Moscow with them—they'd only be away for the summer, after all, and she was sure Shane could make do without it. Only that he couldn't, and the tantrum he threw when she tried to convince him to leave it behind wasn't intentional. It was irrational, and Shane still struggles to understand why he reacted the way he did.

The shriek Shane lets out makes the boy drop the truck immediately, his eyes wide as he clutches his hands to his chest. Shane's heart is racing in his ribcage when he picks the truck off the ground, his face pulled into a tight frown as he inspects it for damage.

"Shane!" His mother calls from the bench she's sat on, her shoulders set with tension as she reprimands him. "He just wants to play!"

"No," he says firmly with a shake of his head, looking at the boy. "Not this one. You can play with the others."

The boy says something in Russian that Shane is hopeless to understand, so the words do nothing to appease him. When the boy doesn't move, still keeping his hands to himself, Shane picks up another one of his toys and pushes it towards him, lips still turned down with a scowl. But then the boy smiles, something shy that barely reaches his eyes, gets the toy from Shane's hand, and Shane finally relaxes again.

Things settle like nothing ever happened. They spend all morning playing at the park, and when his mom says it's time to leave for lunch—they can't leave his dad waiting—Shane is more than a little sad to let go. He wants to tell the boy he hopes to see him again, but even if he did, the words would mean nothing to him. All he can do is wave goodbye as his mom urges him forward with a hand firmly pressed to his back.

"Mom," Shane calls once they stop at a crossing, waiting for the cars to stop. His hands are fists as he grabs onto the straps of his backpack. "How do you say '*what's your name*' in Russian?"

His mom looks down at him with a difficult expression on her face. "I don't know, sweetheart," she says, gently patting the back of his head. "I will ask your dad."

"Okay," he says with a pout, bouncing on his heels.

And that is that for the rest of the day. They meet with his dad at a nice restaurant, and his mother doesn't bring up his question to him even though she makes sure to comment that Shane had made a new friend. He knows better than to not pester his parents with useless, annoying questions, so he keeps it to himself and lets the day roll away.

That night is the first time in the week and a half since they got here that his dad gets home at a decent hour. Shane resigns himself to the spare bedroom, tucked tightly under the blankets because it's the only way he feels safe to sleep alone away from home. He leaves the night lamp on, and even though sleep weighs heavily in his eyes, it takes him a while to fall asleep.

He doesn't catch his mom walking into the room that night, but when Shane wakes up the next morning, there's a torn piece of paper on the nightstand, his mother's calligraphy a struggle to read through. His heart jumps happily in his chest when he finally manages to figure the words out: *'My name is Shane, what is yours? Let's be friends'* with the Russian translation written below every word, phonetically spelled out with little notes from his mom as instructions on how he could better say it.

It's still early in the morning, but a big smile plays on his lips as he reads the words over and over again.

The problem is: Shane doesn't see the boy again for days. He keeps dragging his mom back to that same park in hopes that they will meet again, and he keeps being met with disappointment. His mom tries to offer him some comfort and even buys him ice cream without him having to ask for it, but it's impossible for Shane to stop sulking.

It's been almost a week since they first (and last) met, and Shane stubbornly carries the paper his mom had written for him in the pocket of every pair of pants and shorts he wears outside. He thinks he might finally give up if they fail to meet again, mostly because his mom can see that he's sad, and he doesn't want her to ask too many questions, but *then*.

Shane sees his curls first, his body hunched over the sand bank as he works on the foundations of a castle. Shane runs without warning, his mom yelling after him when his hand slips from her grasp, but that does nothing to stop him. He drops his backpack filled with toys by the edge of the sand bank and carelessly steps onto the sand, startling the boy and making him knock over the second level of his castle's tower.

Fumbling with his pocket for a second, Shane pulls out the crumpled piece of paper and, with his heart beating quickly, he says in butchered Russian: "My name is Shane, what is yours?"

The boy blinks up at him, momentarily confused, almost looking like it's hard to make out the words that Shane is trying to say. Shane bites the insides of his cheeks, anxiety starting to curl its ugly tendrils around his stomach and his throat. Did he not say it properly? He mentally goes over the words his mom had written down for him, but then the boy softly says, "Ilya," with the nicest smile Shane has had directed at him since they got here.

Ilya's smile reflects his own. "Let's be friends," he quickly adds in his broken Russian, and Ilya's curls bounce when he nods.

Shane makes peace with the fact that he'll be away from home for a while after that. They still don't manage to meet every day to play—either because his mom drags him with her when she has other things to do, or because Ilya doesn't show up, and it's hard to make plans when neither of them speak the other's language, and their mothers, too, are helpless to communicate.

Well, at least Shane thinks the woman who brings Ilya to the park is his mother. There is no way she isn't—just like Shane looks exactly like his mom, he can tell that Ilya is almost a carbon copy of the woman with him. They have the same blue eyes, the same curly hair, almost the same moles scattered on their faces.

The days start to pass too quickly when Shane thought they would drag on forever. He almost wishes they did, now that he's found a friend; now that it isn't just him and his mom and the judging eyes that always fall on them. The week before they leave, he starts growing anxious. Anxious that he can't tell Ilya he will be going back home soon, that this is probably the last time they will see each other again.

It's been nice not to feel like he has to be someone else to fit in. Shane is still so young, but he knows that he's not like other kids. It's not that his friends back home are mean to him, but every now and then, and especially when Shane is growing tired and irritable, they will tell him how exhausting he can be. That he's no fun, that he should just go back home. Maybe the language barrier between him and Ilya is a good thing. So Ilya can't tell him those same ugly things.

He asks his mom to buy something Ilya could remember him by. Insists on it even when she gives him a weird look, asking if he's sure. Shane drags her across the street from their apartment, to a small gift shop he had looked into with curious eyes every time they walked past it. He isn't sure of what he wants, but he knows they will find something.

His attention quickly gets drawn to a basket on a stool, filled with bracelets held together by red thread. The beads weaved through vary in color and sizes, and Shane takes his time digging through them in search of something he likes. He would love to find one with a small maple leaf engraved on a bead, but this isn't a Canadian gift shop. Red and white is as much of Canada as he can hope to gift Ilya, an extremely distant memory of his country.

He doesn't find a maple leaf, but he finds one with a little sun charm squashed between the beads. Canada is mostly known for snow instead of sun, but something about this bracelet calls to him; he keeps it in a tight grip as he keeps going through the basket, until he finds another one he's satisfied with. The second bracelet looks much like the other—threaded in red, but the beads are black, and instead of a sun, a bear sits between the plastic beads.

Shane rushes to his mom, pushing the two bracelets into her open palm as she tries to get him to slow down. It isn't much, but it's something Ilya can carry around if he wants. If this summer meant as much to him as it did to Shane.

They meet at the same park again, one last time—even if Ilya doesn't know this is the last time. Today, he's pushing himself on the swing set, Ilya's mom watching him from a bench nearby. She spots Shane and his mom before Ilya does, and the smile she offers them seems kind.

Shane's mom doesn't try to hold him back when he sprints to the swings. Ilya spots him when he's high up in the sky, and even from the ground Shane sees the brightness of the smile Ilya greets him with. Ilya digs his heels into the ground on his way down, forcing the swing to stop. He gestures to the empty one next to him, says something in Russian, and waits for Shane to take place before he starts swinging again.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," Shane says even if Ilya won't understand him. He would feel terrible if they left and he never said anything. "I almost wish we didn't, but I miss home."

Ilya is listening to him, but he doesn't respond. Of course.

“I wish you could come visit us,” he says, trying to keep the pout out of his voice. He’s so upset, and the frustration building up in his chest is making him feel like he wants to cry. “We have a big yard, and...” He sighs. “You can’t even understand me.”

Ilya tilts his head at that, squinting his eyes like he’s trying really hard to make sense of what Shane is trying to say.

“We probably won’t meet again, so I thought...” Shane slows his swing to a stop, shoving a hand into the pocket of his shorts. He takes out both bracelets. “This one is for you.”

Ilya opens his palm when Shane stretches his hand, and Shane deposits the one with the sun into it. Ilya is quick to tie the bracelet around his wrist; it sits loosely on him, but not enough for it to fall. Shane puts his on as well.

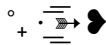
“So we can remember,” he finishes off, swallowing back the tears.

“Thank you,” Ilya says, in English, his accent thick. It catches Shane so off guard that a few tears spill down his cheeks. He quickly dries them off, but not quick enough that Ilya doesn’t notice. The other frowns at him, switching back to Russian when he next speaks. Shane’s frustration is about to grow when Ilya holds up a pinky to him.

Shane snuffles back the stupid tears he didn’t mean to shed, and locks his pinky with Ilya’s.

The interaction doesn’t last very long. Ilya’s mom calls for him, a worried look on her face as she wraps her arms around herself. Ilya jumps off the swing almost immediately, so abruptly that his feet slip under him. Ilya still offers him one last smile before he runs off, waving the hand he has his bracelet on as a final goodbye. Shane wishes they didn’t have to leave, but it’s over now.

He watches, with his chest feeling tight, as Ilya’s mom grabs him by the hand and walks him out of the park. A sad ending to a good summer, but at least Shane will take a small piece of it back home with him.



Shane dreams of a day when he won’t have to live off his parents’ money. They don’t pay for his bills, but they pay for his apartment, his tuition, and his car. And while he’s grateful for the help, on most days he can’t help but feel like a burden. They say they do it out of love,

but Shane knows—at least he thinks he knows—that it’s just because they know he can’t do it on his own.

He could have stayed in Ottawa. It would have been easier. His mom was willing to beg for him to stay, and she did. Many, many times. But, to Shane, going anywhere but his dad’s alma mater was out of question, even if he’s not living in a dorm like he initially wanted to—like his *dad* did back in the day. Yuna Hollander was willing to tolerate her son being away from home, but that would only happen under the circumstances *she* wanted.

She loves him. Shane knows that, and he loves his parents too, but.

It’s whatever.

He has his routine down to a T, and that’s all that really matters to him. Shane has his bulk of classes in the morning, hits the gym and studies in the afternoon, and he clocks in at work at six sharp, four times a week. Every other weekend, he drives back from Montreal to Ottawa to stay with his parents. Things are nice like this.

It’s Thursday night, and Shane has been on his feet for the past five hours, with very little breaks in between. Thursdays aren’t even nearly as bad as Fridays and Saturdays, but Shane’s coworker had called in sick an hour before their shift, and Hayden, his manager, was unable to find someone who could fill in the spot. So he’s been working the floor on his own, and exhaustion is starting to get to him.

He’s drinking some water when the door to the kitchen opens, Hayden’s head popping in as he screams, “Shane, table ten!”

Shane earns a heavy pat on the back, both out of sympathy and because the water goes down the wrong pipe. He’s quick to recompose himself, wiping the corners of his mouth with the back of his hand, wiping it on the apron tied around his waist, and then giving himself three quick sprays of hand sanitizer.

The music sounding from the restaurant’s speakers is too loud. Realistically, Shane knows that is a lie, mostly because he always makes sure to ask Hayden to keep it down when he’s on shift, but he’s tired enough that it feels like he has two speakers glued directly to his ears. He heaves a sigh, patting the pocket of his apron just to make sure his notepad is still there, glances at table ten, and grabs two menus on his way there.

“Hello,” he says on auto-pilot, a terrible smile stretching his lips. He wonders how many fake smiles he still has left to give tonight. “My name is Shane, and I will be helping you today.”

The woman sitting to his right looks up at him, her bright blonde hair falling away from her face. Her smile is too white, and her eyes a terrifying shade of blue.

“Can you bring me a diet Coke?”

“Of course,” Shane says, writing it down on his notepad. To the man sitting across from her, he asks, “Anything I can get for you?”

The man doesn't look up from the menu, but answers Shane curtly with, "Your best vodka."

His voice is deep, his accent thick. His 'r' is strong in a way Shane hasn't heard in a while. Shane writes down his order and beelines for the bar, another heavy sigh escaping him as he rips the paper from the pad. While Chris gets the simple order ready, he types it into the system.

The vodka and Coke get ready within a minute, but he waits a little longer before bringing it to the table. If he can minimize the amount of times he has to talk to them, he will. Chris leans over the bar and asks, "Did one of them not order?"

"Both did," Shane says with a shake of his head, putting both glasses on his tray. He takes far too long to grab two coasters off the small pile he can reach over the bar. "Those are the two orders."

Chris pulls a face. Shane finds a strange sort of comfort in having one other Asian man working with him. Another glass is added to the tray, this one filled with ice.

"What kind of psychopath drinks straight vodka?"

He laughs, and it doesn't feel forced. "I know."

Shane checks on the table again. Both have put the menu down, which means (hopefully) that they're done choosing what they'll eat, if anything. So, he balances the tray with their drinks on a hand and makes his way over again, without a trace of hurry. He cracks open the diet Coke first, pouring it into the iced glass and putting it in front of the scarily beautiful blonde woman. He picks up the vodka then, and the man finally looks up at him.

The face he's met with gives him pause. Handsome, sure, but that's not the only thing. Shane is sure he's seen him before, and it feels like an itch in his brain that he can't quite scratch. Blond curls frame the handsome face dotted with pretty moles. The man offers him a tight smile in thanks, and Shane blinks in an attempt to remind himself of where he is. What he's doing.

He's ready to push away whatever thought might be trying to resurface when the sleeve of the man's jacket rides up as he reaches for the cup, and Shane's breath gets caught in his throat. Even under the dim lights of the restaurant, he can make out the red thread of the bracelet tied around the man's wrist, the white beads, the faded sun. Shane's heart skips a beat, and he momentarily forgets how to speak.

It can't be, can it?

"Um," he tries, clearing his throat. It's hard for him to ignore the intense gaze the man stares him with. "A-anything I can get you to eat?"

"A Caesar's salad, please," the blonde woman says without missing a beat, crossing her arms over the table and leaning in. Exposing her cleavage to the man across from her. "And he'll have—"

“Nothing,” the reply comes quickly this time, forcing a shaky breath out of Shane.

“But I thought—”

“I’m good,” the man insists. The woman pouts, leaning back on her seat.

Shane’s fingers tighten around his pen. “Okay.”

He rushes to the kitchen to place the order, his hands starting to get clammy. There’s just no way that’s him. There’s no way there was only one of that bracelet in that damn basket all these years ago. Shane had been in Moscow for one summer, when he was eight, and he wasn’t supposed to have such clear memories of that time. He’s over twenty now. What the fuck?

What would he even be doing in Montreal, anyway? Speaking English just fine.

Shane cringes at his own thought. They were just kids at the time. People are allowed to learn new languages—and they do. *He* has. But that’s not the point. The point is—

Honestly, what point *is* he trying to make?

People travel all the time. People change. Things happen. Just because he hasn’t gone back to Russia, it doesn’t mean his former summer friend would remain trapped in that country for the rest of his life. But for him to be here, in Montreal, in Shane’s workplace *of all places*?

He wouldn’t be running himself in circles, right outside the kitchen, if they had stayed in contact since. But that happened eons ago—cellphones weren’t a thing like they are today, nor was the internet, and they couldn’t communicate to exchange addresses. Shane doubts his mother would’ve let him give their home address to someone who was essentially a stranger, anyway.

Shane had given Ilya the bracelet as a memento of the summer they’d spent together. He’d never forgotten because he, too, still wears his most of the time. But he genuinely never expected to see Ilya again. Not after so long.

He thinks he’s doing a good job of keeping it together for the rest of the night until Hayden pulls him aside, after Shane delivers the third glass of vodka to possibly-Ilya’s table. Hayden doesn’t look angry, but rather concerned. Shane swallows thickly before he even opens his mouth.

“What’s wrong with you?” Hayden asks in a hushed whisper, arms crossed over his chest.

“Nothing,” Shane answers quickly, because nothing is. At least he doesn’t think there is anything wrong. Hayden gives him a look, like he doesn’t believe a word Shane says.

“Nothing! Really!”

“Are they harassing you?”

“What? No.” Shane frowns.

“Every time I’ve seen you walk away from that table you look like you’d rather be walking into open fire.”

“That is not true,” Shane argues, because it can’t be. He’s in perfect control of the emotions showing on his face. He thinks. “Nothing is wrong, Hayden. I’m fine, I’m just... tired.”

Hayden sighs. “I know, dude. I’m sorry. Jackie almost came to help, but—”

“Jesus, no, it’s fine. There’s no need,” he shakes his head firmly. “Someone has to stay with the kids, right?”

The last thing Shane needed right now was to feel guilty over dragging a mother of three into this mess that he can very well handle by himself. And it’s not like it lasts much longer, anyway—they flag Shane for the bill not long after Hayden pulls him aside, and even if Shane is dying to ask the man if he’s really who he thinks he is, he doesn’t get the chance to.

They don’t talk outside of customer service politeness, and then Shane watches as maybe-Ilya leaves with that impossibly gorgeous woman without sparing him another glance. It makes him wish he’d been wearing his bracelet tonight. Maybe then some recognition would’ve crossed the stranger’s face as well.

Regret keeps him up way past his bedtime.

Shane is a little less miserable the following night at work, and it has everything to do with the fact that he doesn’t have to deal with a full house on his own. J.J. squeezes past him with a tray full of drinks and a dazzling smile, his body somehow moving to the beat of the music playing from the speakers. The music is louder tonight, grating on Shane’s nerves, but that tends to happen when the place is as full as it tends to be on Fridays.

He disappears into the kitchen for a few moments, trying to catch a quick break. Hayden’s going to be on his ass if he finds him hiding here, but he needs a second to get his thoughts in order. Shane had the shittiest sleep last night, and he’s been grumpy all day. He could’ve skipped gym and taken a nap before work, but that somehow sounded worse to him than exhausting his body alongside his mind.

Shane is willing to forget that last night ever happened. That it was just an awful coincidence, a glitch in the matrix, because there is simply no way that was who he thinks it was. Only that he doesn’t get the chance to, because the moment he steps out of the kitchen, he sees him again. Sitting at the bar, without a terrifyingly gorgeous woman by his side.

Chris locks eyes with him for just a split second, and Shane almost turns to leave. He can’t, though; a group of four sits at table seven, and he can’t let J.J. deal with this mess on his own.

Shane trusts that Chris can entertain the man for a while, that he doesn't immediately need a waiter if he didn't pick a table for himself.

The longer he tries to keep himself busy, though, the more he feels the urge to talk to the guy. To take the stool next to him and reintroduce himself, a sliver of hope clinging to his stupid heart that maybe Ilya still remembers him too. If that even is him, that is.

It's stupid, and he knows he can't—at least not now, anyway, while the night is in full swing.

But then, the next time he glances at the bar—out of instinct, he swears—Chris waves him over, and Shane puts on his best professional front before he goes. He has his customer service smile stuck on his face when he approaches, and Chris nods at his patron to signal that he's the one asking for him.

“What can I help you with tonight?”

Ilya's blue eyes are piercing as he looks up at him. He squares up his shoulders, fixing his slouched posture. “Can I have some fries,” he pauses for a beat, and with his voice full of confidence, he adds, “Shane.”

Of course, Shane doesn't notice the way Ilya's eyes quickly flit down to the name tag pinned to his shirt.

“Yes,” Shane tries to sound even when he speaks, but he doesn't feel much of it. “I'll be right back.”

He needs to say something. Shane is wearing the bracelet tonight, not because he was hoping Ilya would come by again, but because he wanted to. He always did. Last night was an outlier, with the way he left his apartment in a hurry after Hayden said they'd have no help. And Ilya is wearing his, too—in plain sight tonight, with his jacket hanging on the back of his bar stool.

The kitchen bell startles Shane out of his thoughts, and he hurries. He's not *eager*; it's nothing like that. His heart, however, seems to disagree, with the way it speeds up in his chest as he approaches the bar again. He slides the plate of fries over the bar top, and is met with Ilya's piercing gaze again.

Shane gathers as much courage as he can and tries: “Ilya.”

The guy before him doesn't seem surprised that Shane is calling him by name. Doesn't correct him, in case Shane had gotten it all wrong. Shane's eyes fall on Ilya's beaded bracelet for a moment, but quickly flits back up to his face. He can't keep looking Ilya in the eye for too long, but he tries.

“Shane,” Ilya says, the hint of a smile on his lips. Amusement, Shane thinks.

“It's... good to see you,” is all he manages, and he suddenly feels like an idiot. He hears Chris suppress a laugh, but when he looks at the bartender, he's busying himself with scrubbing a spot on the bar with a rag.

“Yes,” Ilya replies, the hint of his smile gone.

“Hollander!” J.J. calls, his tone a warning. When Shane’s head snaps at where his voice came from, his face isn’t much friendlier. “Move, you fucker.”

Shane knows he can’t linger; the place is busy, and he can’t leave J.J. to do everything on his own. He offers Ilya a tight smile, and all he gets in return is a short nod.

He doesn’t get another moment to breathe until the last customer leaves and they’re closing the doors. Shane had watched Hayden bring Ilya his tab, and had watched him leave the restaurant almost half an hour ago. He’d been sad they didn’t get to talk again—or to even talk properly, but such is the life of coincidences. Shane still can’t believe Ilya is in Montreal to begin with.

So to say he’s surprised to see Ilya looming on the sidewalk when he leaves for the night is an understatement. Shane feels a shiver run down his spine when he catches his figure out of the corner of his eye, his fists clenching, ready to punch if he has to, but he ends up letting out a sigh of relief when he realizes who it is.

Ilya is leaning against the wall with a foot propped up, a lit cigarette between his lips.

“You can’t smoke here,” Shane says, stopping in his tracks to his car.

Ilya somehow looks even more handsome when he scowls. He puts out his cigarette on the wall and tosses the bud on the ground.

“Stupid country,” Ilya grumbles, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a pack of gum.

“Is it...” Shane clears his throat, suddenly feeling heat creep up the back of his neck. “Are you really him?”

“Ilya Rozanov,” Ilya says with a crooked smile, pushing off the wall. Taking a few steps closer to him. He nods at Shane’s wrist that’s wrapped with the bracelet. “And you are the Asian kid, yes? Shane.”

“Holy shit,” Shane says under his breath, heart beating faster. “What are you doing here?”

The words come out of his mouth bluntly, but Ilya doesn’t seem bothered by it. Instead, his smile widens. Just momentarily.

“Work,” he answers with a wave of his hand. “I thought I was imagining things. Yesterday.”

“Me too,” Shane confesses. The urge he’d felt to get home seems to have vanished. The next question is stupid, but he needs to know. “Is that why you came back today?”

“Mmm, no,” Ilya says with a shake of his head, and Shane isn’t sure he fully believes him. “You have very good vodka here.”

“When are you leaving?” Shane wants to catch up. He wants to take Ilya somewhere and ask what he’s been up to all these years. But it’s late, and most bars are starting to close. And he’s

tired as hell. “I have another shift tomorrow, but—”

“In the morning.” Ilya’s words cut through him like a sharp knife. Shane suddenly feels like he’s eight all over again, unable to communicate even if they understand each other this time. “Early flight.”

“Ah.” Shane tries not to let his disappointment show, but the drop of Ilya’s smile might be enough telling that it doesn’t really work. “That’s a shame. Are you going back to Russia?”

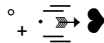
“No.” Ilya’s short, blunt answers makes Shane feel like he’s trying to milk a rock, but it also makes him wonder how much of it is the language barrier they were met with back when they were kids. “Moved to Boston two years ago.”

“I see.” The night is quiet, save for the noise of his coworkers leaving the restaurant one by one. Hayden gives him a pointed look when he walks by, but he doesn’t say anything this time. Doesn’t pull him aside to ask if he’s being bothered by this guy. “Well, you should... go to bed, then.”

At that, Ilya scoffs. “Yes. Sure.”

“It was nice seeing you again.”

“Goodbye, Shane.”



Shane has a problem.

For weeks—*months*, actually—he hasn’t been able to stop thinking about one objectively good-looking Russian. He’s still going to classes, doing his coursework, going to the gym and then going to work, but in between all that, one tab on his laptop has been pretty much pinned to his browser. The night they parted, now as adults, Shane opened Google the second he was home and showered.

He was hunched over his desk when he looked up Ilya Rozanov’s name and found out that, apparently, the kid he once knew had become a model. A good one at that, who doesn’t seem one bit shy about his body. Shane was bombarded with pictures of a shirtless Ilya, of him in his underwear, him in *nothing at all* and with just a sheet to cover his body. He still

remembers the heat that crept up his face, because he still feels it if he thinks about Ilya for too long.

Other than the pictures and some sparse news articles, though, there isn't much about Ilya online. Shane finds his email for bookings, a basic profile on his agency's website, and an Instagram page with scattered posts that don't really spark Shane's interest.

Except for a picture of him by the pool, but Shane doesn't let his thoughts linger on that one for too long. He also doesn't comment on the picture, or follows Ilya at all.

He should have done more, he knows. Both back when they were kids and now when they met after so long. But what was he supposed to do, ask for Ilya's number like a complete loser? He would rather shoot himself in the foot than embarrass himself like that. Besides, Ilya could have done the same—asked for his number, that is, and yet he didn't.

Maybe Ilya hadn't been as excited to see Shane as he'd made it seem, or as Shane had perceived it. Maybe he really had just gone back to the restaurant for the vodka, and he had only lingered after paying to smoke before he headed back to his hotel. Maybe none of it mattered as much to Ilya as it did to Shane.

Something about Ilya felt different, but people do tend to change. That's what his mom always told him growing up when he couldn't understand why his friends started being weird with him.

But, then again, Ilya had been wearing the bracelet. How could that ever be the case?

For three months, Shane lets his thoughts consume him. The what-ifs keep him up at night. He should have said something, he should have tried harder. He should have—

Ilya shows up again with another gorgeous woman hanging off his arm. It's a Saturday night, the place is packed, and the tingle Shane feels in his stomach when he spots Ilya walking in quickly turns into something ugly the moment he realizes Ilya has come with someone else again. Which is fucking stupid, because why would he feel any of this over someone he hardly knows? Over a *man* of all things.

"Shane," Hayden calls as he rushes to the kitchen, helping the staff tonight. Even in the chilly weather, patrons spill out to the tables on the sidewalk. "Table three is asking for you. Specifically."

Ilya's table. Shane feels, for most of the night, like he's being terrorized by the handsome Russian and his gorgeous date, like Ilya somehow wants to rub it in his face. Like he knows that Shane has been googling his name for every crumb of information he could get. But maybe that's because, Shane notices after a while, Ilya is in a worse mood tonight than he had been three months ago.

Something must have happened, but Shane can't just ask him about it. Not until the night is over and Ilya, once again, is found standing outside waiting for him, his date gone. There is a cigarette between his fingers, but tonight it remains unlit.

“Ilya,” Shane greets, mouth dry. He crosses his arms over his chest.

The corners of Ilya’s mouth twitch, but he doesn’t smile. Shane wonders how drunk he is, considering how many drinks he personally delivered to his table.

“Surprised to see me?”

Heat creeps to Shane’s cheeks. “Well. Yes.”

“I told you, is nice vodka,” Ilya supplies. *You don’t even live here*, Shane wants to argue, but finds himself unable to get the words out. “What are you doing tonight?”

“I have stuff to read,” Shane answers truthfully. His paper, which is due Friday, won’t write itself.

“So, nothing.” Ilya’s lips twitch again. “Come.”

“I am not getting in a car with you.” Shane had been the one to serve him drinks all night. He won’t risk his life like that. And besides— “Didn’t you have someone with you?”

“Yes. I sent her home. She was...” Ilya frowns, then says something in Russian that Shane doesn’t understand. “I don’t know how to say it.”

“You drank,” he insists.

“I am not driving, Shane,” Ilya says, letting out a frustrated noise. “My hotel is nearby.”

His hotel.

Shane should say no. He has stuff to do.

And yet, he finds himself falling into step with Ilya, putting a respectful distance between them. There’s something weird stirring in his stomach, but isn’t this exactly what he wanted? To catch up with Ilya, to know what’s been going on with him since they parted at the age of eight. How he’d ended up being a model in Boston.

Talking, however, doesn’t seem to be in Ilya’s plans. The moment the door closes behind them, Ilya fixes Shane with a stare so intense that Shane can feel his blood buzzing under his skin. He’s tongue-tied, his feet cemented into the ground as Ilya’s gaze turns almost predatory. Shane swallows thickly, his bag falling with a soft thud onto the carpeted floor.

“Should we... talk?” he asks, voice thin like he’s running out of breath.

Ilya shakes his head, his beautiful curls bouncing with the movement. “Later.”

“Wh—”

Ilya crosses what little space was left between them, cradling his jaw with a large, warm hand. Shane’s chest shakes as he tries to take in a breath. Shit, he’s so much more stunning up

close. He should pull away. He should leave this hotel room, and maybe hope he'd never see Ilya again. This isn't right. This is—

Shane closes the gap, covering Ilya's mouth with his, and even though he's the one to make the first move, he still gasps when Ilya licks across the seam of his lips, asking to be let in. His lips shouldn't part so easily, and yet he quickly tastes Ilya on him, all the drinks he's had, both awfully bitter and strangely sweet. And Shane shouldn't like this, but the glide of Ilya's tongue against his is dizzying, and how Ilya kisses him like they've kissed a thousand times, like he knows exactly how Shane likes to be kissed.

This is awful; Ilya grabs Shane by the hair and a moan leaves him without his permission. He pushes a knee between Shane's legs, and Shane realizes with horror the arousal that is coursing through him. His hips stutter, the denim of his pants rubbing roughly against Ilya's, the zipper pressing almost painfully against his growing erection. They should stop this, but Shane's nails are claws digging into Ilya's shoulders, and he can't move. He doesn't *want to*.

He still breaks the kiss, though. Keeps himself a hairsbreadth away from Ilya's mouth just so he can whisper, "What the fuck."

"Do you hate it?"

Shane feels like his body is being set ablaze. Does he hate it? He drops to his knees, hands on Ilya's belt, then the button of his jeans and the zipper. He isn't even drunk. He's never done this before, and yet he feels the urge to get Ilya's cock in his hand, in his *mouth*. Ilya lets out a loud, almost drawn out moan when Shane wraps his fingers around him and pulls him out of his underwear, and it encourages Shane to keep going.

Stroking Ilya doesn't feel much different from stroking himself, aside from the fact that Ilya is uncut and he isn't. Shane pulls back the foreskin and rubs his thumb over the slit, smearing precum over Ilya's cockhead and pulling another dizzying moan from him. Ilya buries his fingers into Shane's hair, gripping him tightly, making his scalp tingle. Pleasure rushes down his spine.

He leans in. Takes Ilya's head in his mouth and moans at the weight on his tongue, at the wrongness of how right it feels. He pushes Ilya's pants down his thighs so the zipper isn't hitting his chin when he bobs his head, testing the waters, how far he can take Ilya in his mouth. Just because he's going to be bad at it doesn't mean he can't be eager.

Or maybe he isn't all that terrible, if Ilya's moans is anything to go by. Shane wraps a hand around what he can't fit into his mouth, thinking of the times he's gotten head from his exes, flattening his tongue on the underside and hollowing his cheeks, keeping a tight grip on Ilya's cock. And he can tell that Ilya is trying hard to stay still and not fuck into his mouth by the way he holds onto his hair, how he pulls his hips back every time Shane tries to take him deeper.

Shane's falling into a nice pace when Ilya pulls him off completely. He lets out a loud gasp as air fills his lungs, his head spinning. Looking up at Ilya, barely able to gather his thoughts, he asks, "Was it that awful?"

Ilya's fingers loosen on his hair. "This is your first time with a man?"

His cheeks burn so hot that it makes him think he's running a fever. "Is it that obvious?"

Coaxing him back up on his feet with a hand on the back of his neck, Ilya kisses him far more gentler than he probably should. "A little bit. Was good, though."

"On a scale from one to ten?"

"Mm," Ilya hums. "Five."

He scoffs. "Fuck you."

"Is okay," Ilya says, smirking. He caresses Shane's jaw with a thumb, brushes it over his lower lip, dragging it down. Spit pools under Shane's tongue. "You can practice."

"And you're an expert at this?" he challenges, not sure if he wants to hear the answer. Not sure if this is the first thing he wants Ilya to tell him about himself after all these years.

"So many questions, Shane Hollander."

Shane can't even argue. Ilya pulls his pants up just enough so that it doesn't restrict his movements, and pulls Shane further into the room, towards the bed. He's a little rough when he pushes Shane onto the mattress, his hands quick to get his pants undone, but his eyes are softer and hesitant when he looks up at Shane, as if asking if he can continue. Shane feels like he would die if Ilya stopped now.

And, well. This is the first blowjob Shane hasn't looked away from. He hasn't been *able* to look away from the way Ilya's lips stretch around his cock, how his curls bounce with every bob of his head. Shane hasn't gotten this close to coming this stupidly fast, but when Ilya hums around him, *looking up* at him like he needs to see Shane's reaction to it, he feels the dam starting to break.

"Fuck," he breathes, a little desperate. He clutches Ilya's hair and tugs on him. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, Ilya—"

Ilya pulls off, reaches into his pants, and pulls his own cock out. A loud moan leaves Shane's mouth when Ilya aligns their hips, wrapping a hand around both their cocks and jerking them off with quick strokes. Ilya's moans are desperate as they leave his mouth, but Shane isn't doing much better; the coiling in his guts tightens and tightens, and it takes a broken breath of his name for him to come all over his stomach and Ilya's fingers.

It doesn't take much for Ilya to come after that. Shane still hasn't come down from his high as he watches Ilya spread his spunk over his cock, making the glide of his hand easier, faster. Blood pools at the collar of his shirt, bleeding up his neck, and Shane gets the insane urge to sink his teeth into the blushing flesh. But he doesn't.

He watches as Ilya comes all over him with a broken, shaky moan, his cum hot on his skin. If Shane had it in him, he feels like he could get hard again from this alone. He doesn't, though, the reality of what just happened sinking in as Ilya climbs off of him.

Jesus Christ.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” Ilya asks casually, cleaning his fingers with tissues he pulls from a box on the bedside table, and then tossing the box to Shane. It lands next to his hip.

“Fuck, Ilya. I don’t know,” he breathes out, a strangled laugh dying in his throat. Shane sits up and grabs a bunch of tissues to clean himself. “A *‘how have you been’* would’ve been nice. *‘What are you up to? It’s been so long.’* Stuff like that.”

Ilya smiles, amused, tucking himself back into his pants. “You like boring small talk?”

Can Shane get any redder? It feels like he can.

“No,” he says, brows drawing into a furrow. “But we—we were kids. I don’t...”

Know you anymore, he wants to say, but stops before he does. Did he ever know Ilya? Did they ever know each other? The only words they ever exchanged were thanks to a note Shane’s mom had written for him, and a broken thank you that Ilya managed to get out somehow.

“You still have the bracelet,” he decides to say, because it’s easier to point that out.

“Yes,” Ilya agrees, running his fingers over the beads. Shane isn’t sure if he does it consciously, or if it’s something his body has gotten used to doing with time. “Is a nice bracelet. Good memories.”

This isn’t what Shane expected. Though, if he’s being honest, he doesn’t know *what* he expected, because he never thought they would be seeing each other again. And that’s a recurring thought in his brain, at most hours of the day—why is Ilya suddenly back after over a decade?

Or, well. He can’t be back to a place he’d never been to. But still.

“You said you were here for work,” he presses. “Last time.”

“Yes. You think I lie?”

Shane lets out a snort. *This guy*. It was easier to talk to him when they didn’t speak the same language, it seems. No, Shane knows he isn’t lying; he’d seen Ilya’s Instagram. The pictures he posted on the streets of Montreal that Shane was far too familiar with.

“You suck at conversing.”

Ilya lets out a long sigh. “I model. I travel for work, meet hot people. Is good job.”

“You don’t study?”

“I read, but not study, no.” Ilya walks to the small bar set up in the room and pours himself a glass of vodka. Shane wants to tell him he probably shouldn’t drink more tonight, but he

doesn't. "You?"

"English and French." Ilya doesn't follow it up with another question, only a raise of his brow. Shane should probably leave. "I, uh. Want to teach kids. And stuff." He lets out a sigh, getting back on his feet. "I should go."

"Sure. Give me your number before."

Shane blinks. "What?"

"To text," Ilya deadpans. "You don't know what that is?"

"You're so—"

Shane gives up on arguing before he even begins, making his way to his discarded bag by the door, fishing his phone out of the front pocket. He hands it to Ilya, watches him save his contact, and then send a message to himself. Ilya's phone pings somewhere in the room with the incoming text.

"Will let you know next time I'm in town," Ilya says, handing Shane his phone back. "If I can't come to restaurant."

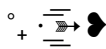
"Sure." *Next time.* Shane feels dizzy just thinking about it. "Thanks for, uh..."

Ilya nods. "Was fun."

"Yeah. Goodnight."

Another nod. Shane leaves with his heart beating in his throat and a weird buzz under his skin.

Next time.



The first text comes in about a month later. It's Friday night, almost one in the morning, and Shane has been trying to sleep ever since he got out of the shower. He'd like to say he hadn't thought of Ilya even once since they last met—since he had Ilya's cock in his mouth—but

Shane is a terrible liar. The guilt that comes every time he touches himself to the thought of the Russian man is mortifying, but he still hasn't found it in him to stop. He feels like a terrible person.

Ilya

What are you doing

Shane

Trying to sleep. Why?

It's late.

Ilya

I'm bored

Come to New York

Shane

What?

Ilya

[picture]

Shane lets out a soft gasp. In the picture, the New York City lights are bright in the background, but that's not what Shane is looking at. The bottom half of the portrait consists of Ilya's stretched out legs, and a clear shot of his crotch. Of his hand down his pants and clearly wrapped around his cock, its hard outline visible on the dark fabric.

A shiver runs down his spine, settling in his own groin. Shit.

Shane

Nice view.

Ilya

That is all you have to say?

You suck at sexting.

Shane

I wasn't talking about just the city view.

Ilya

It misses you

Shane

Please don't send unsolicited dick pictures.

He would have to burn his phone if Ilya did.

Ilya

Ask for it, then

Shane

No.

Ilya

: (

The familiar guilt stirs in Shane's stomach before he even touches himself. His fingers ghost across the band of his pajama pants. Is this what Ilya wants, for Shane to jerk off while talking to him? There would be no other reason for him to be doing this, right?

Ilya

Are you touching yourself?

Shane

Do you want me to?

Ilya

Is the sky blue?

Shane

Well, not exactly.

Ilya

Shane

Letting out a long breath, Shane slips his fingers into his pants. He's already half hard when he gets a hold of himself, and a soft moan escapes his lips as he gives his cock a slow stroke. He may as well add this to the list of things he's never done before—sexting, that is. Shane had an ex, about two years ago, who tried to get him to do it, but he shot it down so fast that she broke up with him two days later.

Now, he isn't appalled by the idea of sexting Ilya. Shane scrolls back up the chat and opens the picture again, eyes trained on Ilya's bulge, his mouth watering with the sheer need he feels to get his mouth on him again. He swipes his thumb over his cockhead, smearing precum over it, biting his lower lip to muffle a whine at how sensitive he feels.

His phone vibrates in his hand.

Ilya

Did you think of me

These years

Shane

Not like this

Ilya

Like what?

Shane

You know.

Ilya

I don't. Tell me

Shane quickens the flicking of his wrist, regretting he told Ilya not to send a picture of his cock but knowing he won't go back on his word. He would rather die than seem like he's begging, because he isn't. He doesn't *need* to see Ilya's cock again, even if it would be nice. Even if it would make him come faster.

Shane

I didn't think y

Shane hits send before he finishes typing, finger slipping as his muscles tighten. He bends his knees, planting his feet on the mattress, toes curling into it as pleasure starts washing over him in waves. His hips jerk as he fucks into his fist, desperate for friction and relief.

Shane

Fuck

Sorry

Ilya

Close?

Shane

Yeah...

Ilya

Me too

It's the thought of seeing Ilya coming again that pushes Shane over the edge. The muscles of his abdomen tighten when he comes, a drawn out moan rolling off his lips as cum pools right under his navel. He feels his body shake with every breath he tries to take.

The shame hits him before he's fully come down from the high of his orgasm. It starts when he looks at his hand, at his stomach, and he cringes so hard that it makes him feel ill. His stomach twists as his phone vibrates again, but this time he doesn't look at the incoming text immediately; he tosses the device on the other side of the bed and goes straight to the bathroom to clean himself with a damp towel. Ideally, he would take another shower, but he will never fall asleep if he does that.

Shane doesn't look at himself in the mirror. He doesn't need to see the mess he's made of himself when he can feel it, when his body is burning up like he's running a fever. He considers ignoring his phone and simply going back to what he'd been doing before Ilya texted, but that would be rude.

Ilya

I was serious about New York

Shane lets out a snort.

Shane

It's the middle of the night. I can't just catch a flight to New York.

Ilya

You can. I will send someone for you

Next time

Next time. *Next time next time next time next time.*

Ilya won't even say hello, yet this is the second time he talks about *next time*. Like he's so certain this will happen again. And, honestly? Shane isn't sure he's wrong about that. It's not like he hated it the first time... or this one.

Still, the implications of it... Sending someone? Ilya's in another country, even if it's not that far. Does Ilya have enough money that he's just flying around in private jets? Shane doesn't know a thing about him, and Ilya doesn't seem that eager to share much about himself.

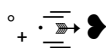
Shane

Maybe if you ask in advance.

Ilya

Okay

If Shane thought he'd fall asleep after all this, he would be sorely mistaken.



Summer arrives with bright, sunny days, the loud chirping of birds, and the feeling that Shane can finally breathe a little. The camping chair he's sitting on doesn't feel that sturdy and safe, but he'd rather have that than feel the grass under the picnic towel Hayden had stretched out for his twin daughters.

Ruby is dangerously close to ripping off the head of the Barbie in her sister's hand, but Hayden doesn't seem to mind. He's probably used to it.

"You didn't have to come," Hayden says, tugging on the cover of Arthur's stroller, shielding him from the sun.

"You can say thanks," Shane teases, running his thumb on the condensation of his ginger ale can. "I don't mind, your kids are fun."

"That's because you don't live with them." Hayden goes for the slightly annoyed facade, but Shane can tell he's incredibly fond of his kids. He's a good dad. "But yeah, thanks. I wanted to give Jackie a day off from all this. She hardly complains, but..."

"We can all use some time for ourselves."

Hayden nods. "And you're travelling soon, right? California, was it?"

Shane has been trying not to think much about it. Not to freak himself out, honestly. He was supposed to spend the summer at his parents' house—he'd already booked July off of work, and he was looking forward to going back home and relaxing. About two weeks ago, however, part of those plans changed.

Ilya's text haunts his phone like a ghost haunts a Victorian house. *Are you free in 3 weeks?* the text had read, still lacking any proper greeting. Shane hadn't made any real plans with his parents, and even if just *going* there was a plan in itself, he still told Ilya yes.

He didn't get another text for another hour. Shane had gone back to reading his book, pretending his mind wasn't racing as fast as his heart, that anxiety wasn't twisting his organs into balloon dogs with every minute that passed and his phone didn't ping again. And when the text finally came in, Ilya was asking for his email. Shane frowned, but told him anyway.

The last thing he expected to see when he checked his inbox was a plane ticket waiting for him. Issued in his name, but certainly not paid with his credit card. Ilya didn't write anything in the subject line or the body of the email.

I will give your name to the front desk, Ilya had texted a minute after the email came in, and all Shane could reply with was a dry, a little nervous, *Okay*.

In a week, he will be visiting Los Angeles for the first time. Shaving three days off the time he was supposed to be with his parents. Five, actually, if he considers the days before and after the flights.

In a week, he will be seeing Ilya again.

“Yeah,” Shane replies after silence has stretched on for too long. “Just for a couple of days, though. I’ll be holed up with my parents after that.”

Jade tugs the body of the Barbie towards herself, and the head snaps off with a clean pop. Neither of the twins cry. Hayden heaves a sigh as Ruby starts swinging the head around, telling her sister that the Barbie head is now a helicopter. She can’t say the word properly, which only makes the scene strangely endearing.

“I don’t even know when Jackie and I will be able to travel again,” Hayden laments, fixing Arthur’s pacifier when the toddler starts getting fussy in his attempt to fall asleep. “Between the restaurant and the kids. Our parents said they’d be happy to stay with them whenever, but like. I don’t think Jackie would be able to stay away from them for too long.”

Shane raises a brow. “And you would?”

“Shit, can you—”

Hayden springs off his camping chair, running after the twins when they start chasing a duck that had been hovering in the area since they got here. Shane isn’t sure Hayden would have been that quick on his feet if the girls weren’t running toward the lake that centers the park.

Arthur coos from the stroller, and Shane brings his attention to him. The toddler’s eyes are bright like Hayden’s, his smile gummy around the pacifier. He reaches up to Shane with grabby hands, prompting Shane to tickle his soft, round tummy. It pulls a giggle out of Arthur.

“Don’t tell your dad,” Shane drops his voice even though Hayden is too far to hear him, “but I’m a bit nervous about LA. I don’t know why.”

Arthur coos again, as if trying to tell Shane: *don’t be!*

How could he not, though, when he *knows* why Ilya is flying him out to California. It certainly isn’t to chat, to tell Shane more about his life. He’d said the first time they sexted that he would fly Shane out whenever—and he’d kept his word about asking him in advance. Shane isn’t stupid, but he wishes Ilya would have spelled it out for him. That he would tell him to forget whatever happened when they were kids because this is different.

Whatever *this* may or may not be.

Ilya is sharp around the edges. Colder, maybe. Closed-off. He doesn’t seem to like it when Shane asks questions, because he hardly answers them; he’s either vague in his replies, or he switches topics entirely. Shane tries not to be invasive, but this is killing him a little.

Maybe this is just somewhat convenient for Ilya. Meeting someone he once knew, someone he can share a secret they're both supposed to keep. Because even if Shane is certain Ilya is sleeping with other men—one simply doesn't get that good at sucking dick without practice—he still isn't sure. He checks Ilya's Instagram every now and then, looking for evidence—hints, even—of his suspicions, but he's found none so far. Most of the pictures on Ilya's feed are professionally taken. There are just a handful taken at clubs, or private parties, and even fewer where Ilya has an arm around an equally hot man's shoulders, or a suggestive hand on someone's hip, but nothing concrete. Nothing that would give him away.

Still, he can try to get something out of him during this California trip. Maybe if he shares a bit more of himself, Ilya will feel compelled to do the same.

Hayden comes back with a twin under each arm, both giggling with every step he takes. Jade (which, honestly, Shane can only tell apart from Ruby because they have different hairstyles today) is soaked from head to toe, her bangs sticking to her forehead. Shane tries not to laugh, but Ruby looks very proud of herself.

“What happened?”

Hayden shakes Ruby before putting her down. “This monster shoved her sister into the lake the second I reached them.” The twins laugh like that isn't something pretty dangerous for them to do. Shane now notices how Hayden's pants are also soaked through and sticking to his legs. He tugs on his daughter's pigtails. “Your mother's going to kill me!”

“But she can swim!” Ruby protests, crossing her tiny arms over her chest.

The Pikes had only enrolled the twins in swimming lessons last summer. Considering how young they are, Shane doubts they're that great at it. He can tell that Hayden is trying to keep it together in order not to upset the girls, but the worry is evident in his eyes.

“Girls, come on,” Shane says, trying not to laugh. “You know your dad is too old for this. Give the poor man a break.”

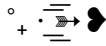
The twins start giggling, and Hayden glares at him. “I'm literally not much older than you!”

“Please,” Shane scoffs playfully. “You're, like, almost thirty.”

“I'm twenty-seven!”

“Whatever you say, grandpa.” Shane pushes off the untrustworthy camping chair. “We should head back before one of you get sick.”

Shane will gladly push his thoughts about the trip to the back of his brain for now, lest he ends up freaking himself out. Getting his hands full of the Pike kids is the best way he knows to clear up his mind.



The elevator ride to the 12th floor seems endless. He had a stupid stutter when he gave his name at the front desk, his hands sweating when he was given his own key card. The woman who took his ID didn't express any emotion other than the forced hospitality smile, clueless to what would be happening tonight. Or not.

Shane almost asked the taxi driver to take him somewhere else. To a cheaper hotel, far from this one, because surely this was stupid. This was a terrible idea. And yet.

He keys into the room, and his breath gets caught in his throat at how quiet it is. Ilya had texted him to let Shane know he wouldn't be there when he arrived, but that didn't make Shane feel any less nervous then and it doesn't help now either. He drops his carry-on next to Ilya's open suitcase and pushes further into the room.

The bed is *huge*. A king size, probably. The white sheets are neatly made, pressed without a crease. Several pillows decorate the headboard. There's a single bathrobe neatly folded in the middle of the bed, a scribbled note on top of it. Shane grabs the paper with his clammy hand.

Will be back later

Take a shower, make yourself comfortable

So, he does. He washes himself thoroughly, touching places he never dared to outside the privacy of his apartment. Places he never thought to touch until he crossed paths with Ilya again. There's no concrete plan for what's happening tonight, but he would rather be overprepared than under; would rather have Ilya make fun of him for making assumptions than to be scolded for not assuming enough.

Shane Hollander is an overthinker, okay. He's gone through every possible scenario in his head.

He sits in bed and waits. He's wearing nothing under the bathrobe, and his thoughts won't stop racing. Shane could be on his phone to distract himself, but the idea of that is somehow worse than sitting with his thoughts. The idea that Ilya could text him and put a time limit to his waiting.

The whirring of the door lock makes Shane's heart skip a stupid beat. He straightens his back, folding his hands over his lap, and watches as Ilya stumbles into the room. Ilya is dressed in a white silky shirt, unbuttoned to expose a lot of his chest and the golden cross resting between his pecs, black slacks, and leather shoes. His hair is gelled at the sides, keeping most of his curls away from his face. He looks like he's been ripped straight out of a magazine.

Shane's mouth runs dry.

Ilya seems to take a minute to realize that Shane is in the room with him. He struggles to get out of his shoes, a hand on the wall keeping him steady, and Shane starts to think this was a stupid idea. He takes in a sharp breath, louder than he intended, and the noise is what seems to pull Ilya's attention to him. Ilya stumbles on his feet again, and a wide smile stretches on his lips.

He crosses the room with wide strides. Shane stays put where he is, leaning back as Ilya gets closer to him, looking up so their eyes meet. Ilya's hands are warm when he cups his cheeks, but his kiss lacks any sort of tenderness when he smashes their lips together. Ilya kisses him with with hunger, tongue immediately sliding into Shane's mouth, like he's been waiting to do this all day.

Ilya takes like a terrible mixture of alcohol and nicotine, but Shane can't find it in him to complain. Not tonight, or at least not right now, when Ilya is pushing him until his back is flat on the mattress. Shane lets his hands slide down Ilya's neck, his bared chest, slipping under the silk to feel out his shoulders. Ilya works on his bathrobe tie with quick, skilled fingers, leaving Shane exposed when he's still far too overdressed.

"Fuck," Ilya curses when he pulls back from the kiss, eyes raking over Shane's naked body. "Look at you."

"Hello to you too," Shane grumbles, but whatever heat he tried to speak with gets lost with the warmth of his cheeks. He tugs at the collar of Ilya's shirt. "This doesn't seem fair."

"You showered for me?" Ilya asks, tracing a light finger down Shane's chest, sending a shiver down his spine.

"Your penmanship is terrible."

Ilya's brows furrow, finger stopping right below Shane's navel. "My what?"

Shane lets out a huffed laugh. "Your handwriting."

"And that is important?"

Yes, Shane wants to say, but the word gets trapped in his throat when Ilya's hand resumes its path down his body, fingers brushing the carvings of his Adonis belt. Shane is shamefully hard already, has been for the past twenty minutes or so as he drove himself crazy at the mere thought of Ilya's hands on him again. He struggles to keep his hands steady as he undoes the remaining buttons of Ilya's blouse, pushing it off his shoulders so it pools somewhere by the foot of the bed.

That seems to be what prompts Ilya to undress too—not Shane's naked body, but rather his desperation to touch Ilya as well. To see him fully nude, just like Ilya sees him right now. And, god, Shane's mouth waters at the sight of Ilya's defined muscles, his body looking like it was sculpted out of marble like the ancient Greek sculptures. Ilya is only half hard, but Shane thinks that won't be the case for much longer.

“What do you want to do?” Ilya asks as he crawls over him, his eyes hungry.

“You asked me to come,” Shane breathes, unable to bring himself to say it. Too scared to *want*.

“And you are so obedient,” Ilya's voice is akin to a purr, his smile teasing. He leans in closer, his nose brushing with Shane's. His breath is warm against his face when he says, “But I won't do anything you don't want. So tell me.”

Shane's eyes flutter shut when Ilya finds his pulse point with his mouth, nipping at the skin as Shane's hands find their way back to his shoulders. He might not be a virgin, but he's never been with a man like this before. Not before Ilya stumbled back into his life, at least. Shane never had to be the one to ask for sex, and he's never wanted it as much as he does now.

“Ilya,” he tries, swallowing past the embarrassment that crawls through his chest and up his throat. He reaches between them and wraps a hand around Ilya's dick, hoping that it's enough. “Please.”

Ilya lets out a shaky moan, thrusting into his grip. “Say it, Shane.”

“Fuck,” he curses, shivering at the soft *yes* that rolls off Ilya's tongue. “I want you to fuck me.”

“You are sure?” Ilya asks like he's trying to be difficult. Like Shane isn't leaking at the tip and hasn't been driving himself crazy at the mere thought of this trip. “You seem tense.”

“Jesus Christ, Ilya,” Shane groans, tugging on Ilya's cock. He pulls back the foreskin and swipes his thumb over the slit. “I'm going to get my things and leave if you don't.”

“Noo,” it almost sounds like Ilya is whining, which does terrible things to Shane. “I am trying to be a gentleman. I will do whatever you want.”

Terrible thing for him to say when Shane already feels like he's taking too much, that he's being greedy for wanting to be taken by such a hot guy. Ilya flips Shane on his stomach, pulls off the fluffy bathrobe, and leaves the bed for just a brief moment. When the bed dips under his weight again, Shane feels hyper-aware of every touch on his body, how warm Ilya's hands feel on his thighs when he spreads his legs apart.

Ilya's lube-coated fingers are gentle as they probe him, stretching him with patience and near devotion. Shane's grip is a vice on a pillow, his breathing shallow as he tries to accommodate to the intrusion. This is already so different from the times he'd touched himself that he can't even fathom what it'll feel like to have Ilya's cock inside him—Shane has seen it before, has

had it in his mouth, and he knows that the toy he has stashed deep in his dresser back home doesn't even come close to Ilya's size.

Three fingers in, Shane moans, "It's okay, I'm good," a plea that he can't even be ashamed of when he feels he's going to burst at the seams if his cock rubs against the soft bedsheets one more time.

Ilya's hand stills, but he doesn't immediately pull out. He rubs Shane's hip with the other one, and in his stupidly sexy accent, voice hoarse like he's barely keeping it together himself, he asks, "Are you sure?"

If Shane had to be honest, he isn't. Not entirely, at least. His chest tightens at the thought of Ilya's cock pushing inside him, but if he comes now, then the night will be over for him. He still ends up nodding, pushing against Ilya's hand to get his point across.

He tries not to whine pathetically at how empty he feels when Ilya frees his fingers, but the sigh he lets out is inevitable. Shane hears Ilya let out a noise behind him, but he can't bring himself to look over his shoulder and see what it's about. He can't get over the stirring in his chest, in his stomach, the buzzing under his skin and the fire coursing through his veins at the realization—and anticipation—of what's about to happen.

Shane can feel Ilya's warmth through the latex and lube, rubbing against his rim as Ilya spreads his cheeks apart. And he doesn't mean to tense up, but his body reacts without his permission to the press of Ilya's cockhead to his hole, the stretch almost unbearable. He knew it would be worse than his toy, but the pressure makes him dizzy, Ilya's grip on his hips doing little to ground him.

"Holy fuck." It's Ilya who curses, pulling a broken moan out of Shane. "Fucking hell, Shane. You're tight."

Shane almost wants to be snappy at such an obvious observation, but he's doing everything he can to keep himself together. He tries to ease his breathing, to will his muscles to relax, but Ilya won't stop pushing in, his pace tortuously slow. Ilya only stops when Shane shifts under him, trying to find a comfortable position.

"Are you okay?" Ilya asks, pressing an open-mouthed kiss to his shoulder. Too tender.

"Just—give me a minute," Shane grits out, and Ilya does.

It takes him more than a minute, but it's not like he's counting. All he can focus on are the kisses Ilya covers his back with, the weight of his body on him, the soft moans he lets out with every clench of Shane's walls around his dick. Ilya angles his hips and the slide is easier and not that painful, and he must be able to tell before Shane does that he's ready.

Shane feels like he's going crazy. Ilya pulls him to his knees by the hips, dragging him further down the bed so he can plant a foot on the mattress and the other on the floor, and the new angle sends his cock so far into him that Shane almost feels it in his throat. His thrusts are measured, hard snaps against his ass that punch a moan out of him with every contact.

All Shane can think is: *oh fuck*—at how good he feels as pleasure rushes down his spine, pushing him to the brink of orgasm so fast that he can barely understand what’s happening; at the realization that he’s never felt this good with any of his exes, and the fear that no one but Ilya will do it for him after tonight. Shane wraps a hand around his cock and a wet cry leaves his mouth, his balls tightening as the dam starts to break.

Ilya presses a hand between his shoulders and slides it to the back of his neck, pushing him into the mattress and holding him down as he quickens his pace, almost ruthless. Shane can’t keep up with it, the jerking of his fist faltering as his vision starts to darken around the edges, pleasure consuming him like the flames of a wildfire.

He doesn’t even realize he’s moaning Ilya’s name until Ilya presses his lips to his ear and says, almost in a growl, “Are you going to come for me, Shane?” And it’s almost like his body was waiting for permission, his orgasm hitting him so hard that his entire body shakes with it. He comes thickly over his fingers, over the white bedsheets, Ilya fucking him into oversensitivity and then some.

Ilya comes shortly after, both hands back to gripping his hips so hard that Shane thinks it’s going to bruise. His hips stutter before he shoots into the condom, a long moan falling from his lips as he comes, and comes, and comes. Shane can’t feel his limbs when Ilya finally stills, and it takes everything in him not to collapse on top of his own cum when Ilya pulls out.

He falls on his side and rolls onto his back, chest heaving as he tries to catch his breath. Shane doesn’t dare looking at Ilya as he makes his way to the bathroom. The emptiness he feels now hurts worse than when Ilya was stretching him, the ache in his ass spreading to the small of his back in burning waves.

Ilya strips the top sheet from the bed while Shane is in the bathroom, the rustling reaching him through the slightly opened door. And as soon as Shane crosses the threshold back, Ilya pats the empty space next to him, making himself comfortable against the pillows lined up on the headboard. Shane slips into a fresh pair of underwear and crawls next to him, exhaustion finally catching up to him. They don’t cuddle, but Ilya still buries a hand into his hair, petting him gently. It feels awfully intimate.

“Were you working?” Shane asks, thinking of the alcohol taste that lingered on Ilya’s tongue.

Ilya hums in thought, but shakes his head. “Not really. It was a dinner with work people, yes, but it was more... relaxed?”

Shane nods. “You tasted like you had fun.”

Trying to hold back a smile, Ilya nods too. “Drinking is good for not thinking.”

Shane couldn’t possibly agree. Whenever he drank, more often than not, every thought he’s ever had tended to haunt him.

“What were you trying not to think about?” he tries.

For a moment, Ilya stays silent, giving Shane a strange look that makes his skin crawl. Before he can take the question back, though, Ilya removes his hand from his hair and says, “Nothing. You should sleep.”

Shane opens his mouth to protest, maybe to apologize, but Ilya has already turned his back to him and turned off the lamp on his bedside table. With his throat feeling tight, Shane pulls the covers up to his chin, turns his back to Ilya as well, and tries to fall asleep.

The first time in months that Shane doesn’t wake up to the sound of his alarm is to the sound of an angry, muffled voice. The hotel room is still dark, but sunlight filters in through the gaps on the curtains. His muscles ache, not only from what happened last night, but also from having slept in the same position without moving once. When he rolls onto his back, Shane’s shoulders hurt.

It only takes a moment for him to realize that Ilya isn’t in bed, and then another for his brain to process that it’s Ilya’s angry voice he’s hearing through the closed bathroom door.

Shane gets out of bed, shrugs on the bathrobe he’d been wearing the night before, and pushes open the curtains. It’s late enough in the day that the sunlight momentarily blinds him, but he makes no effort to check his phone for the time. He’s not really given much time to do anything, anyway—Ilya goes quiet in the bathroom, and Shane waits with his breath trapped in his lungs for the door to fly open.

He counts up to thirty before it happens, but it isn’t an angry slam against the wall that follows Ilya’s exit from the bathroom. Ilya looks exhausted, like he’s been up arguing with whoever was on the other end of the line for hours. He seems surprised to be met with sunlight, but even more so to find Shane already awake.

“Is... everything okay?” Shane asks before Ilya can say good morning (if he was ever going to), right before he puts on his nonchalant mask.

Ilya tries to smile, but it’s half-hearted and barely tilts his mouth. “Yes,” he answers, but he sounds strained. “Did I wake you?”

“No,” Shane lies, hoping that Ilya can’t see right through him. “You sounded... agitated.”

Ilya stares at him blankly, either because he really doesn’t want to talk about it or because the translation for the word doesn’t register in his brain. So, Shane tries to clarify, just in case it’s the latter.

“You sounded angry.”

“Is nothing serious,” Ilya insists, and Shane takes his word for it. Maybe it was something work-related that he was unhappy about. “Are you hungry? Room service will be here soon.”

“Yeah, sure.” Ilya crosses the room and gets back in bed, phone still in hand. It doesn’t look like he’s up to conversation. “So... what’s the plan for today?”

Shane wouldn’t mind staying in all day, with Ilya all over him. That’s why he’s here after all, isn’t it? But Ilya’s answer is, “I have fitting after lunch, another dinner tonight.” Before Shane can deflate, he adds: “Do you want to come?”

Shane blinks. Blinks again, as the words get processed in his brain. Heat rises up his neck.

“Come?” he stupidly asks. “To your... schedules?”

Ilya raises a brow at him. “You would rather stay locked up in this room, Rapunzel?”

Shane scoffs, crossing his arms over his chest. “What if I wanted to explore the city?”

“Do you?”

He sputters. “Well, not really.”

Ilya smirks like he can see right through Shane. He puts his phone down on the bedside table, his posture against the headboard entirely too suggesting. He beckons Shane with two fingers, sending a shiver straight to his cock. This is pathetic.

“Come here.”

Room service will be here soon, Shane thinks to himself as he climbs back in bed. Ilya tugs at the tie of his robe and pushes it off his shoulders, his hand warm on the back of his neck when he pulls him in. Ilya kisses him tongue first, licking into his mouth with so much hunger that Shane thinks he wouldn’t mind that much being eaten up alive. Being breakfast himself.

Ilya hauls Shane into his lap, a thigh lodged between his legs, pressing against his cock, pulling a pathetic moan out of him. Maybe Shane should have some shame or self-respect, but any thoughts of that melts through his ears as he grinds into Ilya’s thigh and pleasure coils in his stomach. It’s too early for this, and yet Shane pulls his mouth away from Ilya’s so he can kiss down his body, over a supple pec and a perked nipple.

He can feel Ilya’s abs shake under his lips when he lets out a breath of Shane’s name, hand threading into his hair as Shane mouths at the seam of his boxers. Ilya doesn’t rush Shane, lets him go at his pace when he reaches past the elastic band and pulls Ilya’s cock out, mouth watering at the sigh. He’s hard and big in Shane’s hand, cockhead glistening with precum when Shane pumps his fist a couple of times.

Shane isn’t any better at this now than he was the first time he had Ilya’s cock in his mouth, but he still feels encouraged to go for it by the weight of Ilya’s hand on the back of his head. And he likes it, the weight of Ilya’s cock on his tongue despite how weird it feels, the stretch of his lips around him, his measured breathing as he tries to take every inch of him. His jaw

slack, Shane does everything he can to keep his teeth out of the way with the bobs of his head, small moans rumbling in his chest every time Ilya's cockhead hits the back of his throat because he can't possibly take him any deeper than this.

Ilya isn't loud, but the low grunts he lets out every time Shane goes down on him or hollows his cheeks is enough to drive him crazy, to have his cock aching in the confines of his underwear. Shane closes his eyes and focuses on getting Ilya off, the tugs on his hair encouraging him to keep going, every stutter of Ilya's hips letting him know that he must be doing something right.

Shane's name gets tangled with profanities and a string of Russian that he can't understand as he picks up his pace. He can tell by Ilya's breathing that he isn't too far from coming, the fingers in his hair tightening, finally shoving him down with just a bit more force. It takes two hums around Ilya's cock for Ilya to pull him back harder than would be necessary, but Shane refuses to pull off. He might regret this later, but right now he wants Ilya to come in his mouth.

A knock on the door startles Ilya into coming, his moan getting muffled by the hand he slaps over his own mouth. Ilya's cum is bitter on Shane's tongue and warm down his throat, has tears gathering at the corners of his eyes and spit at the corners of his lips as he struggles to take it all down. Another knock has Ilya tugging harshly at his hair hard enough for his cock to slip out of Shane's mouth, and Shane lets out a loud gasp when he can finally breathe again.

He doesn't turn to watch Ilya tuck himself back into his underwear as he rushes to answer the door. Shane stays as he is on the bed, head hung low between his shoulders as he tries to catch his breath, as he tries to urge the bitter taste off his tongue. But it's not because he doesn't want to see Ilya that he stays put—it's because, this way, he can continue grinding into the mattress for relief, his nerve-endings tingling the closer he gets to orgasming.

Shane tries not to pay attention to what's happening at the door, and he would never admit to it if he was asked, but it's hearing Ilya thank the hotel staff and closing the door behind him that makes him come. He hates that he soils his underwear, but he still shakes through his orgasm as pleasure rocks through him, the low *'fuck'* Ilya lets out when he, most likely, sees him like this making his head spin.

"Couldn't even wait half a minute," Ilya tsks. A soft thud on the dresser, and the bed dips again. Ilya kneels over him with one leg between Shane's, pressing a kiss on his shoulder. "So needy. Shame I could not see it."

"Shut up," Shane tries to be snappy, but ends up letting out a chuckle. He's going to have to throw his underwear in the trash. There's no way this is going back to Canada in his luggage. "You taste awful."

"You are so charming," Ilya says sarcastically, scraping his teeth over Shane's skin but refraining from biting. "You think you taste like cupcakes?"

Shane scrunches his nose at the thought, twisting under Ilya so he's looking up at him. "I've never tasted my own cum, that's gross. And you wouldn't know if I do!"

Ilya smirks. “Oh, I will find out.”

If he hadn’t *just* come, Shane is sure he would be getting hard again.



Shane doesn’t go to Ilya’s fitting with him. Ilya’s manager arrived sometime after eleven—a short, skinny woman, with fiery ginger hair and features that belong in magazines, just like her client—with a heavy knock on the door and the urgency of someone who’s already running late. She’d given Shane a once-over with a raised brow, turned to Ilya and said flatly, “No,” before Ilya could even say anything to her.

Shame was like a blanket over him, and suddenly Shane wished he’d never come to LA in the first place. Ilya didn’t even try to argue—he just sighed, snatched the outfit she’d come in carrying, and made his way to the bathroom.

“Sorry,” she’d said, with a smile that looked apologetic enough. “This isn’t about you. The employer asked for secrecy.”

Shane wondered how many times she’s stumbled upon scenarios just like this one, with a stranger in Ilya’s bed right before a schedule. With the covers pulled tight over his body, he watched as Ilya left about twenty minutes later, barely acknowledging his existence. For the first half an hour he was alone, Shane seriously considered leaving.

It’s Ilya’s incoming text that stops him from doing so. It quells some of his shame.

Ilya

Sorry, I didn’t know

You can still come to dinner tonight

if you want

I have asked

Shane

It's okay

Your manager seems scary enough that I wouldn't want to argue with
her, lol

He cringes at the way he finishes the text. He never fucking says *lol*, but he felt the need to make it sound less serious than it is.

Ilya

Nina is a sweet woman

But very professional

She is taking my phone away

See you later

Shane doesn't bother replying. He also doesn't really bother getting out of bed, because his desire to explore the city is nonexistent, was barely an excuse to deflect from the weird feelings that crawled through his chest. He turns on the TV and settles on the first movie he finds, just wishing time will pass faster. So dinner can happen and they can get this over with.

As the taxi stops at the curb, Shane feels his stomach getting tied into very uncomfortable knots. If Ilya hadn't told him otherwise, he'd swear they're pulling up to a club: there's a small line of people outside, all dressed to the nines, and even from inside the taxi, Shane can hear the loud music blasting through the venue.

They get out of the car, and the ground shakes beneath his feet. Shane swallows around the nervous lump that lodges itself in his throat, pulling at the lapels of his suit to get it closer to his body. To cover him up a bit more.

The suit isn't even his, or Ilya's—Ilya had come back from his fitting with Nina in tow, two suits in hands instead of just one. For just a few seconds, Shane felt relieved that he could stop worrying about what to wear; Ilya had dropped a bomb in his lap out of the blue with no time to prepare. The moment he realized he'd be exposing his body in the suit, however, the relief was promptly gone.

"You look gorgeous," Ilya says again now, lips almost pressed to his ear and a firm hand on his lower back as he pushes Shane forward. "Don't worry about it, Shane."

Every time he feels a light breeze on the cutout on his back, Shane thinks it's impossible not to worry, to think that everyone's eyes are on him. He isn't ashamed of his body; he knows he looks good, and he works out to *make sure* that he does, but he isn't used to this—to exposing it to others, like Ilya seems so comfortable in doing so.

It shouldn't be a difficult night to get through. Ilya said his only job was to look pretty and pose for whatever camera was aimed at him, that he was nothing more than an accessory to the real important people of the brand they were dressed in, and Shane wants to believe him, he does, but there are too many people here.

They push through the doors of the venue and Shane's immediately overwhelmed. The loud chatter overlaps with the music playing from speakers he can't see, the bright flashes of professional cameras disturbing the comfortable mood set by the low lights across the hall. There's people everywhere, and tables everywhere; they take two steps further in, and champagne is thrust into his hands.

A camera gets aimed at them, and Ilya's hand immediately drops from his lower back. Shane won't say he misses the touch the second it's gone, but it feels like it made the ground shift under him. He doesn't get enough time to ponder if he should smile for the picture or not; '*keep it serious*' the guy behind the lens shouts, and Shane hopes—he prays like he's never prayed before—that his resting face will be enough for whatever is going on tonight.

Ilya guides him through the maze of tables, greeting almost everyone on the way with a bright, disarming smile. It's so different to see him like this, without the mask of almost indifference he puts on whenever Shane tries to get the smallest hint of information out of him. Given, however, that Ilya isn't really *talking* to these people, but rather just exchanging pleasantries, it makes sense. Still, it makes him wish, secretly, that that smile was directed at him and not others.

Shane can't say he's going to remember much of tonight. Not because he's going to get blackout drunk (he's not that big of a drinker, though he seems to be drinking pretty fast tonight, considering he finds his glass empty the second Ilya finds their seats), but rather because he knows his brain will do everything it can to forget how overwhelming all of this seems to be.

People stop by, introducing themselves before asking Shane's name and if he's new in the industry, and he can't say he remembers any of these people the second they're gone. He manages to answer awkwardly the first few times it happens, but Ilya, hand on his thigh under the white tablecloth the entire time, takes on the reigns and starts speaking for him.

Normally, Shane would argue and insist he can speak for himself. Right now, the most he can offer is a forced smile.

Tonight, Shane witnesses the making of pictures that will surely end up on Ilya's feed. Not that he's been *following* him, because he still hasn't pressed that button, but.

It feels... He can't really tell what it feels like. The models Ilya poses with are gorgeous, dressed in very little fabric, and the way they talk to him makes the bile in Shane's stomach threaten to come up his oesophagus. It's not like he's jealous, because why the fuck would he be, but every time Ilya gets dragged out of his chair for another set of flashes, it makes him wish he hadn't come.

But then Ilya will give him a *look* that, even in the low lights of the venue, makes something within him spark. It makes him want to slip under that ridiculous tablecloth and suck him off while Ilya tries to be polite with the people who are paying him to be here tonight. Not that he would, but the mere thought of it has him crossing his legs and snatching more champagne off a passing tray.

He has no plans of getting drunk, but the food takes forever to arrive, and the more he keeps looking at Ilya—dressed in a see-through shirt and pants that make his ass look amazing—the more on edge he feels. Someone approaches him with a camera in hand, and before Shane can come up with an excuse, Ilya offers him a hand. He takes a deep breath before their palms touch, and the second he's on his feet, he realizes the mistake he's made.

Ilya pulls him close, hand on his waist, and Shane's heart starts hammering against his ribcage, a thrumming that doesn't slow down once he realizes how warm Ilya is next to him. The flashes blind him, and his breath hitches, every muscle in his body stiffening.

The photographer lowers the camera to check the viewfinder, flipping through the pictures taken. Ilya takes that blip in time to lean in and say, directly into his ear, "You are tense."

Of course Shane is tense. This isn't his life, or anything he's remotely used to. There's a hot man clinging to his waist, he's getting insanely turned on, and he hasn't even tried wrapping his thoughts around the possibility of being attracted to men exclusively.

When Shane doesn't reply or even acknowledges him, Ilya asks, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Shane manages to choke out, but his voice is strained, Ilya's hot breath on his neck too distracting.

"You want to leave." It isn't a question. Ilya's fingers dig a little harder into his waist like he's trying to pull an answer out of him, so Shane nods. Yeah, he wants to leave. He needs to. "Okay. Give me a moment."

In the moments it takes Ilya to send a string of text messages, the noise in the venue seems to get louder. The chatter turns to screaming, the music a screech to his ears. The flashes, even when not aimed at him, become brighter, and Shane's chest tightens. A hand on his shoulder, a beautiful woman before him, words being said that he doesn't register. He tries to take another deep breath, feeling like he's about to explode into a million pieces.

Ilya peels him away from the people surrounding them with a firm grip around his wrist, weaving through the crowded venue with a smile as tight as Shane's chest. Shane feels dizzy when they finally step outside, fresh air filling his lungs, the ground swaying under him. Ilya's hand travels from his wrist to the back of his neck, his firm grip keeping Shane up on his feet.

The second they're back in Ilya's hotel room, Shane gets pushed against the door. Ilya's thigh is solid muscle between his legs, pressing hard against the boner Shane has been trying to fight off the entire night. His fingers work quickly on the three buttons that has kept Shane's chest mostly covered for the night, and Shane lets out a sigh when he finally feels Ilya's hands on his torso.

Mouthing at his throat, Ilya says, "We will not do that again."

A shiver runs down Shane's spine, but guilt settles like a meteor in his stomach. "Sorry," he breathes, pulling Ilya's sheer shirt free from the waistband of his pants. "I'm just—I'm not used to it."

"You do not have to get used to anything." A flick to his nipples, a gasp falling from his lips. Ilya scrapes his teeth over his pulse point. "You looked very pretty, though. They loved you."

Shane sinks to his knees, because that's easier than trying to find the right words to say right now. His hands slide to the slope of Ilya's ass, pulling him in as he leans forward. Shane nuzzles Ilya's crotch like he's been dying to do it all night, his brain buzzing as he feels Ilya twitch. He mouths at his cock over the delicate fabric of his pants, a hum crawling up his throat when Ilya threads his fingers through his hair. His grip is firm, but he doesn't push Shane to go any faster.

He undoes Ilya's button and zipper with quick fingers, a little too eager to push his pants and boxers down his thighs. Shane grabs Ilya's cock by the base, laps up the length, and closes his lips around the head, and his racing brain finally seems to slow down. His eyes slip closed as he swirls his tongue around the crown, his tongue flattening on the underside when he takes Ilya deeper.

Ilya curses under his breath, his hand cupping the back of Shane's head as he rocks his hips, slowly fucking his mouth. A string of Russian words follows the soft *fuck* he lets out, and Shane is embarrassed to acknowledge, even to himself, how much hearing Ilya speak his native language turns him on.

Shane wonders if he'll be able to take all of Ilya in his mouth one day, if they're going to keep this up long enough for it to happen. He breathes through his nose, his jaw starting to ache, and tries not to think about the possibility of Ilya disappearing from his life again.

Ilya pulls him off his cock with a grunt, fingers tight on his hair. Shane looks up at him in a daze, lips parted as he gasps, feeling spit covering his chin and lips. Ilya's hand is oddly gentle as he cups his jaw, thumb running over his lower lip. He pushes the thumb past his parted mouth, and Shane wraps his lips around it.

"Christ, Shane," Ilya mutters, his eyes dark. "Come here."

Shane goes without thinking. Ilya kisses him like he wants to devour Shane, with an urgency that has his back hitting the door again. He buries his fingers into Ilya's curls, wishing they could be closer somehow, that Ilya would crawl under his skin and touch every part of him that could make him fall apart.

Ilya pushes the suit off Shane's shoulders roughly, pulling him away from the door by the belt loops of his pants without ever breaking the kiss. Shane stumbles after him, savoring the kiss and every glide of Ilya's tongue against his, even if Ilya tastes like whisky tonight.

He's pushed onto the bed face down. Ilya pulls on his pants and underwear with a little too much force, and a strangled moan leaves Shane's lips when he feels Ilya's cock rubbing against the cleft of his ass, his hands firm and strong on his hips. He wants to believe Ilya wouldn't do anything to him without prep, but feeling the blunt head of his cock against his rim still has his throat feeling tight.

They separate for just a few seconds—only long enough for Ilya to grab the lube and shed his clothes, and for heat to spread all over Shane's body. The press of a slick finger to his entrance makes him gasp, muscles tensing up for a moment, but he relaxes again when Ilya leans over him and mouths at the base of his neck. There is no rush, but his finger slips in as soon as Shane's body gives way, stretching him gently, almost delicately. Two fingers has him seeing stars, three makes him drool all over the bedsheets.

And it's terrible, Shane soon finds out, how much deeper Ilya can reach like this. His fingers brush against his prostate, and the moan Shane lets out is shamefully loud, has his entire body shaking and stars dotting his sight. Ilya brings his earlobe between his teeth and finger-fucks him at the same angle, again and again, pushing him too far, too fast. Tears bead at the corners of his eyes, and Shane doesn't want to come like this, but he can't even find the strength in himself to say it.

All he manages to let out is a broken, "Ilya," that gets stuck in his throat alongside a whine, fire burning under his skin. "Fuck."

"Can you come like this?" Ilya grunts, like Shane can't feel how hard his cock is against his thigh.

"No," Shane says, but it isn't a direct answer to Ilya's question. He *could*, but adds, "Don't wanna."

"No?" Ilya asks, a teasing lilt to his tone. "You want my cock?"

Ilya brushes his fingers harder against the nerves, like he's trying to torture him—and, honestly, it's working. Precum oozes past the slit of his cock, his stomach coiling too quickly. Shane nods furiously, but it doesn't seem to be enough for Ilya, who doesn't give his fingers any rest.

"Yes, *fuck*," he moans, burying his face into the mattress, fingers twisting the bedsheets tightly.

Ilya works quickly, like he's just as desperate as Shane is, hands spreading his cheeks as he rubs the length along the cleft once, twice, before pushing in. It feels just as good as the previous night, Shane's moans leaving him in hurried strings as Ilya pushes deeper.

"Can't get over it." Ilya's voice is a growl in his ear, his grip bruising. A shiver runs down Shane's spine. "How fucking tight you are. So good."

How is Shane supposed to move on from this? When Ilya rolls his hips just right, drilling his cock into his prostate, making pleasure course through his veins so quickly. Shane's going back home tomorrow, yet he doubts he's going to forget the thickness of Ilya's cock inside him, the way he holds him, how every thrust and every slap of his hips against his ass feels like he's trying to brand him. Ilya fucks him with hurried, messy thrusts tonight, panting and grunting into his ear every time he clenches around him, a poor attempt at delaying his orgasm.

There's no way he can delay it, not when Ilya keeps hitting his prostate dead on, his vision blurring with every press of the blunt cockhead into it. Shane reaches a hand between his body and the mattress, trying to stroke himself, but Ilya doesn't lift any of the weight on him, like he wants Shane to come just like that. Hands-free.

"You don't even know how hot you are, Shane Hollander," Ilya pants, lifting his body off him but pressing a strong hand between his shoulders to keep him down. "Looking so clueless while people keep staring at you."

"Shut up," he grunts, but feels the flames within him burning hotter. "That's not true."

"You are calling me liar?" Ilya digs his fingers deeper into his shoulder blades. God, he's going to leave bruises all over him. "I will send you pictures when they come out, you will see. Made me want to fuck you right there."

"Didn't look like it," he groans, but knows that he's lying. Ilya kept a hand on him whenever possible, and Shane *knew* he wasn't imagining the energy radiating off of him. "And that wouldn't have been appropriate."

"So full of good manners." Shane can almost hear Ilya's eye roll. "You need to be told to come?"

"No," he huffs, but the tightening in his balls say otherwise. In what seems to be an act of mercy, Ilya pulls him further out of bed, freeing his cock. Giving him enough room to jerk himself off. "Ah, shit."

It only takes a few pathetic, harsh tugs on his cock for him to come, a broken string of moans leaving him as Ilya fucks him through his orgasm, moaning just as loudly as Shane. He comes so hard that he sees stars, his toes numb where they scrape against the carpet. Ilya fucks him until he can't take it anymore, until pleasure starts edging into pain and he grip of his walls on Ilya's cock is a vice. Draping himself over his body again, Ilya pushes him into bed, and with a hard bite on his shoulder—one that makes Shane cry out in pain—he comes into the condom, hot as he pulses inside him.

“Such a good boy, Shane,” Ilya drawls out, kissing over the skin he’d just bitten, as if that’d do anything to soothe the mark.

(It does.)

“You’re a little insufferable,” he groans, trying not to wipe his hand clean on the bedsheets, but the words come out sounding a bit too fond.

“Just a little?” Ilya laughs. “You downplay my efforts.”

The moments that follow, of cleaning up and showering, are mechanical at best. Shane gets through the motions with one clear goal in mind: to get in bed and probably fall into a coma. He’s exhausted, both physically and mentally. Under the hot spray of the shower, the realization of what he’s done hits him like a train: he flew out to a different country, on someone else’s money, just to get fucked. To get fucked by the very person who paid for his tickets, and who’s paying for the suite he’s in right now.

What the fuck is he even doing? He steps out of the bathroom and finds Ilya already in bed, in boxers only, an unlit cigarette between his fingers. His wet curls are pushed away from his face, and in the warm, low lights of the bedside lamps, he looks absolutely stunning. They lock eyes for a moment, and without Shane even having to say anything, Ilya puts the cigarette down on the nightstand and pats the empty space next to him.

It still feels way too intimate to share a bed, but that’s a ridiculous thought to have considering everything they’ve already done.

“Is the time of your flight tomorrow okay?” Ilya asks once Shane has made himself comfortable under the covers, both leaning against the headboard. “Tried not to buy it too early.”

Against his will, Shane feels his cheeks heating up. “Yeah, it’s fine. How much longer are you staying here?”

“I go home tomorrow, too.”

“Oh. Do you like it in Boston?”

“Yes, but...” Ilya waves a hand around before he settles it back on his lap. The expression on his face seems... conflicted, if Shane had to guess. “I mean Russia.”

“Ah.” And suddenly Shane’s reminded of that one summer and the bright-eyed boy he’d met, and how different he is from the person next to him now. He thinks of sunny days in Moscow, and all the hurtful looks that had been thrown at him and his mom. “I haven’t gone back since...”

Ilya hums, hand coming up to rest on the golden cross that’s back around his neck. “Sometimes I wish I didn’t either.”

Shane takes the slight opening Ilya offers him. “Why do you, then?”

Ilya's answer is simple: "Because of family."

And Shane can relate to that. He may be a couple of hours away from his parents now, but he still makes his way back to them. He makes the drive because he cares, because he loves them. Because his life would be miserable if he didn't have them around. Shane craves his independency more than anything, but he would never give up the connection with the people who gave him life.

"Did your mom stay back?" he asks, his memories of her a little frayed now, but he still remembers how similar Ilya had been to the woman who'd take him to the park that summer. Her curls, the color of her eyes, the moles painted across her skin. Just like Ilya.

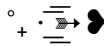
The look in Ilya's eyes grow a little sadder, making Shane fear he'd said the wrong thing. Making him wish he could take the question back.

"Yes."

"Do you miss her?"

Ilya clutches the cross a little tighter.

"So much."



Shane doesn't hear from Ilya again for the rest of the summer, and it's hard for him not to wonder if he'd done something wrong.

It's been weeks since he left LA; the leaves are starting to yellow, the temperatures are finally dropping, and yet all he can think about is the way they left things that one morning in July. Shane can't stop thinking about the weight of Ilya's hand on the small of his back as he pulled him into a kiss, the warmth of his tongue in his mouth, the ferociousness with which he was kissed, like Ilya was sure they wouldn't be seeing each other again.

In the hotel lobby, minutes before his taxi arrived, Shane almost wished Ilya would kiss him again. They were close enough that it wouldn't take much effort, but there were eyes on them. Surveillance cameras capturing their every move. Ilya's shoulders were tense, but

Shane wasn't sure that had anything to do with him. He was about to ask if everything was okay when Ilya's phone started ringing, and then everything started going downhill.

He still remembers how angry Ilya had been on the phone, his voice roaring without a care that they were in public, foreign words falling quickly from his lips like bullets aimed at a target. Ilya's features had been distorted with anger, the veins on his neck popping the harsher his words became. Shane didn't know what to do to help because he couldn't even tell what was wrong, and he never got the chance to make a move.

Ilya left the lobby without sparing him a glance, hopped into a taxi, and left without saying goodbye. Shane tried to pretend he wasn't hurt, but he couldn't swallow past the knot that was left in his throat for days. He expected Ilya to text him an apology, hoped he'd explain what happened and why he left the way he did, but those texts never came. Not even after Shane swallowed his pride and sent the first text, asking if everything was okay.

Shane tried not to insist. If Ilya wasn't going to talk to him, he wasn't going to humiliate himself any further. He refuses to accept he did something to deserve the cold shoulder. He doesn't think it would be too far-fetched to think they'd had a good weekend in LA, even with how insanely uncomfortable he'd been at that dinner.

Checking Ilya's feed has become a habit that almost annoys him more often than not, and it's been doing little to ease his worries—the problem is that Ilya hasn't updated his Instagram since he left California, and by his previous pattern of posting, that's highly unusual. He considers sending another text just in case Ilya had missed the first one, but every time he opens their chat, Shane decides against it.

He doesn't have time to be running himself in circles, anyway. His fall semester has already begun.

It's a little after 1am when Shane finally crawls into bed, his eyes sore from staring at his laptop screen all night. He's exhausted, but at least he's done with all his reading for the week. He pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose as he settles against his pillows, grabbing his phone off the nightstand to check it for the first time in hours. When he scrolls through the notifications on his lockscreen, his heart skips several beats.

Shane unlocks his phone with clumsy fingers, not believing what his eyes are seeing. He opens the messages app and, sure enough, a new text is there, waiting for him to read.

Ilya

You are not at work tonight

Shane scoffs, a frown pulling at his features. His fingers swipe furiously over the keyboard, but when he reads the message back before hitting send, he feels like an idiot. He hits backspace until the message is gone, and instead he sends:

Shane

Are you stalking me?

Ilya

No

I came for the vodka, and guy at the bar said my favorite waiter wasn't here

Shane

Disclosing an employee's schedule is against our policy.

Ilya

He said I look like kicked puppy

How many puppies has he kicked to know?

Shane frowns. Why is the restaurant still open at this hour? It should have closed almost an hour ago. He considers texting Hayden about it when another text comes in, and he finds himself unable to exit the chat.

Ilya

I would know where you live if I was stalker
and I don't

Shane

That's not very comforting or less creepy.

Ilya

Come to my hotel

Shane

It's Tuesday.

Ilya

And?

Shane

I have class tomorrow. I can't.

Shane almost gets out of bed and starts getting dressed, but pride leaves him rooted under his covers. If Ilya thinks he can disappear for two months and come back like nothing ever happened—he'd be *almost* correct to assume Shane is that big of a fool. He's aching to know what happened, what prompted Ilya to disappear without a word, but not like this. Not in the middle of the night, and not when Ilya's intentions seem to be far from talking about it.

Ilya

I take you to coffee after class

You come back to hotel with me and I suck your pretty cock

How does that sound?

It feels like his entire body is being set alight. He doesn't want to give in so easily—he *can't* give in so easily, but is he supposed to ignore the way his body reacts? It's hard enough for him to ignore the urge he gets to palm himself through his boxers. He takes a deep breath, thumb hovering over the keyboard.

Shane

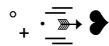
You are so charming with your words.

Ilya

The right answer is 'okay'

Shane

Fine.



Shane twists his fingers so hard into Ilya's curls that he's sure a few strands get ripped off his scalp. Instead of complaining or acknowledging the pain, all Ilya does is take him deeper into his mouth, nose brushing against his trimmed pubes. Ilya has one hand gripping his ass tightly and the other shoved into his mouth, fingers pressing down on Shane's tongue to keep him from being too loud.

They had barely made it two steps into the room when Ilya shoved him against the door, hand desperate on his jaw and he leaned in to kiss him. They hadn't really talked at the cafe, or on their way to Ilya's hotel, and they still hadn't talked before Ilya took his breath away. Not about what really mattered, anyway.

Right now, Shane can't remember what was so important.

He comes into Ilya's mouth with a soft, muffled cry, thighs shaking with the sudden burst, Ilya's throat tight around his cockhead. Ilya keeps his mouth on him until his balls are fully drained, until goosebumps start rippling through his flesh and their point of contact starts to hurt. When Ilya pulls away, his lips are a bit swollen and red, spit covering his mouth and his chin, and he looks *dazed*. Like he could do this for hours on end.

"You can't keep doing this," Shane breathes, cheeks flushed, holding himself up with a hand on Ilya's shoulder. Ilya presses a tender kiss into his crotch that makes him shiver.

"Doing what?" Ilya asks almost innocently. "Sucking your cock?"

He lets out a strangled laugh that sounds almost manic. Shane runs a frustrated hand through his hair.

"Coming and going as you please," he says, irrationally. "Pulling me in only to then push me away."

Ilya sits back on his heels, wiping at his mouth with the back of a hand. The frown on his face makes him look as confused as Shane had spent the past two months feeling.

"I can only find work in Montreal so many times, Shane."

"That's not—" He lets out a huff, tucks himself back into his pants, and steps around Ilya. His feet feel heavy as he drags himself across the room, sitting on Ilya's bed without asking if he could. "I try talking to you but you won't talk to me. You didn't even *look* at me before leaving me in another fucking country, couldn't even reply to a fucking text when I asked if you were okay."

And I can't help but feel like I'm being used, he stops himself from adding, because they're not anything. He already feels like he's asking for too much.

Ilya's shoulders sag as tension visibly leaves his body. He gets on his feet, crosses the room, and sits next to Shane in bed, leaving some space between them. Enough that Shane wouldn't be able to touch him if he were to reach out and try to.

"I am fine," Ilya says, and while Shane has to take his word for it, he isn't sure he fully believes it. "I had issues with my family. I did not mean to leave like that, but my brother is asshole."

Shane's frown softens. His hand twitches with the urge to reach out, but he leaves it where it is on his lap. "But everything is okay now?"

Ilya takes a little too long to answer, and when he does, he says, "Is complicated."

"Did you at least get to see your mom?"

Hurt spreads all over Ilya's face, and he's not quick enough to mask it. He looks away briefly, but Shane sees the shaking of his chest when he takes a deep breath.

“In a way, yes.” The tightness in his voice is heartwrenching. He reaches for the cross dangling from his neck, just like he’d done back in LA. “Cemeteries are not very pleasant, but I go see her whenever I can.”

Shame consumes him like the uncontained flames of a fire.

“Oh my god, Ilya. I’m... I’m so sorry,” he whispers, feeling like an idiot. “I didn’t—”

“Is okay,” Ilya tries to reassure with a shake of his head and a tight smile, but all it does is make Shane’s heart ache. “Has been long. I was young.”

“Still,” Shane presses, even though he doesn’t know what exactly he wants to say. He tries to imagine the gaping hole that the loss must have felt in Ilya’s chest, but he can’t even begin to fathom it. “I just—I remember...”

I remember her smile, he wants to say, but now he isn’t sure if he’s just projecting Ilya’s on the fading memories he has of that one summer. Her long curls, her beauty, all the details Shane thinks he remembers, are they false memories? A mere reflection of the person sitting next to him now? Did Ilya look just like his mom, or is Shane wrong about that?

He remembers the way she looked at her son, though, and of that he is sure. The love and adoration in her eyes, but also the slight fear. The way she held him strongly by the hand when it was time to leave, how she never let him stray too far.

But it’s not his place to say any of that. He’s been wanting Ilya to just talk to him for so long, but he doesn’t need it if that’s going to hurt him.

“And my father is going to die, too,” Ilya says almost too casually, leaning back into his hands, looking up at the ceiling instead of at Shane. “Soon, maybe. Probably.”

“Ilya, that’s terrible.”

Ilya hums. “I guess.”

“We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.” The change of gears isn’t exactly what Shane wants, but it is, perhaps, what Ilya needs from him right now. “But if you do, I will listen. Okay?”

“Okay.” Ilya finally looks at him again, a light smirk tugging his lips. “Can we go back to making out now?”

What else is Shane supposed to do if not climb into Ilya’s lap and take his lips in his, to try and kiss his pain away? Ilya acts like he’s fine, but Shane thinks there’s no way he could be. When Ilya grabs Shane’s face, his grip is stronger than it had been earlier, his kiss a lot more desperate. His other hand falls on Shane’s hip and pulls him closer, making Shane forget that he has to leave.

He’s already finished his reading for the week, anyway. It can’t be that bad if he allows himself one afternoon to relax. Though, honestly, it can’t even be properly called relaxing

when he gets so high-strung with so little; Ilya falls into the mattress, pulling Shane along with him, and Shane can't believe that he's already getting turned on again.

Ilya's erection brushes against his crotch and Shane gasps, shuddering. This is no ideal way to cope with things, but if it's what Ilya wants—what he *needs* from Shane, then Shane will do it for him. He will let Ilya's hands roam down his body, under his shirt, smoothing up his back. Ilya's nails are blunt when he scrapes them over his skin, but it still makes goosebumps rise on his flesh. When fingers dip into his pants, his underwear, Shane knows there's no stopping what comes next.

And while he expects Ilya to be a little rough, his own way to get some of his frustrations and sadness out, he's the complete opposite. His fingers are gentle as he stretches Shane open, patient as Shane adjusts to the intrusion. He doesn't try to rush it—he *waits* until Shane is the one to say he's ready, to urge him to keep moving. Shane's heart is in his throat as Ilya covers his cock with latex, lava pooling in his stomach as he lathers himself with lube.

Sweat runs down his back when he straddles Ilya's lap, a moan falling from his lips as Ilya's cockhead brushes against his entrance. His breath gets caught in his throat at the initial intrusion, and Shane can't imagine he will ever get used to how full Ilya makes him feel. He grips firmly onto Ilya's shoulders as he lowers himself, almost tortuously slow. Shane leans forward, takes Ilya's mouth in his, and kisses him almost desperately.

Ilya's moans rock him to his core once he's fully sheathed. One hand on the back of his neck and the other on his peck, thumb brushing over his nipple, it almost feels like Ilya wants to have him as close as he possibly can, wants Shane to feel like there's nowhere for him to go—not that he *would* want to go anywhere.

Shane fucks himself on Ilya's cock without a hurry, feeling every inch of Ilya's cock splitting him open. He rides him until his thighs start to ache, until his cock, too, hurts so much from remaining untouched that he finds himself spilling into Ilya's mouth: "I need more."

Ilya lets out a sound that's akin to a growl, holding Shane firmly by the hips and flipping them over. He fucks him with abandon like this, one hand on the headboard and the other pushing Shane's leg up. Shane almost feels delirious when he wraps a hand around himself, the flicking of his wrist messy, pleasure coiling in his groin and muddling his brain.

"Ilya," he moans, but he doesn't even know what he wanted to say. He might not have wanted to say anything at all. Shane thumbs at his slit, smearing precum over his sensitive cockhead, and a whine rolls off his tongue. "Please."

"Come for me, Shane," Ilya grunts, picking up his pace, the sound of his hips colliding into his ass filthy. "Come on."

Shane tries to jerk himself off faster, but it's already starting to be too much. His eyes slip closed without him meaning to, the buildup of his orgasm running down his spine in waves, his muscles twitching with every stroke of his hand. Ilya grabs his other leg by the back of his thigh and nearly folds him in half, changing the angle of his stroking just slightly, but it's enough for him to be able to fuck Shane even deeper.

Shane is so overwhelmed that he can feel tears clinging to his lashes. He strokes himself once, twice, and comes with a long, embarrassing cry all over himself, coating his stomach and his fingers with white, sticky ropes. Ilya pulls out so fast that Shane gasps, his eyes snapping open when the emptiness hits him. He doesn't expect to see Ilya pulling off the condom, a wild look in his eyes, blood flushing down his neck and his chest.

Ilya leans over him and, with just a few quick jerks of his hand, he adds to the mess on Shane's stomach. It's so disgusting yet so *hot* that Shane can't even bring himself to tell him off for it. The worst of it, though, is how Ilya leans in and kisses him before they can even come down from their highs, tongue licking into his mouth with a hunger that's almost unexpected.

"You are going to ruin me," Ilya murmurs against his mouth, and it almost makes Shane laugh. "I could blow you off in the shower right now."

That pulls a genuine chuckle out of Shane. "My dick would fall off if you did."

Ilya's lips twitch into a smirk. "That would not be very sexy."

"I do need a shower, though." He hates the sticky feeling in his hand and his stomach.

Prying himself off Shane and getting out of bed, Ilya offers him a hand. Shane hesitates when he almost reaches out his dirty hand, switching for the other last second. There is nothing very sexy about the moments that follow—not because seeing Ilya naked and wet isn't sexy in itself, but because he's just drained. He came twice in a very short while, and now he's struggling to even keep his eyes open. His exhaustion and the absolute relaxed state his body is in are only made worse by Ilya's fingers threading through his hair, shampooing his scalp.

And maybe this is too intimate for what they are (or aren't), but Shane won't think about that right now.

"I should go," Shane says once he's dry and back in his boxers. "I have..."

But he can't bring himself to lie and say he has work to get done, because he doesn't have anything that's urgent. It should be fine if he didn't think of his workload this one time, even if his brain has been yelling at him for breaking his perfectly curated routine.

"Or you can stay," Ilya counters, resting against the headboard and lifting the covers on the spot next to him, beckoning Shane. "Your house won't run away."

"It's an apartment," Shane argues for the sake of arguing, but makes his way to bed anyway. He leaves some space between them, not wanting to assume anything and end up being too close, but Ilya is having none of it—he scoots over and places himself close enough that he can put a hand on Shane's thigh. "Why did you choose to move to Boston? Los Angeles or New York would make more sense for your line of work, no?"

"Mm, yes," Ilya agrees, drawing circles on his skin. "A good friend lives there, though. So it was more familiar to me. I would not be alone."

“Ah. I see.”

“Svetlana is a nice girl,” Ilya continues. Something ugly twists in Shane’s chest, but he tries to ignore it. It isn’t his place to feel whatever that is. “Is the only thing I care to keep from home.”

Shane frowns. “From home? You mean Russia?”

“Yes,” Ilya nods. “She is friend from childhood. And you?”

“What about me?” he asks, frown deepening.

“You are from here?”

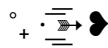
“Oh, no.” His hand hovers over Ilya’s. Before he can think better of it, he covers it with his own. Ilya’s gentle touches come to a halt. “I was born and raised in Ottawa, my parents still live there. Montreal is where my dad attended university, and it was never a question whether I’d attend the same one as him or not.”

“So you like them?” Ilya asks. “Your parents.”

“Yeah, I love them,” Shane replies easily, and with the way Ilya’s breathing slows down next to him, he almost wonders if he shouldn’t have.

“Good for you,” Ilya says gently, and while Shane thinks he means it, he can’t help but notice the bitter tinge in his voice.

The complicated feelings in his chest only grow. He wonders if he will ever make sense of them.



Ilya

Are you home?

Shane shifts under the throw blanket he has pulled up to his chin, adjusting his glasses as he blinks the text into full focus. It's been almost three months since he last heard from Ilya, and the text that just came in is not a response to the last one Shane had sent.

Shane

No, I'm house sitting for my parents.

Why?

Ilya

So not in Montreal

It's stupid for his heart to skip a beat at such a ridiculous thing—the fact that Ilya still remembers, so many months later, that Montreal isn't exactly Shane's home. Not permanently, at least.

Shane

No, not in Montreal.

Ilya

Okay

Shane frowns. He watches his screen, waiting for another text to come in, but two minutes go by and Ilya doesn't follow up.

Shane

Are you in town?

Ilya

Yes

He's out of the couch before his brain even processes what he's doing. His fingers swipe quickly over the keyboard, and he hits backspace several times before he's satisfied with what he's sending.

Shane

Do you want to come over?

Ilya

To your parents house?

Shane

Yes. They'll be away for a week.

I could make the drive. Where are you?

Ilya

[location]

Shane knows that what he's doing doesn't make logical sense. He shouldn't be getting into his car when it's going to be so late into the night by the time he makes it back. He doesn't even know if Ilya flew in for work or not—though, surely, he would have said something if that was the case. Surely Ilya wouldn't have sent his location that quickly if he wasn't able to leave.

For the sake of driving safely on the icy roads, he won't be thinking about that at all.

The muscles of his back ache by the time he parks on the curb of Ilya's hotel, but he can barely feel it over the light buzzing that seems to course through his entire body. Your driver has arrived, he sends, trying to hold back a smile and doing a very poor job of it.

Ilya walks through the hotel doors a few short minutes later, dragging a black carry-on behind him, backpack over one shoulder and a duffel bag over the other. A long, black coat hugs his

body very nicely, and an equally black scarf shields his neck and the lower half of his face from the cold.

They don't really talk past initial greetings for the entirety of the drive, and for once Shane doesn't feel the need to fill the silence. It's getting late, and he's pretty sure Ilya had landed not too long ago—he leans against the window, closes his eyes, and makes Shane's heart flip embarrassingly in his chest. There's a set to his jaw, a slight furrow to his eyebrows that almost creases his forehead, and Shane figures exhaustion must be finally settling in.

It's a little past eleven when Shane parks in front of his parents' house again. Ilya gets out of the car before he does, and refuses all of Shane's offers to help with his baggage. He takes Ilya inside, and watches the way Ilya's eyes roam over every corner of the house, how they linger on the framed pictures decorating the corner tables, the fireplace mantel, the walls.

"I think it's a bit much," he says, waving at the pictures hung on the hallway walls as he walks Ilya to his childhood bedroom. "But my mom refuses to take them down."

"I think it's nice," Ilya says, not taking his eyes off them. "They love you very much."

Heat rises up the back of Shane's neck. "This is, um, my room," he says almost awkwardly as he walks through the door, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans just so he has something to do with them. "You can sleep here, and I'll... take my parents' bedroom."

"Will you, now?" Ilya asks with a raised brow and a slight smirk on his lips. He drops his bags by the dresser and takes the room in, just like he'd done with the rest of the house he'd been able to see. "You grew up here?"

"Yes."

"Is a boring room," Ilya concludes, the smirk never leaving his lips.

Shane rolls his eyes. "Fuck you. Did you expect it would look the same as when I was twelve?"

"Kind of." Ilya's smirk widens. "What were you into? Dinosaurs?"

"You are so annoying," he says, but the chuckle he lets out is entirely contradicting. "It was sharks."

Ilya nods, giving the room another look over. "I can see it."

"Is the heater not warm enough?" he asks just to change topics, mostly because he doesn't want Ilya to open that can of worms. He's been called boring and annoying often enough once he starts talking about the sea creatures that he knows to keep it to himself now. Ilya's smirk quickly turns into a frown, his head tilting with an unspoken question. "You haven't taken off your coat."

"Oh."

Shane isn't prepared for the next few seconds. Ilya shrugs off his coat before he does his scarf, which is a bit of a weird choice. Shane only gets a moment to drool over the way Ilya's black woolen shirt hugs his muscles before his heart stops beating.

"What the fuck," he says without thinking, his throat immediately tightening. Ilya's grip on his scarf tightens just slightly, but Shane doesn't see it. He can't get his eyes off the ugly bruise staining Ilya's jaw. "What the fuck happened?"

"My father is dead," Ilya says nonchalantly, like that isn't at all devastating news. Shane's heart winds even tighter. "My brother was not happy to have me at the funeral."

He closes the gap between them, hand instinctively coming up to Ilya's jaw. Ilya doesn't flinch at the touch, but his breath stutters. "Does it still hurt? Why would he—"

Ilya holds him gently by the wrist, pulling his hand away from the bruise. "Later, okay? I am very tired."

"Of course," he quickly concedes. "A warm shower should be nice, yes? I'll grab a towel for you. Bathroom's at the end of the hall—"

With a hand on the back of his neck, Ilya pulls him into a kiss. Not desperate and hungry like he usually is, but rather so tender that Shane has to brace himself with both hands on his shoulders. He forgets what he's supposed to do the second Ilya weaves his fingers through his hair, the gentle tug he gives the strands making his scalp tingle pleasantly. He almost wants to protest when Ilya starts pulling him towards his bed—he's still in his outside clothes, he was in a *plane* wearing that, and yet he doesn't say anything when they fall on the mattress.

"Do your parents know you are bringing boys home?" Ilya asks once they part, trailing kisses up his jaw. His breath comes out shaky when Ilya's tongue flicks at his earlobe.

"No," he answers in a soft breath. "They don't—I haven't—"

"Does it make you hard?" The question is such a weird juxtaposition to how softly Ilya is kissing and touching him right now that it almost gives him whiplash. "Being bad."

"Jesus, shut up."

"Make me."

Ilya welcomes Shane's tongue with eagerness and a soft moan, his hands running down Shane's back and tugging his sweater out of his pants. Shane groans when Ilya runs his palms up and down his back, under the sweater, when his fingers trace the waistband of his jeans. The stutter of his hip is involuntary, the rough friction of their jeans almost making his mostly soft cock ache.

He pulls back before he can get too carried away.

"Shower first," he insists, face feeling hot.

Shane can't tell if Ilya's smile looks as drunk or if he's imagining things.

“Only if you come with me.”

Well, that sounds like a good compromise, especially when he can get on his knees under the hot spray of the shower and suck Ilya off like he’s been wanting to (and, honestly, missing) for months. He likes the way Ilya’s moans bounce off the tiled walls, how his fingers grip his wet hair. The weight of his cock on his tongue is enough to make him forget the pain of the floor tiles digging into his knees. Ilya comes into his mouth with a beautiful cry, and it only takes Shane a few tugs on his cock for him to come, too, his cum getting washed down the drain.

Instead of getting back to what they were doing, Shane drags Ilya out to the living room. It feels weird to have him here like this—surreal, almost, to have this man in the house he grew up in. Shane makes himself a cup of tea and one of hot chocolate for Ilya, his heart softening at the gentle smile Ilya gives him when presented with the beverage. He feeds wood to the fireplace and makes himself comfortable on the couch, right next to Ilya.

“You don’t have to talk about it now,” he starts, pulling a knee up to his chest. “I just want to offer my condolences. I think losing someone is still tough even if the relationship was complicated.”

“Yes,” Ilya says softly, sinking a bit deeper into the couch. “But it will be okay, I think.”

“Yeah,” Shane agrees, and he genuinely hopes so.

Shane does not sleep in his parents’ room. He sleeps with Ilya in his room, in his bed, and it’s weird—not in a bad way by any means, but simply because they don’t really *do* anything. Ilya is visibly exhausted by the time they call it a night, and all he manages to do is give Shane a lazy kiss before he passes out. Shane stays up for at least another hour, watching as Ilya’s features turn peaceful for the first time that night, his soft curls framing his face.

When he wakes up in the morning, with the soft glow of winter sunlight filtering in through the window, he finds Ilya still dead asleep. Shane props himself up on an elbow, his fingers ghostlike as he brushes over the ugly bruise on Ilya’s jaw, and he can’t help but wonder just what the hell would compel someone to punch their own brother in the face like that.

Ilya’s eyes flutter open before he can pull his hand away. Shane freezes, ready to apologize, but Ilya’s lips curl into a soft smile that immediately puts him at ease.

“Does it make me ugly?” Ilya asks, voice hoarse with sleep.

Shane chuckles softly, shaking his head. “That’s impossible. How are you going to work like that, though?”

Ilya grabs Shane's hand and places a gentle kiss on his palm. "I did not come for work."

He holds his breath. "No?"

"Nina demanded I get time off." Ilya guides Shane's hand to his head, and Shane threads his fingers through his curls, nails gently scratching his scalp. Ilya's eyes flutter shut and, for a moment, Shane wonders if he will fall back asleep. "To take care of my father at first, and now... She says I need time to process it."

"She's right." It's good that Ilya is getting some time to himself, he thinks. But then, if he didn't fly in for work, then— "Wait, why did you come, then?"

When Ilya opens his eyes again, they're intense. He looks at Shane like he can't believe he's even asking that, his lips thinning into a line before he releases the tension he seems to be holding.

"Svetlana stayed back in Moscow," he explains. "She is helping me sort out some stuff. And I... didn't want to be alone, and I also didn't want to stay there."

Isn't it a terrible thing, what those words make him feel. How he looks at Ilya right now and the vulnerability he finds in his eyes makes Shane think of the kid he met all those years ago, the boy who didn't yet know what loss and grief meant or felt like. Ilya is wearing the bracelet now—the one with the sun and the beads, the red thread worn out with time, fished out from the bottom of his backpack as soon as they were out of the shower.

"Are you hungry?" he asks instead of, '*what do you remember of that summer?*', or '*why does your brother hate you so much?*'. The relief Ilya must feel seems evident on his face.

Ilya trails after him like a puppy, never straying too far. He doesn't hover over Shane like a shadow, but his questions are plentiful and constant. *Where was this picture taken?* as he picks up a frame off the wall and brings it into the kitchen. *How old were you here?* as he describes another one from the living room. Was the house always like this? Did they ever move? Did he have many friends?

It's cute, Shane thinks as he picks up toast from the toaster, spreading avocado on his and strawberry jam on Ilya's after Ilya pulls a disgusted face at him. Ilya had once told him he asked too many questions, but he's no different right now—the only difference is that Shane has no qualms in answering them, while Ilya seems to dodge almost every question Shane tries to send his way.

Ilya finds it absurd that Shane takes his coffee with no sugar, while Shane is horrified to watch Ilya fill half his mug with creamer (and, yes, he judges his dad for it, too).

"Are you on break from school?" Ilya asks, wiping his upper lip with the back of a hand.

"Yeah," Shane blinks, forcing himself to look away from Ilya's mouth. "Classes start again on Monday, though, and I'll likely start tutoring soon."

“You said you want to work with kids, yes?” Shane nods. “That is very sweet. I think you will be good teacher.”

He blushes. “You don’t know that.”

“I can feel it.”

“How did you end up as a model?” he asks, desperate to divert the attention from himself, unable to swallow a single compliment. “I mean, besides your obvious good looks.”

Ilya smirks, but it’s a fleeting thing. He remains quiet for a while, focusing on finishing his toast instead. Likely mulling over the English words in his brain.

“My father was willing to pay for anything that would keep me away,” he says in a way that almost seem rehearsed, a sad smile dancing on his lips. “I was never the favorite son. He would do whatever Andrei wanted.”

The tightness in Ilya’s voice edges on dangerous. Shane can’t see it happening, not with how guarded he seems even as he opens up, but he wouldn’t know what to do if Ilya were to start crying. He wishes he could reach across the table and hold Ilya’s hand for comfort, but Ilya keeps his hands to himself.

“Andrei saw me sucking my friend’s dick one day,” Ilya says bluntly, letting out a long sigh. “He was not supposed to be home, and we were supposed to be doing school project. He would threaten to tell my father every time he got angry at me.”

“Ilya, that’s fucking awful.” Shane can’t imagine having his biggest secret being found out like that, against his will.

“When Svetlana said she was moving to America to be model, I wanted to come too. She was the only person I had on my side.”

Shane frowns. “And you still kept going back to Russia? Why?”

“Because it is home,” Ilya says with a frown of his own.

That can’t be true, he wants to say. A place that doesn’t accept or want you can’t be home. People who hate you can’t be home. Being degraded, abused, and humiliated can’t be called being home.

But who is he to say any of that, when Ilya is only showing him a glimpse of what it was like? When he doesn’t have the full picture, even though the one in front of him is so clearly bruised, both physically and emotionally.

“It does not matter now,” Ilya continues when Shane fails to say something back. “He is dead and I have no reason to go back.”

“Do you like modelling?” he asks, trying to soften the mood again. He hadn’t expected Ilya to open up like this, and he has a feeling he wouldn’t like to talk any further.

“I am good at it.” It’s so early in the morning, and yet his confidence is so fucking sexy. Shane’s nerves are just beginning to settle when Ilya hits him with, “The sponsors, the partying, getting to fuck hot people.”

“Right.”

The sudden bitterness in his mouth makes his jaw ache. They’re not anything, and he has no right to feel like this, but it still doesn’t feel nice to be reminded that he’s just a commodity. That Ilya will continue to show up whenever he feels like it, and that he will still leave. Shane never really thought they were something more, but now he feels foolish to have even dared hoping.

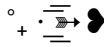
“But that is not my favorite thing about being in North America,” Ilya adds. “Not anymore.”

Shane won’t make the mistake of trying to read into it. He won’t try to decipher what Ilya is trying to say if he’s not willing to say it clearly. He leaves the table, and Ilya goes after him; he pulls Shane in by the waist once the dishes are in the sink, and Shane is too tired to fight him. Ilya kisses him, soft and tender, and he refuses to hope.

He can’t.

He won’t.

(And yet, he does.)



Shane

Do we have pictures of that summer in Russia when I was a kid?

Yuna H.

I think so, they should be in an album somewhere.

Why?

Shane

Do you think they're with the others in the basement?

Yuna H.

Probably. I haven't gone through the old pictures in a long time.

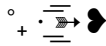
Why are you asking all of a sudden?

Is everything okay at home?

We miss you!

Shane

Everything is fine. No burglaries yet! :)



Shane leaves Ilya lightly snoring on the couch and the TV turned on. He doesn't go to his parents' basement that often, mostly because he has no reason to, but also because he never really learned how to navigate his mother's messy storage. The space is a maze of metal shelves, with boxes everywhere. He's pretty sure she's still holding on to every stuffed animal he's ever had, every drawing he did at school and brought home for her, likely displayed on their fridge at some point.

He knows where the boxes with the pictures are, though, and that all of them are labelled by year. His mother would have him help her bring a few of them up at least once a year, so they would flip through the albums and relive all the good memories. Shane pulls out the two boxes from the year he was eight and, sitting on the dusty, cold floor, starts going through the albums.

For a little while, he loses sight of his objective. It's been years since he last went down this particular year of his memory lane, and while his memories aren't clear even with the aid of the photographs, nostalgia still stirs warmly in his chest. But it feels weird, too, to see a version of himself that wasn't yet worn down by the unspoken rules of society.

The cold is starting to seep into his bones when he finds it—an album thinner than the others, the label on its cover written in his mother's beautiful handwriting: *Moscow, Russia. 1999.*

Shane holds his breath and flips it open.

The first few pictures aren't what he's looking for; they're pictures of his parents at the airport, of his father hailing a taxi, of him and his mother in the apartment Shane remembers nothing of. Mundane pictures that he isn't sure why his parents wanted to capture in the first place. But then comes the pictures of him in that park—the first three of him playing on his own, his mother behind the camera, and then the pictures with Ilya begin.

There aren't many of them, but Shane is relieved to find that they both look happy in the few that do exist. It doesn't look like his mother was putting any effort into getting them to pose together for a picture, and Ilya probably wouldn't have understood the request if she tried, anyway. The last picture in the album, however, is the one that really gets to him.

Ilya's mom is crouching next to him in the sandbank they spent most of the time playing in, her long skirt pooling around her legs and long, curly hair coming down beautifully over her shoulder. Her hold on Ilya's arm seems gentle, as is the look on her face, even if Ilya didn't seem all that happy to hear what she had to say. Shane doesn't remember this moment or the one that followed, but he's glad to see his memories of her weren't wrong.

Ilya looks just like her. Even now, as a grown adult, he's still the mirror image of his mother.

Shane takes the picture out of the album and puts the boxes back in place. He's shivering when he makes his way back upstairs, and he's startled to find Ilya wide awake on the couch, the movie still playing.

"Sorry," he apologizes, even if there is no real reason why he should. "I was looking for something."

"Yeah?" Ilya shifts on the couch, turning to get a better look at him. "Did you find it?"

Because it's easier to show than explaining what he'd been up to, Shane makes his way back to the couch and sits next to him. He hands Ilya the photograph without a word, and while Ilya doesn't hesitate to grab it, it seems to take him a moment to process what he's looking at.

And then his hand starts to shake.

"I was looking for a picture of the two of us back then," he starts softly. "I didn't know this was in there. This is her, isn't it? Your mom?"

When Ilya doesn't reply, Shane lifts his gaze from his shaky hand to his face, only to have his heart broken by the sight of a tear rolling down Ilya's beautiful face.

“You can keep it.”

“Thank you,” Ilya says softly, voice cracking. He tries to snuffle back more tears, quickly wiping his eyes. “I—I do not have many pictures of her. Sometimes I become afraid I will forget what she looked like.”

That’s impossible, Shane thinks to himself. *You’re a carbon copy of her.*

“Did your family not take many pictures?”

Ilya shakes his head. “No, she liked it very much, actually. She would call me little model, and I would take many of her too when she would let me play with her camera.”

“How...” he starts, but course-corrects. “What happened, then? Could you not bring the pictures with you when you moved?”

“My father threw away most of them when she died.” Shane can tell Ilya is trying very hard to keep it together, and how difficult of a task this is. He wonders how often he’s talked about what happened, if at all. If Ilya ever felt like he *could* share this with anyone. “He said she was a disgrace for killing herself.”

“Ilya...”

“She was just so sad, and he was not kind to her.”

Before he can think better of it, Shane closes the very small gap still separating them and pulls Ilya into his arms. Ilya doesn’t protest, his body doesn’t tense up; he sighs, sinks into Shane’s embrace, and it’s almost like he’s relieved to finally have someone holding him.

What an awful life. How could you go through all that, and still come out relatively okay on the other side?

“You didn’t deserve any of that,” his voice comes out as a near whisper, but he needs to let Ilya know. He needs Ilya to hear these words for once, just in case nobody has told him that before. “You shouldn’t have gone through so much.”

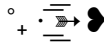
Ilya starts pulling back from the hug, and while Shane’s instinct is to hold him tighter, he loosens his arms instead. Before he can mourn the contact, or start overthinking that maybe this was too much, Ilya leans in and kisses him—a soft peck, nothing more than just the press of their lips, so unlike him.

I think I like you, Shane thinks of saying, but keeps the words to himself. *How unfortunate.*

“Sorry,” Ilya says with an awkward laugh when he pulls away, and it’s the first time Shane hears him not sound that sure of himself. He looks down at the photograph again, and a soft smile tugs at his lips. “Thank you.”

Shane almost wishes his school break would never end. That he could stay here, with Ilya, in his parents’ house. But that’s something that won’t happen, and probably never will; Ilya will still leave, and life will keep moving forward. So, he’ll enjoy this while he still can.

God knows when they'll get to see each other again.



“Shane Hollander?”

The frown on his face is more than just at the tugging of Ruby's hands on his hair. Tutoring ended almost an hour ago, and he's now playing the part of the twins' babysitter for the Pikes. He hadn't recognized the number on the caller ID, and the use of his full name leaves no room for the call to be a mistake.

“Yes?” he hesitantly answers, holding back a wince as Ruby starts tying a tuft of his hair with an elastic band.

“This is Svetlana Vetrova, Ilya Rozanov's friend,” she offers, and Shane immediately recognizes her name. Her accent is almost nonexistent though, unlike Ilya's. “I got your contact with him, I hope you don't mind.”

“Um.” His brain lags for a moment, words lost on him. He doesn't know Svetlana, and she doesn't know him. He wasn't even aware that she knew of his existence. Jade climbs onto him where he's sitting on the floor, a plastic princess tiara on her hands. “Is... is everything okay?”

Why are you calling me?

“Would you be able to come to Boston?”

Shane is pretty sure his heart stops beating. He can't even feel the tugs of Ruby's hands on his hair, or the way the plastic teeth of Jade's tiara scrape on his scalp. The rug on Hayden's living room floor, that he's been sitting on for the past hour, suddenly feels very uncomfortable under him, but he can't get himself to move.

His mouth feels very dry when he asks, “When?”

“Right now?” He's going to be sick. “Or as soon as possible.”

“I—I'm babysitting right now,” he says with a lot of effort, heart picking up its pace within seconds. “Is this about Ilya? Did something happen?”

“Mm, yes,” she says, and it takes Shane several moments to finally realize that she doesn’t sound that worried. “He was in an accident, and insists on seeing you. He is sulking that he can’t fly out.”

“*An accident?*” His voice comes out so loud that it startles the twins. Jade looks at him with wide eyes, hands clutched to her chest. He runs a soothing hand up and down her back, feeling bad. “Sorry, sorry.”

“Honestly, it’s not bad,” she says, and Shane hears grumbling in the background. Is she with him right now? God, is he in the hospital? “He is just being very annoying and dramatic about it.”

“My friend won’t be home until eight, I can’t leave his daughters alone. And I don’t have any clothes on me—”

“If I buy you a late night flight, would that be okay?”

It’s the middle of the week. Shane has class in the morning, and shifts during the weekend, and tutoring with the twins, and he can’t just turn his routine upside down like this. He shouldn’t, at least, but he still replies to Svetlana with a positive, his throat feeling tight despite her saying it’s nothing serious.

It’s nothing serious, and yet Ilya insists on seeing him immediately?

Right. *Sure*.

Hayden seems confused by his sudden request for time off once he and Jackie are back home. Shane can’t bring himself to elaborate on the reason—what is he supposed to say, anyway? That he’s flying out to their neighboring country to see the guy he’s been fucking? Hayden doesn’t even know he’s been with anyone since he broke up with his ex, let alone with a man. God, the thought of telling Hayden all of that makes him feel a little sick.

Jackie, bless her heart, seems to notice the urgency in his voice better than her husband does. She doesn’t ask any questions, and shuts down any attempts from Hayden of doing so. Her smile is as kind as she usually is when she says *of course, Shane*, and while that’s supposed to make him feel relieved, he feels bad—that he won’t be here to help with the restaurant, or with the kids.

But he doesn’t have time to think about that too deeply.

It’s almost midnight when he lands in Boston, and a text from Svetlana’s (still unsaved) number comes in as soon as his phone is connected to data again, telling him her car model and license plate, and where she would be waiting for him. His stomach has been in knots since they hung up the call, and now that he’s here and this is, somehow, very real, it is just getting worse.

Shane hadn’t tried picturing what she would look like. He couldn’t put a face to the voice, and Ilya never really talked much about her, and he really shouldn’t be surprised by her looks, considering she’s a model just like Ilya, but—she’s gorgeous. Not terrifyingly so like

the girls he'd seen with Ilya when he first came to Montreal, but that might have something to do with the friendly smile she greets him with.

"Ilya wasn't joking," she says as a greeting, offering him a hand. Shane stares at her perfectly manicured nails for maybe a second too long before he takes her hand, her grip firmer than his. "I hope you had a good flight."

"Joking about what?" Shane asks with a slight frown, throat still dry from the plane. "It wasn't bad."

Svetlana opens the trunk of her car so Shane can rid himself of his baggage, and he tries not to feel too awkward when he climbs into her passenger seat.

"I am sorry to have had you fly out on such a short notice," she says, and her smile seems apologetic enough. "But thank you for coming."

"Is he... is he okay? Please be honest."

Shane has spent the entire night trying not to catastrophize things in his head, but he's been doing a terrible job at it. She had told him it was nothing serious, but he couldn't help but think she was just trying not to worry him too much, trying to soften the blow of a near tragedy. His brain has been conjuring up pictures of Ilya being horribly injured, trapped in a hospital bed, and it's been making him sick.

"Mostly, yes." That's not at all what he wanted to hear. He wanted Svetlana to say that Ilya was completely fine, that this was just a ruse to get him to Boston. A lie that would undoubtedly make him mad, but that was better than having his fears confirmed. "He crashed into a parked car, hasn't told me why or how. He went to the ER, but they have already sent him home. If you manage to get anything out of him, please tell me."

Shane lets out a long sigh of relief. If Ilya is already home, then it can't be as bad as he was making it out to be. But then he realizes that Svetlana is driving him to *Ilya's home*, and his stomach gets tied into knots for completely different reasons.

Yes, Ilya had been to his parents' house during his winter break, but that was still somewhat removed from their personal spaces. In the year they've been reconnecting (and Shane can't even believe it's already been a year), not once had they met at a place that would give Shane any sense of permanence. Meeting in hotels made it easy for him to tell himself at the end of the day that whatever they had would never be more than it already was.

Those couple of days in January made him yearn for something he was certain he could never have.

And yet he's here, in Boston, in Ilya's childhood friend's car. She parks on the curb of a tall building, gives him the code so he can buzz himself in and her own spare key to the apartment, and he still has a hard time believing that this is happening.

Shane is, admittedly, a little nervous when he stops in front of Ilya's door. Should he send a text so Ilya isn't alarmed when he walks in? Ring the doorbell even though he has a key? He

puts the key into the keyhole. Takes a deep breath, and lets himself in.

The lights in Ilya's apartment are dim, none of the overhead lights turned on. The place is so quiet that, for a second, Shane thinks that Ilya is asleep—the wheels of his carry-on are loud on the wooden floors and pulls a wince out of him, a curse coming out of his mouth as a whisper. The door clicks shut behind him, and before he can shrug off his jacket, he hears a noise coming from the general direction of the couch.

Ilya's head pops up from the back, his curls messy and his eyes puffy with sleep. Shane watches as Ilya blinks him into focus, his brows pinching like he doesn't exactly believe what he's seeing. There's a bruise on his eye socket and a cut on his lip, but Shane doesn't see any more damage than that. He almost falls to his knees in relief.

"Shane?" Ilya calls softly, voice deeper than usual. "You came?"

Shane drops his jacket next to his suitcase and slips out of his shoes in a hurry.

"You asked."

Ilya's smile is lazy and a bit infuriating when he perches his chin on the back of the couch. "That simple?"

Shane's hands clench into fists at his sides.

"You had your friend call me in the middle of the night, saying you were in an accident." He tries to keep his voice even, but it feels like he's falling apart at the seams. "What did you expect me to do? You couldn't have texted me yourself?"

"Come here."

Shane complies so easily that it makes him feel almost pathetic. He swallows down the lump in his throat as he crosses the distance between him and Ilya, trying to keep it together. Ilya is okay; he's home, and awake, and talking to him right now. He reaches the couch in just a few strides, and he walks around it so he can have a better look at the man lying on it.

"Will you tell me what happened?" he asks softly, sitting on the ground so they can be at eye level. He places a gentle hand on Ilya's chest, his heart fluttering when Ilya takes it and intertwines their fingers.

"You will laugh at me."

Shane stares at the burst vessels on his eye socket, and can't imagine how he would ever do that.

"I won't."

Ilya brings his hand to his lips, softly kissing the back of it. "It was a squirrel. I did not want to run it over."

Shane frowns. "A... what?"

“The rodent? You know what squirrel is,” Ilya says, frowning too. “I was not going *that* fast, it just surprised me. I couldn’t just run over it.”

“Ilya,” Shane says very carefully. “You’re telling me a squirrel did this to you?”

“I would not say the squirrel did it. Airbags in sports cars are very good, I guess.”

Jesus Christ. Shane lets out a long breath, trying to process the fact that he’s been freaking himself out over this. He isn’t downplaying Ilya’s injuries, but this is nothing compared to the catastrophes he’s been conjuring up in his head. This is definitely nothing worth flying someone out for. Yet, despite all that, Ilya still wanted him here. And even if Shane had known beforehand what happened, he’s still pretty sure he wouldn’t have said no.

“And you were being a baby because of that?” he teases, giving Ilya’s hand a firm squeeze.

“The drugs they give you at hospital are very good,” Ilya comments, making him finally realize where his calmer demeanor might be coming from. “But they do nothing now. You are downplaying my suffering, Hollander.”

“So you want to get free nursing services.”

“Mm, yes,” Ilya says with a nod, eyes fluttering shut. “Hospital bills are very expensive in America.”

“Such a baby,” Shane says, fondness unintentionally dripping from his voice. He can’t believe he will be missing two days of classes for this man—though, if he has to be honest, that doesn’t seem like such a terrible thing.

Shane’s day has been exhaustively long, and he needs to get some rest, but he doesn’t mind staying up a little longer if that means he gets to take care of Ilya. Ilya shows him to the guest room, says the sheets were changed recently, but he gives Shane such big puppy eyes that Shane doesn’t even consider spending a minute in it. He follows Ilya to his room, waits until Ilya is comfortable against his pillows, and trails back to the kitchen.

He wraps a handful of ice cubes in a towel (because, apparently, Ilya is an adult who doesn’t have an ice pack in his home) and gets a glass of ice-cold water. He rummages through the cabinet in Ilya’s bathroom for painkillers, and only settles in the bedroom when he has everything he needs.

Ilya is starting to doze off when Shane sits next to him in bed. His eyes flutter open when the mattress dips under Shane’s weight, but Shane can tell he’s struggling to stay awake.

“You’re running out of painkillers,” he says, offering him the pill in his hand. Ilya only pushes himself up enough so that he won’t choke when he swallows. “Have you iced that bruise? Are you hurt anywhere else?”

When Ilya starts taking off his shirt, Shane is confused. He opens his mouth to tell Ilya to stop, that this isn’t the time for that, but he swallows the words back down when he realizes

why he's doing it. A bruise in the perfect shape of a seatbelt marks Ilya's skin, from his collarbone, across his chest, and just below his right pec.

"Christ," Shane mutters, tracing the skin with a light finger. Ilya doesn't wince at the touch, and Shane hopes that means it isn't as bad as it seems. "Let's do your eye first, and then we can tackle this."

It's a slow, strangely domestic end to his night. He allows Ilya to finally slip under when he changes the icing to his chest, keeping the towel in place as Ilya's breathing evens out and he sinks further into the mattress. As the minutes drag by, Shane wonders if they could ever have this in an easier way, if they could have this for longer than just a couple of days at a time.

He brushes Ilya's curls away from his face with light fingers, and his heart aches. Sometimes, when it's late enough at night and he can't fall asleep, Shane wishes they had never met. He wishes his parents hadn't taken him to Russia that summer in 1999, or that they had never reconnected after so long. It would be easier to get through life that way, because then he wouldn't miss something he had never known.

But then, in moments like this, Shane can't believe such a thought ever crossed his mind. When they're as close as they are now, Shane wishes they never had to be apart again, even if that's an impossible wish. It was easier to deal with the separation when he thought all Ilya wanted from him was a quick, convenient fuck, but ever since his winter break he's been pretty sure that is no longer the case.

He doesn't know what he's supposed to do. He's pretty sure that ending whatever this is would be the best for both of them, but he isn't sure he would be able to stop the festering of his feelings.

Shane wakes up with Ilya's nose buried into his nape and his arm around his middle, hand pressed into his stomach. He shifts at the unexpected warmth, heart fluttering, and immediately regrets it when his ass brushes against Ilya's half hard crotch, pulling a groan out of him.

He freezes, holding his breath. The seconds tick by, his heart beginning to race, and when he thinks he'd somehow managed to not wake Ilya accidentally, the arm around him tightens. Ilya groans, pressing a kiss to his nape.

"Why are you awake?" he asks groggily, slipping his hand under Shane's shirt. "Is early."

“I don’t know,” Shane answers weakly, because it’s not like he *meant* to wake up right now. “Did I wake you?”

“Yes.” Ilya’s hand travels up his torso, raising goosebumps in his wake. He stops at Shane’s right pec, giving it a squeeze.

With no heat or intention whatsoever in his voice, Shane mumbles, “Stop.”

Ilya trails light kisses up his neck, under his jaw, nosing right under his ear. “Is that what you want?”

No.

“You’re hurt.”

“I am fine.”

“Ilya,” Shane tries, a bit firmer, but his body starts to melt against Ilya’s.

“I will take pill after, I will let you do ice, whatever you want.” His tongue flicks on his earlobe, making him sigh. He was never winning this argument. “Let me have this. I missed you.”

How is he supposed to fight that? How is he supposed to tell himself, or his stupid heart, that this isn’t what it looks like? That Ilya meant it in a different way, that maybe he just meant it physically. Shane can’t seem to fool himself no matter which way he tries to bend.

Ilya’s thigh is heavy when he throws it over his hip, keeping him in place. Shane sighs when Ilya slots his crotch to his ass, the outline of his hardening cock pressing between the cleft of his cheeks, the fingers gripping his pec moving to flick his budding nipple. He tries to roll his hips, to add some friction to Ilya’s movements, but it only makes Ilya hold him down harder.

“Stay still,” Ilya whispers, a command. Shane feels the words burning down his spine.

This might be the hottest thing they’ve done to date, and that’s saying a lot. He will probably have to unpack at a later time why he finds Ilya using him like this so hot, but right now he can’t even think about it. Not when there’s cotton rubbing into his ass, and he can feel every twitch of Ilya’s cock, the hand on his nipple as urgent as the pants that get breathed down his neck.

Today might be a record of how fast Ilya comes, and for once Shane isn’t embarrassed to be the one to do it first. The movements of Ilya’s hips grow frantic quickly, his moans unrestrained and kind of loud for how early in the morning it still is. Shane feels the moment Ilya’s muscles tighten, a broken version of his name rolling off Ilya’s tongue seconds before he feels the warm, wet spot against his ass.

Ilya only gives himself a moment to breathe before he’s rolling Shane onto his back, kissing him wildly as he straddles his hips. He certainly feels how hard Shane is in his pajama pants, and that’s probably why he doesn’t kiss him for long. Shane’s heart is beating quickly in his

ribcage as Ilya crawls down his body, hands frantic as he grabs his pants by the waistband and pulls it down to his thighs.

A loud moan rips out of Shane's mouth when Ilya takes a hold of his cock, his entire body shaking with anticipation as he flattens his tongue on the underside and licks him up to the crown, wrapping his lips around his cock without preamble. It's too much too fast; Shane can't hold back the noises that leave him as Ilya blows him messily, almost in a hurry. He buries his fingers into Ilya's curls and lets pleasure wash all over him.

Shane curses when he comes down Ilya's throat, his legs feeling numb with the force of his orgasm. Ilya swallows every last drop of his release with a pleased hum, only pulling off with an obscene pop when Shane has nothing left to give. When he climbs back up his body and slots their mouths together again, Shane feels dizzy, and now, when they kiss, there's no hurry.

He only pulls back when he tastes blood on his tongue, brows pinching into a frown, and it takes him a moment longer to realize that it's the cut on Ilya's lip bleeding. Ilya looks just as confused, trying to chase Shane's mouth for another kiss, but he stops with a hiss the second Shane cups his jaw with a hand and swipes his thumb over the cut.

"You're so stubborn," Shane chastises, swallowing thickly when Ilya takes his thumb into his mouth, tongue flicking over the pad. "Stop getting hurt."

"Whatever you want," Ilya says, tacking something in Russian at the end of the phrase that Shane doesn't understand.

So, he asks, "What does that mean?"

"Nothing," Ilya says, but his eyes tell a very different story. "You are very curious. Is cute."

"Shut up," he grumbles, but worry starts eating him up again the second his gaze flits from the cut on his lip to the bruise on his eye. "How's the pain?"

"Better," Ilya says, and this time Shane doesn't think he's lying. "I think another pill would be good."

"I'll get it for you."

Shane tries to move, but Ilya keeps him pinned to the mattress with his weight. He tries to push Ilya off him, but truthfully, he doesn't put much energy into it—Ilya's smile is far too bright for Shane to put up any real fight.

"Can I tell you a secret?" Ilya asks, smile widening and worsening the wound. Shane holds his breath and nods. "I am very happy you are here."

Fuck. Shane hopes Ilya can't feel the beat his stupid heart skips.

"Just ask me to come like a normal person next time," Shane says, still not completely over the fear he'd felt for hours the previous night. "Don't scare me like that."

“I was normal,” Ilya argues, nuzzling into his cheek. “Sveta was the one being dramatic.”

Shane raises a brow at him. “So you weren’t whining and pouting? I could hear your voice in the background when she called.”

“I do not recall. Could be true, though.”

“You’re making me miss class and work.”

Ilya pecks his cheek very chastely. “And that is so terrible?”

“Yes,” he says, just to be difficult. “It’s very awful. If I fail my classes and go broke it will be all your fault.”

“And you say I am baby.” Ilya trails his peppering kisses to his mouth, bumping their noses together. *Too soft*, Shane thinks. He’s never going to recover from this. “You will be fine, and you will not become poor. But if you do, I will spoil you.”

This time, when Shane tries to push Ilya off him, Ilya complies with a stupid smile on his face that doesn’t get wiped off even as Shane tucks himself back into his pajamas and gets out of bed. The way he also can’t stop smiling as he goes to get another painkiller from the bathroom cabinet is ridiculous.

“I think my mother would have liked to know you.”

Shane’s breath gets caught in his chest like fabric snagging on thorns, hand stilling its caress of Ilya’s hair. He’s sure that, with the way Ilya has his head laid on his chest, he can hear the steady way his heart starts beating faster. He expects Ilya to pull away, but he doesn’t stop the mindless toying with the bracelet tied around Shane’s wrist.

“How was she?” he asks delicately.

“So beautiful and fun.” Ilya’s voice is steady, and Shane doesn’t know how much of it is a practiced front he has to put on. “She loved music and singing, and she was the most beautiful when she would put on a show for me, just to make me smile. I loved her. I still do.”

“It sounds like she loved you too.”

Ilya hums, burrowing into his chest. “She was scared of my father. He was... influential figure? Is that how you say? Important man, had eyes everywhere. I think that was suffocating her.”

“It must have been hard for her. And for you.”

“It was, even for my brother.” Now, when Ilya speaks of his brother, he doesn’t sound angry or bitter. He just seems... regretful. “He wasn’t so bad before.”

Shane frowns. “Before?”

“Yes. Before I found my mother.”

Tears prickle Shane’s eyes. He hadn’t even thought it to be a possibility, that Ilya had been the one to find her.

“She was still alive, I think. My father and Andrei were not home. The people working at the house helped me call for help, but then it was too late, and Andrei has hated me since. Because he was not there to say goodbye to her.”

Shane’s heart breaks when he feels wetness on his bare chest. He immediately wraps his arms around Ilya, trying his best to push his own tears back into his tear ducts. Ilya sniffles very quietly, but buries his face into the crook of his neck when he blankets himself over Shane.

“Sorry,” Ilya says very quietly, trying to laugh to lighten the mood, but it only serves to break Shane’s heart even further. “I am ruining the mood. This is the worst after sex talk. Not very sexy of me.”

“Ilya, shut up,” Shane says with no real bite. “I don’t care that this isn’t sexy. You can... you can be vulnerable with me. I told you that you can talk to me.”

“I don’t want you to think I am weak,” Ilya says. “My mother also wasn’t weak.”

“I didn’t think she was,” he clarifies. “And I don’t think you are, either. I don’t know what terrible things your father told you, but vulnerability isn’t a weakness. Talking about your feelings won’t make you any less of a man.”

This time, Ilya pulls back so he can look down at him. Tears no longer roll down his cheeks, and his eyes are the gentlest they’ve ever been. Shane almost starts thinking he said something wrong, but before his thoughts can spin out of control, Ilya leans in and kisses him.

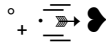
“I think I was lucky to find you again,” Ilya mutters against his lips, never really pulling away.

The butterflies in Shane’s stomach are a kaleidoscope out of control.

“I think I like you,” Shane admits against his better judgment, the words stumbling out of his mouth before he thinks better of it—before he thinks about it at all.

“Yes?” Ilya bumps their noses, a delighted laugh coming out of him. “I think I like you too, Shane.”

Shane hopes that, somehow, that will be enough.



“So, what was that all about?”

Shane’s hand freezes mid wipe, his fingers tightening on the rag. He looks up at Hayden—who’s leaning against the bar and not helping at all with closing—with his ears ringing.

It’s far too late at night, but he knows exactly what Hayden is talking about. Still, he asks, “What?”

“Oh, come on!” Hayden’s voice goes up like it tends to when he’s a bit too excited. Or annoyed. “You know what I’m talking about! Last week? Your sudden need to leave?”

“Oh, um. There was... an emergency.”

Shane cringes at himself. Could he be a worse liar?

“With a cousin,” he tries adding, and it only makes the lie worse. “On my dad’s side.”

“With a cousin,” Hayden repeats like he doesn’t fully believe it. Behind the bar, Chris snickers. “Right. If you say so. Anyway—you’re coming tomorrow, right?”

Shane blinks.

Hayden frowns. “To the twins’ birthday?”

His blood runs cold. “Fuck! Hayd, I’m sorry, I completely forgot. I—I have a... friend... coming to visit this weekend. Fuck.”

To be fair, Shane wasn’t really thinking when he told Ilya just last week that, yes, he could come and stay at his place for a few days. Ilya was two fingers and a tongue deep in his ass as he pried a reply from him, and the last thing on his mind were Ruby and Jade’s adorable little faces.

God dammit. He didn’t even get them gifts.

“Shit, didn’t know you had other friends,” Hayden says with a laugh, earning a glare from Shane. “Well, bring them over! I’m sure there will be enough for one extra person. Is it

someone I know?”

Kind of.

“No,” Shane adds to his snowball of lies, but softens it with a truth. “It’s someone from my childhood.”

“Sweet. I’ll let Jackie know you’re bringing a plus one. I’m sure she won’t mind.”

Sometimes, Shane thinks, Hayden’s lack of critical thinking is a blessing.

“We have a problem.”

Ilya freezes for a second before he can even close the passenger door behind him.

“What happened?” he asks, slamming the door shut. Exhaustion sits heavily under his eyes, and Shane knows he isn’t doing much better himself—it’s two in the morning, and he’s already been awake for too many hours. “Are you dying?”

Shane frowns. “What? No! Jesus.”

Ilya’s brows shoot up his forehead. “What is the problem, then? We can fix it?”

Shane feels his cheeks getting hot. He pulls out of the airport parking lot and starts the drive home.

“I, um. I forgot my best friend is throwing a birthday party for his twin daughters tomorrow—he just reminded me of it today, and I kind of can’t miss it.” He keeps his eyes on the road so he doesn’t have to see how Ilya reacts to the information. “And I... told Hayden you’d be coming with me.”

When Ilya doesn’t immediately reply, Shane worries he fucked up. He pries his eyes off the road for just a second—just so he can assess the damage he’s done, but Ilya just looks like he’s waiting for him to say more.

“And?” Ilya prompts. “Is that all?”

Shane’s face gets hotter as he turns back to the road.

“I would have told you if I’d remembered it last weekend. I wasn’t in my right mind.”

He can hear the smirk in Ilya’s voice when he says, “Oh, I remember.”

“Shut up.”

“Is not a problem,” Ilya says, placing a hand on his thigh and squeezing. “I can keep my hands to myself for a few hours.”

Shane laughs, allowing his shoulders to relax. “Great. If we leave at noon, we should have enough time to find them gifts without missing much of the party.”

“Okay, Uncle Shane.”

“Don’t ever call me like that again.”

“Oh, you’re strict. I like that.”

Shane rolls his eyes. This is going to be a long weekend.

(He can’t wait.)

There is something very unexpected about the glint Shane finds in Ilya’s eyes the second they step into the toy store. Shane didn’t even know what he wanted to get for the twins, and he was fully prepared to ask for help from anyone who worked there, but Ilya’s enthusiasm alone was enough for him to push that idea aside.

“What do they like?” Ilya asks, eyeing the aisles with hawk eyes. “They are twins, yes?”

“Um,” Shane scratches the back of his neck. “They have a few dolls, and they like to play pretend. Jackie—that’s their mother—said they want to try stimulating their brains more, so maybe we could get them a puzzle? And maybe something for Arthur so he doesn’t feel left out, even though he’s too little to grasp that concept.”

Ilya walks back to the front of the store and grabs a shopping cart for them.

Shane gawks.

“Ilya, I don’t think that’s necessary,” he tries, but the other doesn’t seem to be listening to him. “We have four hands and pretty strong arms between the two of us.”

“I am helping you become best uncle,” Ilya says far too casually. “And I have to make good first impression.”

“O-oh.” His stomach flips with sudden uneasiness. Did he give Ilya the wrong impression when he talked about it last night? Did he unintentionally make Ilya believe that Hayden

knows about them? Whatever they are. He grabs Ilya by the elbow, finally getting him to slow down. Shane drops his voice so others won't hear them. "I haven't... he doesn't know that we..."

Ilya frowns. "What does that have to do with the presents?"

His grip on Ilya's elbow loosens. "You just said you wanted to make a good first impression."

"Is that illegal in Canada?" It's Shane's turn to frown. "Relax."

And Shane tries his best to, okay, but by the time they reach the register, Ilya has added two sets of Lego to the cart, four different Barbies, a handful of costumes, and three stuffed animals. Every '*no*' or '*that's too much*' that he tried to say were completely ignored, and now that it was time to pay, Ilya was refusing to let him help.

"Ilya, you can't do that," Shane insisted, trying to push him aside.

Although the glare Ilya sent him wasn't serious, it still made him back off a bit.

"You say it is not necessary, and now you will not let me pay." He takes the stuffed animals out of the small pile and hands them to Shane. "Here, you get this. I will pay for everything else. I don't mind."

Seeing this is a losing battle, Shane gives up putting up a fight.

"Hayden is going to kill me," he grumbles once they're loading all the gifts into the trunk of his car. "No, actually, Jackie is going to kill me. I don't think Hayden would care that much. You realize this is too much, right?"

"I can take some yelling," Ilya says with a smile that almost feels misplaced. He pets the back of Shane's head, hand sliding down to his neck, where he gives it a squeeze. "The kids will like it. That is what matters."

Shane hopes that he's right, but he can't seem to quell his nerves for the entirety of the drive to the Pike's. The issue is that he can tell this is less about the ridiculous pile of gifts and more about Ilya's presence itself—he may be able to fool Hayden for a couple of hours, but his wife is another beast entirely. He isn't sure his lies would get past her as easily.

By the time they arrive, the curb in front of the house is already fully lined with cars. Shane parks on the other side of the street, and piles most of the gifts into Ilya's waiting arms.

The front door opens for them almost a minute after Shane rings the doorbell. He expects there to be a lot of noise, a lot of kids yelling, but the party seems almost muffled from the entrance of the house. Hayden sports a bright smile and a beer in hand, but he already looks like he's been put through the wringer.

"Finally!" is his form of greeting, stepping aside so they can walk in. Hayden seems to ignore the ridiculous amount of gifts they're bringing with them. "Ruby has been asking for you for at least half an hour."

Shane allows himself to be pulled into a quick hug. “Are they in the backyard? Where should we put these?”

Hayden gestures vaguely at the house. “Ask Jackie, she’s the one handling that.”

“And you’re doing what? Being a trophy husband?”

“Hey!” Hayden punches him on the shoulder, but it doesn’t even hurt. “I’ll be manning the grill! You’re getting no meat.”

Shane starts laughing, but swallows it back down when Ilya clears his throat next to him.

“Oh, right,” he says, trying to push the heat rising on the back of his neck back down. “Hayd, this is Ilya. Ilya, this is Hayden.”

Ilya smiles tightly, unable to offer Hayden a hand. “Is nice to meet you.”

“Oh,” Hayden blinks. “Where are you from?”

Sometimes, Hayden’s social tactfulness can be worse than Shane’s somehow.

“Russia,” Ilya replies easily.

Hayden looks from Ilya to Shane, the movement of his eyes almost in slow motion, making Shane feel like he’s being put under a microscope.

“Russia,” Hayden repeats. “That’s interesting.”

“We’re gonna go look for Jackie,” Shane quickly interjects before he starts asking too many questions. “And the twins.”

If Shane could drag Ilya by the hand, he would. Instead, he walks in quick strides and hopes that Ilya can keep up with him without dropping anything. The noise of the ongoing party gets louder as they walk further into the house, and through the glass of the door to the backyard, they can see a handful of children running around, big smiles on their faces.

Jackie intercepts them before they can make their way outside, startling the shit out of Shane when she calls out his name. She’s standing behind the kitchen island, her dark hair tied up in a tight ponytail, Arthur wrapped safely to her back on his sling.

“There you are!” she calls with a bright smile, seconds before she notices everything they’re carrying. “What the f—hell is all that?”

“You must be Miss Jackie—”

“Just Jackie is fine—”

“Do not be mad at Shane,” Ilya says with a very charming smile. “I was the one to insist. He said your kids are very cute, and I did not want to come with empty hands.”

“Jackie, this is Ilya,” Shane introduces with a bit of an awkward smile. “I told him it was too much. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s—fine, I guess,” she sighs, repositioning Arthur’s little legs around her hips. “Just take it to the guest bedroom.”

Ilya looks way too smug and proud of himself as he follows Shane through the house. There’s a small pile of wrapped gifts on the guest bed, and it almost grows twice its size when Ilya gently drops the ones they’ve brought. Shane places the bagged stuffed animals there, too, but keeps the one meant for Arthur.

Jackie is still in the kitchen when they come back out, chopping vegetables so Hayden can throw them on the grill. Arthur is unusually quiet on her back, cheek resting between her shoulder blades, eyeing them carefully. Or, Shane supposes, eyeing Ilya carefully.

“Hey there, little guy,” Shane says softly, tugging at his socked feet, careful not to disturb Jackie as she works. Ilya remains on the other side of the island, watching them. “Aren’t you getting too big for your mom to carry you like that?”

Arthur shakes his head no.

“He was being really fussy when the girls went outside but he refused to follow,” Jackie says, and Shane notices she is putting conscious effort into not hitting the cutting board too loudly with the blade of her knife. “Was just trying to delay pulling out the earmuffs as much as I could.”

“Do you want to come with Uncle Shane?” he asks even though he knows there will be resistance, but he’s ready for the bribery. He shows Arthur the gift bag. “We brought something for you.”

As expected, Arthur’s eyes light up. Jackie halts her work, raising a brow at him but still backing away from the island. Shane puts the toy on the counter so he can get both hands under Arthur’s arms, getting him out of the sling with very little effort. Jackie audibly sighs in relief to have the weight off her back.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

Shane smiles, nodding as his response. He perches Arthur on one arm and, with his free hand, he passes the gift to Ilya.

“Arthur, this is Ilya. He is my friend.” Ilya’s smile could rival the sun it’s so bright, his eyes filled with fondness as he waves at the toddler. Arthur meekly waves back. “Is it okay if he opens this for you?”

As soon as Arthur nods eagerly, Ilya starts undoing the bow on the string keeping the bag closed. He doesn’t take the stuffed animal out himself, though; he crosses the small distance between them, and offers the opening of the bag for the toddler to stick his hands into. A delighted squeal leaves his lips when his eyes land on the stuffed bat.

“Wow, look at that!” Jackie says encouragingly to her son. “What do we say, honey?”

“Thank you, Uncle Illa,” Arthur says shyly, adorably butchering Ilya’s name. “And Uncle Shane.”

Ilya pats the back of Arthur’s head gently, and Arthur doesn’t pull away. Miraculously.

“You are very welcome, little guy,” Ilya says, his fondness wrapping itself around Shane’s heart and refusing to let go.

“Do you want to go outside?” Shane asks. Arthur seems to hesitate, but ends up nodding anyway.

Shane knows just what the toddler needs to join his sisters in the backyard. He tells Ilya to follow him into the living room, and he puts Arthur down without much of a fuss, though the kid keeps a firm grip on the leg of his jeans. Shane grabs the red earmuffs from the TV console, where the Pikes usually leave it for easy access, and slides it over Arthur’s small head.

Arthur doesn’t fight it.

“Is there construction outside?” Ilya asks, pulling a snort out of Shane with how sincere he sounds.

He shakes his head. “He’s just not good with loud noises, and his sisters can get very... rowdy.”

Fully equipped, Arthur charges into the backyard without waiting for them, calling out for the twins while shaking his stuffed bat vigorously. Shane risks a glance at Ilya, and the soft smile he finds directed at him (and not at Arthur) feels like a bullet being shot straight through his heart.

Worse than that, though, is the liking the twins (and their friends, apparently) seem to take to Ilya once Shane introduces him to them. He almost feels bad at the way the kids drag him by the hand to the bouncy house inflated in the middle of the backyard, but Ilya doesn’t seem to have a problem with it—he looks almost too happy, Shane would dare say, judging by the big smile that refuses to leave his lips.

J.J. bumps into his back almost with the force of a bulldozer, making Shane stumble on his feet. He has a deep frown between his brows and a complaint on the tip of his tongue when he’s offered a beer, already uncapped.

“I could swear you had forgotten,” J.J. says with a smirk, pushing the beer into his chest when he takes a moment too long to take it. “You’re not one to run late.”

“Yeah,” Shane agrees, pretending he can’t feel the heat warming his face. “My friend arrived last night. Had no gifts.”

J.J. switches to French when he says, “I heard him talking. He’s not from here, is he?”

“Ah, no.” Shane takes the first sip of his beer, feeling the nerves surging up his stomach. “He’s from Russia. We... met when we were kids.”

“Cool! Have you been there?”

“What are you boys talking about?” Hayden asks, carrying the chopped vegetables Jackie had been working on out to the patio. “Using French to keep secrets isn’t cool!”

Shane rolls his eyes at him. “You’ve been living here for how many years already, Hayd? You have to pick it up at some point.”

“That’s what I have you teaching the girls for!” The way Hayden says it makes Shane believe he’s not joking about it one bit. “But, seriously, what were you talking about?”

J.J. beats Shane to the punch. “Shane’s friend from Russia.”

Hayden turns on the gas on the grill. “I feel like I’ve seen him before, but that would be impossible.”

Shane shifts, takes another sip of his beer.

“No, you have,” he says. “He’s been to the restaurant before. A couple of times, actually.”

Hayden looks at him over his shoulder, an eyebrow raised. Shane shrugs, not really ready to elaborate.

It’s a weird feeling, having Ilya here with him. Up until now, Shane felt like he’s been living two separate lives—one with Ilya and the other without—even when he had Ilya in places that were common to his routine. It was easy to make himself believe that he could keep things separate because there was never a reason for his two worlds to collide.

Now that they’re here, though, Shane wonders why he didn’t make it happen sooner.

When he remembers what most of their encounters were like, however, shame burns hot in his stomach. Not because he’s ashamed of what he’s been doing with Ilya, that’s not really the case, but because he doesn’t know how he could explain it to his friends in a way that would be easy to understand. *Would* they understand? Would they ever be accepting of him if he told them that he’s never felt for a girl the things that Ilya makes him feel?

But then he watches the way Ilya makes the kids laugh, how he’s just so *good* with them, with Arthur on his left arm while he dangles Jade by the ankles with his right hand, and it makes him wish he could be a little brave.

Ruby comes running up to them, and the fantasy almost shatters. Shane almost expects her to say that something has gone wrong, even though it doesn’t look to be the case, but that’s not at all what he does. She watches her step when Hayden reminds her to, hopping onto the patio with too much energy bouncing off her, and says, “Uncle Shane, does Uncle Ilya like pink?”

Shane finds himself at a loss for words. He gently rests his hand on her head when she pulls at his pants for attention, like addressing him by name wasn't enough. "I don't know, honey. Have you asked him?"

"I can't ask him!" she says, sounding appalled by the suggestion. "It's a surprise! I can't give him my tiara because I'm going to wear it, a Jade's is pink! Do you think he will be upset?"

"Um—"

"Ruby, boys don't wear pink," Hayden says, almost scolding and completely unhelpful.

"Hayden, don't say that," Shane retorts with a frown. "That's not true, sweetheart. Boys can wear pink, too. I don't think he would mind."

Her face brightens up immediately with the force of her smile. "Awesome! Thank you, Uncle Shane!"

She runs off into the house, and Shane turns to his friend with a scowl in place.

"What the hell, dude!"

"Yeah, Pike," J.J. chimes in, his brows high up with surprise. "Not even *I* am that much of an idiot."

Hayden frowns. "What did I do?!"

The idea of telling his friends about whatever he has going on with Ilya recedes to the very back of his mind very quickly. If boys can't wear pink, surely they can't kiss other boys, let alone *develop feelings* for them.

The hours seem to pass by very slowly, and Shane only gets to have Ilya by his side once Arthur grows fussy again. Jackie is quick to come to the rescue on the first wail he lets out, Ilya's face shifting with concern, likely worried that he did something wrong. He follows Jackie to the back porch, but keeps it polite and doesn't follow her into the house.

Shane gently holds him by the elbow. "He's okay. He's just tired."

Ilya directs his concerned looks at him. "You are sure?"

"Positively." He hopes his smile is as reassuring as he tries to make it seem. "I didn't know you were that good with kids."

Ilya's expression shifts almost immediately, a smirk replacing his concern.

"Is it giving you baby fever?"

As it turns out, Ilya can take an elbow to the ribs really well. He only minimally grunts. Shane feels like his entire face is on fire.

"Shut up," Shane hisses, looking over his shoulder just to be sure no one is listening. J.J. seems to have the small group of men engrossed in whatever he's talking about. "Who taught you that?!"

"Why?" Ilya's smirk widens. Shane feels his heart beating faster. "You think a great lover wouldn't know what baby fever means?"

"Ilya! Shut up! And who said you're a great lover?"

Ilya raises a brow at him. "Oh? So the moans were just a performance when I had my d—"

Shane slaps a hand over Ilya's mouth and pulls him into the house, away from his friends. "Okay, I get it! Don't talk about your *cock* in front of other people like that! Jesus!"

"You are jealous."

"I'm not jealous—"

Ilya shuts him up with a hand cupping his cheek, thumb caressing over the freckles scattered on his face. His heart doesn't slow down, but the gentleness of the act gets his words tangled around his tongue. Ilya leans in, and Shane's eyes flutter shut on instinct.

His heart pounds so hard that he can feel it in his throat, but before either of them can close the gap, a soft cough forces them to pull away from each other.

"Sorry," Jackie quickly apologizes under the weight of Shane's alarmed gaze. "Maybe you'd want to get further away from—" she gestures at the backyard area with a hand, "before doing that."

Shane can't even bring himself to push Ilya away. What would be the point of pretending nothing is happening when she saw them with her own eyes? When there is no excusing the compromising position they've found themselves in. He drags Ilya further into the house, but not because he wants to kiss him in secrecy.

"Sorry," Shane apologizes as well, shame crawling its way up his chest. "I know the kids shouldn't see—"

Jackie frowns, cutting him off before he can finish that sentence. "Shane, honey, I don't have a problem with my kids seeing two men kissing. I just thought that... maybe you wouldn't be ready for *everyone else* to see."

Ilya places a hand on the small of his back, reassuring, and it takes everything in him not to pull away from the touch.

Softer, she asks, “Do you want to talk about it?”

Shane firmly shakes his head. “There’s nothing to talk about. We’re not—”

Ilya’s fingers dig into his back, and before Shane can figure out what that means, he says, “We are friends, and I like him. Is not that complicated.”

He looks up at Ilya, his gaze soft. “I like you too.”

It’s not the first time he says it but, somehow, this time it feels like it matters more. That he means it more than he did the first time, even if there was no hesitation then, as there isn’t any now.

“We will make it work,” Ilya says, voice a near whisper, his hand rubbing up and down his back. “Somehow.”

And, god, Shane really hopes that they do.



The sun is bright behind his closed curtains, but Shane doesn’t bother letting any of it in. He couldn’t, even if he wanted to—Ilya is a weighed blanket on top of him, and he hasn’t moved for the last half an hour.

Not that Shane minds, no. Quite the opposite.

Threading his fingers through Ilya’s curls, Shane is more than certain that this is what happiness feels like—the ache between his legs, the teeth marks all over his thighs, the contentment in his heart that won’t go away no matter what. Ilya’s breathing is steady, but Shane knows he isn’t asleep.

It’s why he says, “Would you like to meet my parents?”

Ilya makes a soft noise on the back of his throat, lifting his head to look at him. His bright eyes are shrouded in surprise. “What?”

“No?” Shane backpedals with a slight frown.

“I didn’t say that,” Ilya says almost too softly, like he’s afraid he will scare Shane off. Not like Shane could go anywhere with Ilya’s entire body on him. “You want me to meet them?”

“Yeah.” Shane tries to smile, but there isn’t much confidence in it, even though he’s spent at least a month ruminating over the idea. “You already met my mom, kind of. She’ll remember you. But I want you to meet them both, properly. I think... I don’t want to keep hiding this from them. But it’s fine if you don’t want to, or if you think it’s too much, or too fast—”

Ilya kisses him gently, successfully shutting him up.

“If that is what you want, I am all for it.” He kisses Shane again, his smile widening this time. “That makes me your boyfriend, yes?”

Shane blushes, but he doesn’t shy away from Ilya’s gaze.

“I guess it does.” He grabs Ilya by the back of his neck with both hands and smashes their lips together.

Boyfriend.

Shane likes the sound of that.

It’s crazy to think that one summer could change someone’s entire life. As he kisses Ilya, Shane is glad for every star that aligned and made it possible for them to meet again; glad that Ilya kept coming back, and put his trust in him.

He still may not know what their future looks like, or how rocky the road ahead is going to be. All he knows is that he will gladly have Ilya by his side, and that’s all that really matters to him.

End Notes

comments are always very welcome but please don't be an asshole 😊 i'd be happy to hear from you if you enjoyed the story!! i'm @noisehues on all socials if you want to find me! see you next time!!

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