

As the Romans Do

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As the Romans Do

by [kooksie](#)

Summary

As a straight man, Ilya Rozanov has never had a gay roommate before, but it's going pretty well. Shane Hollander is kind, silly, and an even bigger hockey nut than Ilya.

So when Shane starts bringing men over, and Ilya begins to want to bash their fucking heads in, Ilya comes to a startling conclusion: He must be homophobic.

(He's jealous.)

Notes

I'm super excited about this one! I've always wanted to write a genuine friends to lovers, so here we go.

A few notes:

In this universe, Shane is Ilya's gay awakening. He thinks he's straight, but the bisexual terminator lies dormant within.

I'm imagining they're ~24 years old in this.

I have this entire thing written (about 8x longer than I originally planned LMFAO), but will upload weekly on Mondays.

If you don't like pining and yearning, get to the back of the line. Yearners to the FRONT

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ilya saves his contact as: “Hollander \$700/mo furnished.”

Svetlana looks over his shoulder as he’s coordinating the apartment tour. Her voice deepens as it always does in Russian. “Fucking prostitutes already?”

Ilya rolls his eyes. “This is rent.”

“No, it’s not.” Svetlana squints at the screen. “No rent is that cheap in the city. Are you prostituting *yourself*?”

Ilya sticks his tongue out at her. He sighs, a sound that seems to come from somewhere deeper. “I might have to. If he’s not scamming me, it’s the nicest listing I’ve seen within my budget.”

Svetlana nods in approval. “So it’s a ‘he.’”

“Of course. I can’t live with a woman,” Ilya points out.

“Because...?”

“We’d end up fucking.” He shrugs.

Svetlana opens her mouth to disagree. Blush rises to her face. “Right.”

Ilya grins at her and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “Right.”

Shane Hollander answers his front door in a Montreal Metros jersey.

“Oh. This won’t work,” Ilya says.

Shane has a freckled face and it drops when Ilya says it.

“Kidding,” Ilya backtracks. He smiles, wider than appropriate, because if he doesn’t leave today with his name on a lease, he might actually resort to prostituting himself. “I am a Raiders fan. That’s why I said that.”

Shane’s tanned face breaks into a small smile. “Oh. Okay.” His silhouette fills the doorway: broad shoulders and a narrow waist. “You do realize you’re apartment hunting in Montreal?”

Ilya forces his eyes to blow comically wide. “I *am*?”

Shane laughs. “I’m Shane, by the way.”

“Ilya.” Ilya straightens up, as if he can sneak a glance at the apartment over Shane’s head.

“Right.” Shane’s cheeks go red. “Come in.” He steps aside, opening the door wide enough for Ilya to walk in.

The apartment is homey and clean. The radiator rattles. Plants abound on the coffee table. The couch has an obscene number of throw pillows on it, and if Ilya were to lay down on it, his calves would hang right off the armrest.

It is hardly enough space for one grown man. Here are two of them: Ilya scanning the room, and Shane scanning Ilya's face for his reaction.

"Looks great," Ilya says. He smiles, again.

"I'll show you the bedroom."

Shane begins walking down a narrow hallway that forks off into two rooms. He reaches for the doorknob, but hesitates with his fingers around the metal.

"It's pretty small," Shane says, his voice low.

"That's fine," Ilya replies, immediately. The numbers float in his head, tantalizing: Seven hundred dollars. Seven hundred dollars.

"But there's a big window. Lots of natural light." Shane chews on his lip. "The closet's not the biggest."

It is not lost on Ilya that they are standing outside the bedroom, rather than entering it. "I am a visual learner."

Shane blushes again. "Yeah. Sorry." He props the door open, letting Ilya walk in first.

The room is small, exaggeratedly so. The bed is a full-size, but there is hardly room for a desk. It is clean, though, and smells of a sickly sweet lemon disinfectant. Sunshine pools onto the bedsheets. When Ilya turns around to face Shane, it lights his black hair up like a matchstick.

“Looks great,” Ilya repeats.

Shane nods. “Alright. Okay.”

“When are you looking to fill it?”

“As soon as possible, really.” Shane scratches the back of his neck. “But you’d only start paying next month.”

It’s only the first week of the month. That’s awfully generous. Ilya winces at his own bluntness, but doesn’t know how to frame it any other way: “I will take it.”

Shane doesn’t really react. “Sure. The only other thing I wanted to mention is a guest policy, things like that.”

Ilya nods. “I am okay not bringing people over.”

“No, no.” Shane shakes his head. “That’s totally fine. I just mean, we would let each other know ahead of time. And if it’s really late, be quieter, if possible, just because the walls are pretty thin.”

“Yes. Makes sense.”

Shane fiddles with his fingers. His eyes dart around the room, not quite meeting Ilya’s gaze. “There might be some weekends my boyfriend comes to stay.” His voice is measured. “It won’t be a regular thing. He lives in Toronto.”

Shane looks at Ilya, then, and Ilya gets a sense of why Shane’s face is carefully blank.

“Is that fine?” Shane asks.

Ilya takes a moment to picture what Shane sees: A six-foot something burly Russian, barreling into his apartment with strong opinions of sports - and maybe, strong opinions about other things too.

Ilya is a bit surprised that Shane is gay. He thought he had a good radar for these things. Maybe the muscles and the sports tee threw Ilya off. But if Shane mentioned his boyfriend as a test, it is one that Ilya is going to ace. And he's not in a position to be choosy about his roommates anyway.

So he smirks. “Of course. A Maple Leaf beats a Metro any day.”

Shane's face splits open into a smile. Ilya feels like he's won a game he hadn't realized he was playing.

Ilya's belongings take up one measly suitcase, and a carry-on at that. He can tell Shane was expecting more, seeing as he rescheduled a work meeting to help Ilya settle in.

“You did not need to do that,” Ilya says.

Shane shrugs. “It's no problem.”

“What do you do for work anyway?”

“Software engineer.” Shane scratches the back of his neck. “For a fintech startup. Boring stuff, but it’s remote, so.”

Ilya furrows his brow and pretends to know what “fintech” is aside from something obscenely lucrative. He steps in front of his suitcase, embarrassed of how little it holds. He looks around the tiny apartment they now share in a neighborhood where sirens fill the night. “If you are in major gambling debt,” he says slowly, “I think I have the right to know.”

Shane grins. “I’m a big saver. That’s all.” He reaches behind Ilya to roll Ilya’s suitcase over to his bedroom. Ilya gets a whiff of honey as Shane passes. “What do you do for work?”

It is suddenly funny to Ilya that Shane never asked before. “Oh, you know. Porn.”

The scrape of Ilya’s banged up suitcase wheels ceases. Shane freezes up.

“Kidding,” Ilya announces, because Shane’s eyebrows are up by his hairline.

“I didn’t mean - that’s fine if - if you were.” Shane’s nose scrunches. “I’d just ask that you not film out here.”

“Shane,” Ilya says pointedly. “I am not a pornstar.”

Shane’s face flushes. “Right. You are?”

“Camera operator.”

Shane’s eyes widen. “For porn?”

“No, no.” Ilya shakes his head. “For CityNews Montreal.”

“So you’re on TV?”

Shane still looks so dumbfounded that Ilya chuckles. “I am just the guy behind the camera, so no. Is not that cool. Pretty sure I am the only person alive in this city willing to follow a police chase with thirty kilos on my shoulder.”

Shane’s eyes light up. Ilya’s suitcase reaches only up to his bare knees, a pair of gym shorts covering his thighs. “Man. So you lift, right? I mean, you must.”

Ilya takes this to mean Shane is looking at his arms. He nods. “I feel like shit when I don’t exercise.”

Shane doesn’t need to know exactly how true that is. And he’s on new medication, anyway. So it’s hardly relevant.

“Well. You ever need a spotter for your lifts, let me know.”

Seeing as Ilya’s only friend is spending the foreseeable future living in Russia - and weighs about half of what Ilya can bench anyways - it’s not a bad offer. “I do, actually. Saturday?”

Shane takes out his phone, presumably to check his calendar. “I can do all morning. Any time before noon.”

Ilya tsks. “Why so early?”

Shane blinks a few times. “You think noon is early?”

Ilya nods. “I work out at 10 pm most nights.”

“Jeez. I’m usually asleep by then.”

A shrill ringing sounds, interrupting them both: the sound of the in-unit washing machine finishing its load. It was about half the reason Ilya was so desperate to sign this lease in the first place. His gym clothes became a biohazard in his last apartment back in Boston, in part because he couldn’t afford to go to the laundromat more than twice a month. Now, Shane walks over to the machine and pulls out a bundle of clothes that is entirely white.

“I just have two more cycles, by the way,” Shane says, maneuvering the clothes into the dryer. “Just my reds and my blues.”

Ilya scratches his nose. “You separate laundry. By color.”

Shane turns to him, his arms so full of white socks that one plops onto the floor. Ilya walks over, leans down, and picks it up for him. “Thanks,” Shane says. He pushes the remaining clothes into the machine. “And, yeah. Don’t you?”

Of course he now lives with an early bird harboring neurotic laundry habits. Ilya just smiles at him. “I don’t think you’re going to like me very much.”

Shane presses START on the machine. “I’ll like you as long as you pay rent by the 30th.”

Ilya walks back to his shabby bedroom door. He likes it when people are straightforward: *Here*, he imagines Shane saying, this is what’s expected of you. Whereas it’s Ilya’s job, as a son, to predict what his father expects of him. And he’s never been intelligent enough to get it right.

He swings open his bedroom door. It nearly snags on the corner of his bedframe. He turns around and calls out to Shane: “That I can do.”

They do end up going to the gym together. It's the weekend, yet Ilya sets an alarm so they can go in the morning like Shane wants. He shudders to think of what his old self might think of this. He's used to sleeping in until 1.

They scan in at the front desk, where a guy about their age with a mullet and colored tattoo sleeve greets them. Shane does abs first, which Ilya finds genuinely insane and tells him so. Shane laughs and, in turn, questions Ilya's music choice.

On the train back, both of them sweaty and sidled in the last empty seats in the traincar, Ilya offers Shane an earbud and educates him on the musicality of Skryptonite.

They finish up a song and Shane hands the earbud back. "It's good," he says finally.

Ilya grins, pleased.

"For workouts, though, I still prefer my stuff."

"Sure," Ilya says. "Your white noise."

Shane nods. "Right."

"There's -" Ilya stutters and his eyes bulge. "You don't *actually* listen to white noise."

Shane shrugs defensively. "It helps me focus on my reps."

Ilya leans his head back until it bangs against the glass window of the traincar. He sighs, dramatized for his audience of one. "I live with a psychopath."

It's a Tuesday. Ilya got sent out with a reporter to cover a car pileup in Longueuil. Four deaths, and his hand trembled as he tried to keep the camera steady as it focused on a grieving widow mid-interview.

He arrives home at 8 pm. Even if he had the energy to make something, he doesn't have much appetite. He figures he'll have sleep for dinner.

Shane sits up from their comically small couch. A game is on, Admirals versus Metros. "Going into overtime," Shane tells him.

Ilya's feet veer away from the hallway and towards the couch instead. He squeezes in next to Shane a respectful distance away, which is tough to do with how big they both are.

"Don't tell me you're rooting for the Admirals," Shane says.

"God no." Ilya kicks his feet up onto the coffee table. He wonders if Shane minds, because it feels like it's his table and not theirs. The whole apartment does, actually. But maybe that feeling will go away soon. "Scott Hunter is five hundred years old."

Shane laughs. "I like him. He came to speak to my team back when I was in the minors."

Ilya jerks his head to the side to look at Shane better. His nose is perfectly straight. It could be used as a ruler. "You played?"

Shane turns to look at him, so Ilya faces the TV instead. "Yeah. In college, too."

“Did you like it?”

“Loved it,” Shane says, then clears his throat. “I grilled some salmon and potatoes, by the way. It’s in the fridge if you want some.”

Ilya’s stomach knots. “No, that’s alright. That’s your food.”

“I made a lot. And I sometimes get weird about leftovers. Like, thinking about the bacteria and - yeah. So, anyway.”

“I couldn’t.” In the next breath, Ilya asks, “You sure?”

Shane nods.

Ilya doesn’t poke fun at Shane’s comment about leftovers, because this particular neurotic trait of his works in Ilya’s favor tonight. “Thank you.”

He walks over to the fridge, plates a hunk of salmon and sliced, crispy potatoes speckled in rosemary. When the microwave beeps, he removes the plate and sits back down onto the couch to eat.

He scoops the first bite into his mouth. “It’s really good,” he manages through a mouthful of food, and while he wants to say more about the depth of flavor he notices his throat has gotten a bit tight. It’s just, he was really hungry. And really tired. And the home cooked meal is about a thousand times better than the frozen ones he buys on sale at Costco.

“Great. I’m glad.” Shane opens his mouth to say more, but then the Metros score in overtime and he’s up off the couch and clapping.

Jeez, Ilya thinks. This guy loves his hockey.

He spears a potato wedge and chews maybe twice before swallowing.

It's weeks later and they're at the gym again, this time spotting each other so they can catch up.

Because yes, while they're roommates, Ilya hasn't been home the last two evenings. His Tinder date went particularly well: a Lebanese woman in tech sales, tall with curly hair, recovering from a breakup. They got drinks the first night, went back to hers, fucked twice and then he fell asleep with his arm dangling off her bed. The next night, they went to their respective workplaces and met up for dinner. She ordered a falafel wrap and and he chicken shawarma, and they fucked on her couch.

If Ilya ever had sex on his and Shane's couch, he's fairly sure Shane would spear him like a fish and roast him on an open flame. Shane, on the other hand, doesn't seem the type to have sex on a couch - or at all, if Ilya is being honest.

But he does have a boyfriend, the mystery one Ilya has yet to meet. So maybe Ilya is wrong.

"Could you see yourself with her?" Shane asks, pushing himself up off the bench.

"Having sex again?" Ilya clarifies, then answers his own question. "Yes, I mean. It was great."

"No, but." Shane continues talking as Ilya lays himself down onto the bench again, his sweat intermingling with Shane's. "Dating her."

“Oh.” Ilya grunts through his reps and only responds once he’s no longer gasping for air and has reracked the weights. “She’s not looking for anything serious. Got out of a breakup.”

Shane tilts his head, considering. His shirt sticks to his chest like cling wrap. “Hm. Are you bummed?”

Ilya smiles a little. “I prefer it that way.”

“Ah. Casual?”

Ilya nods. “You’re not gonna ask about the gory details?”

Shane shakes his head. “That’s between you and God.”

Ilya laughs. He’s laughing so much, these days.

Shane’s phone begins to ring. FaceTime request from someone named Mike Murphy. He swipes and answers, muttering into the phone: “Hey. I’m at the gym. Can I call you back?”

Ilya perks up. “Is this mystery man?”

“Oh.” Shane cranes the phone in Ilya’s direction. “This is Mike.”

Ilya waves as the screen slowly depixelates, revealing a man’s round, pale face. Mike has a Bieber-swoop of straight brown hair over his forehead and brown eyes spaced slightly far apart. He looks perfectly average. “Ilya!” He chirps. “Great to finally meet you.”

“You too.” Ilya tugs his earbuds out and wipes some of the sweat off his chin with the back of his hand.

“You’re Russian, right?”

“Guilty.”

“Nice. I’m, like, obsessed with the KGB.” Before Ilya can reply, he adds: “My boyfriend’s awesome. Isn’t he?”

“Yes.” Ilya’s eyes flicker from the phone to Shane, his freckled face rosy from exertion.
“Awesome.”

Shane winces, which he usually does when complimented. He turns his phone so it’s facing him again. “That’s nice. Um. Can I call you back in, like, thirty?”

Ilya shoots Shane a look. Shane cranes the phone away from his face and mouths to him:
What?

“Today’s the day you said we’d race on the treadmill, no?” Ilya whispers.

Shane’s eyes alight in recognition. He turns the phone back to face him. “Um, sorry. Make that an hour.”

“An hour? But I miss you,” Mike whines. “And I need to tell you who I met today. God, you’re not gonna believe it.”

Shane makes a vague gesture to Ilya that Ilya takes to mean to skip to their next muscle group without him. As Shane switches his phone audio to his earbuds, Ilya watches Shane nod along to Mike’s monologue, asking quick follow-ups every now and again. It gives Ilya time to do his bicep curls, and for his mind to wander.

He's not sure what he expected Mike to look like. Shane's features are quite unique: jet black hair, almond-shaped eyes with spokes of long eyelashes like a pinwheel, and - perhaps most notably - the smattering of freckles across his cheekbones, a constellation that blankets the straight cut of his nose.

And look: Ilya has seen many straight relationships where the woman is more beautiful than the man. Statistically, what with the proliferation of ugly men, it's bound to happen.

But in a relationship with two men, Ilya supposes it can function the same. It is rare to find two men who are equally attractive, and on top of that equally attracted to each other.

Mike is perfectly average-looking. At least he also seems quite nice. Ilya ponders this all as he switches the dumbbell from one hand to the other. Then Shane ends the call and those brown eyes are back on Ilya.

"Is that your type?" Ilya asks, his bicep flexing. "White?"

Shane chuckles awkwardly. "Uh. I don't have a type."

"Really," Ilya deadpans. "I don't believe it."

Shane flounders. "I don't! Do you?"

If you pool together every woman Ilya has fucked in his life, it would look like the United Nations. He settles on the one common denominator. "I prefer tall women."

"How tall?"

"Like, tall." He thinks back to the South Sudanese woman he saw on and off in Boston: six feet of soft curves and smooth skin. God, she was beautiful. "If she's wearing heels, she'd be taller than me. That tall."

“Whoa,” Shane says. “That *is* tall.”

Ilya shrugs. “A woman like that sometimes tries to make herself smaller. I want to, you know. Throw her around a bit. Make her feel appreciated.”

And, selfishly, he loves long legs: thick legs, thin legs, legs that poke out of dresses and legs that grow out from skirts.

Shane opens and closes his mouth in turn. He’s slightly less red, having taken a break from their exercises. “That’s... nice.”

Ilya chuckles, all of a sudden. “Sorry. I keep forgetting you don’t swing that way.”

“You just met my boyfriend,” Shane says, amused.

“Yes, but.” Ilya gestures vaguely around them. “He’s not here much.”

Shane looks crestfallen at that. Ilya wishes suddenly he could take it back. “Yeah.”

They finish up in the weight area and move to cardio. They race on the last two treadmills, right above a TV broadcasting Food Network. Ilya beats Shane by four seconds on kilometer one of five.

“Work on your speed, Hollander,” Ilya teases between pants.

By kilometer five, when they’ve agreed to stop, Shane beats his time overall by twenty seconds. He shuts his treadmill off and, breathless, bumps Ilya with his sweaty arm. He’s smiling, wide and proud. “Work on your endurance, Rozanov.”

On a Saturday afternoon, Ilya is spooning soggy cereal into his mouth when Shane approaches him looking vaguely sick.

Ilya sets his spoon down into the ceramic bowl with a plop. A drop of milk ricochets upwards and clings to his chin.

“So,” Shane starts. “How’d you sleep?”

“Fine,” Ilya says slowly. Shane shifts his weight foot to foot while Ilya rushes to blink the sleepiness out of his eyes. Half of him wonders if he’s being evicted. Can a roommate evict him, or does it have to be the landlord? This and other legal questions he has to research, including renewing his visa.

“Great. Good.” Shane sits down at the dining table. “So, next weekend is my birthday. And -”

“What? When?” Ilya interjects.

“Friday.”

“Friday,” Ilya echoes. He makes a mental note.

“Yes. And Mike’s wanting to fly in for the weekend. Thursday through Sunday, because his job is remote on Fridays.”

“O-kay.” Ilya is struggling to see the point.

“Is it fine if he stays here?”

Ilya’s eyebrows draw in. This is Shane’s apartment, practically. “Of course it’s fine.”

“Great,” Shane replies. He scratches his temple, his fingers shaky. Ilya begins to freak out, just a little. “We’d stay out of your hair during the day. We’d have to be here at night, obviously. But I’ll try -”

“Shane,” Ilya interrupts.

Shane cringes, but Ilya barrels on, because he’s new to this too: having a gay roommate. A gay friend, even. Ilya injects an artificial calm into his voice he doesn’t feel.

“Is there anything I’ve said to you, or - or *done*, that makes you think I would not be okay with that?”

Suddenly Shane plops his head into his hands. He stays in that pose for only a second before straightening up in his chair and taking a deep breath. “I’m sorry.”

Ilya gulps. “*I* am sorry if I made you feel -”

“No. No.” Shane shakes his head. “It’s not you. I just have some, like, stuff in my head.”

““Stuff in your head,”” Ilya repeats dumbly.

“From hockey.” Shane brings his thumbnail to his mouth, chewing it before he remembers he has company and drops his hand. “They, um, weren’t a fan of the gay thing. That much. My teammates.”

Ilya processes the information too slowly. “Oh,” he says finally. God. He’s the worst. “They gave you trouble?”

“Not all of them,” Shane whispers. “But enough.”

The most empathetic thing Ilya can think to do is shove his cereal bowl and box to the side so there’s nothing between them except the expanse of chipped wooden table. “Is that why you quit?”

“Part of it,” Shane says, rather miserably. He fiddles with his fingers. “I think I just worry, you know, that I’m shoving the - that *aspect* of me - in people’s faces. Or, your face, in this case.”

“Shane,” Ilya says. Every time Ilya says his name, he perks up like a puppy. “He is your boyfriend. Your partner. He is welcome.”

Shane gulps and his Adam’s apple bobs. His eyes look huge, a warm brown in the sun. “Thank you,” he manages.

Ilya considers Shane for a moment. He takes a calculated risk. “Plus, you see how long I take to do my hair. If anything, I am more gay than you are.”

Ilya wonders after he says it if it’s mildly offensive. But Shane’s expression transforms, and he throws his head back and laughs, this deep and rich sound that makes Ilya think: *worth it*.

Ilya is in the control room at work when he gets a call from an unknown number. He wonders if it’s Svetlana, back inexplicably early from her stint in Russia with a new Canadian number, so he answers.

“Ilya, hey!”

The voice is so chipper that Ilya rules out Svetlana immediately. “Is this Doctor Gaffouri?”

That’s Ilya’s dentist, of course. He practically bounced off the walls with giddiness as he told Ilya he is grinding his teeth too much when he sleeps, which in turn is the likely cause of his migraines. Time and place, dude.

There’s a laugh on the other end. “You’re funny. No. It’s Mike.”

Ilya blinks. “Shane’s Mike?”

“The one and only.” There’s some rustling on the other end. “I’m calling because I want to do something fun for Shane on his birthday. A bit of a surprise. And I’d love your help planning.”

Ilya switches the phone from one hand to the other. “What do you have in mind?”

“Right now he thinks we’re all just going out to dinner. You, me, his friend Rose. But I was thinking. What if we booked him a table at Unity?”

“At what?”

“Oh my god. I thought even straight guys know this place. Club Unity.”

“Club Unity,” Ilya repeats, unsure.

“It’s the largest gay nightclub in Montreal. We could get our own table. Bottle service. The whole shebang.”

“Well,” Ilya begins. Approaching this respectfully feels like dodging landmines. “I’m sure you know Shane likes to go to bed early.”

“Yeah, duh,” Mike says, though not unkindly. “But on his birthday? This is the one day of the year it’s all about him.”

Ilya barrels on. “He likes going to the gym on Saturday mornings. Early morning.”

Mike’s voice is a little more stilted. “I know.”

“So a late night on Friday throws that off. And he likes his routine.”

“I think he’ll just like seeing his boyfriend after two months.”

Ilya squeezes his eyes shut. “Yes. Okay. You know him best.” He tries to picture Shane at a nightclub and the image gets blurry. He just can’t help himself. “How about a sports bar?”

“That…” Mike trails off. “That’s not a bad idea. You have one in mind?”

“No. But I can look into it.”

Mike hums. “That would be great. If there are any gay sports bars, that’d be even better.”

Ilya wonders to himself: Is it homophobic to laugh at that question? And anyway, it’s the twenty-first century, so maybe Ilya is the one who’s out of the loop. What the hell. “Do you want me to check?”

“Yes. That’d be great. Let me know what you find.”

“Okay. Sure.” One of the News Assistants, Isaac, waves Ilya over and gestures frantically to the camera equipment. “I have to go.”

“Alright. You’re a lifesaver. See you Friday.”

On Wednesday, Ilya excuses himself from the dinner table. Shane cooked enough tofu lasagna for the two of them. Ilya pretended to hate it on the principle of containing tofu for exactly one minute before he dropped the guise because he wanted seconds.

Unbeknownst to Shane, the reason Ilya is leaving the living room is so he can call Shane’s boyfriend in private. He thinks to himself how fucked up that would be if they were two straight dudes. *Yo, Marly. Be back in a sec. I’m gonna call your girlfriend.*

Ilya laughs to himself. Yes, this is simpler.

He props his computer open onto the bar’s website before hitting the call button. He had entered a rabbit hole of sorts the night prior, during which he discovered that gay sports bars do, in fact, exist. He found the perfect one on St-Laurent, a longstanding sports bar with new lesbian co-owners, and is oddly giddy to share.

Mike picks up on the first ring.

“Champs,” Ilya says, without preamble. “The bar. It is perfect for Shane. There is some dancing, if he wants, but pool tables too. And even better is they’re showing the game. Puck drop is at 7:15. Might be too close to dinner. But we could catch the second half.”

“Sorry, what?”

Ilya blinks a few times. “The sports bar. That you asked me to find.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry, Ilya.”

Some people fuck up the pronunciation of his name so much he’d rather they not even attempt it. This is one of those cases. “Why sorry?”

“I forgot I asked you to do that. I ended up putting the deposit down at Unity.”

Ilya runs his tongue over his front teeth. “Okay.”

“I should have said.”

“It’s fine. What time do you have it?”

“What, the table?”

Ilya hums.

“Midnight to three.”

Ilya could laugh. This is Shane they’re talking about. “You might want to push back dinner.”

“I already did.”

Ilya nods, considering. “Should I tell Shane to have a late lunch?”

“I can tell him,” Mike replies coolly. “I’ll be with him the entire day.”

“Right.” The silence lingers for a few beats. “Well. See you Friday.”

“I really am looking forward to meeting you,” Mike says. “Sorry for the trouble.”

“No, no.” Ilya forces a smile in case it bleeds into his voice. “It’s no trouble. Have a safe flight.”

Ilya shoots off a happy birthday text to Shane before he goes to work. When Ilya leaves for the office, Shane is already on his way to pick Mike up from the airport. At least Ilya won’t be home for their reunion sex. The walls in the apartment are crazily thin as is.

Ilya doesn’t actually see the birthday boy in question until dinner at this medium-nice Japanese fusion restaurant.

“What is this fused with?” Ilya moans around a spicy tuna hand roll. “The hand of God?”

Shane is sitting directly across from Ilya, his legs crossed on the booth side with Mike, who looks exactly how Ilya expected except slightly shorter. Next to Ilya, Rose is consumed by taking overly obvious candid photos of the couple when she thinks they aren’t looking.

Shane laughs. “It’s a French-Japanese fusion.”

Ilya speaks through a mouthful of rice. “Like you?”

Shane goes red in record time. “Um. I guess you could say that.”

Mike pinches Shane’s cheek with hands slick with soy sauce. “The perfect combination.”

As Shane wipes his cheek off with a napkin, Ilya asks Mike about his flight.

“Oh, fine. Bugged down by work stuff, as usual.”

“Mike moved from Montreal to Toronto for work,” Shane supplies.

Mike nods. “I’m a personal stylist for a high-profile actress.”

“Oh, nice,” Ilya replies. He looks to Rose to include her in the conversation, but she is busy snapping her photos, so he keeps talking. “Which actor?”

“Actress,” Mike corrects.

“Sorry,” Ilya says, automatically. English isn’t his first language. He is good, but he slips up sometimes. “Which actress?”

“Oh, I probably shouldn’t say.”

Mike’s arm is sprawled across Shane’s shoulders, but it drops as Shane turns to face Mike more head-on. “I mean, it’s not a secret,” Shane says. “Is it?”

“Well.” Mike shrugs. “More and more fashion houses are expressing interest in her, so I just want to be cognizant.”

“That’s okay.” Ilya pokes at the seaweed salad on his plate. “I don’t mean to...” What the fuck is the word? Pry?

Shane is persistent. “It’s on your LinkedIn, though. And you always tell people.”

Mike sighs. “Alright. Simone D’Bon.”

Ilya catches Shane’s eye across the table. He hopes his stare conveys what he’s thinking, which is: *who the fuck is that?*

Shane flashes Ilya a small smile. It energizes Ilya enough to react enthusiastically for someone he’s never heard of in his life. “Wow! That is super cool.”

Shane comes to his rescue. “She was on this hospital show, Saving Hope.”

Ilya, again, tries to be supportive. “I love hospital shows.”

Shane grins at him again, and only Ilya knows why. Just a few days prior, they were scrolling through Netflix together sprawled on the couch and Ilya went on a tirade lambasting unrealistic workplace television.

“Yes, so.” Mike snags a piece of sushi from Shane’s plate, leaving one left. “I’ve been pretty busy.”

Rose joins in the conversation after her phone alerts her she has low storage and retells the story of how she first met Shane in McGill’s freshman dorms. Shane was holding a moving box the size of a boulder and it nearly crushed Rose’s head when they collided.

When the check comes, Shane fights to put his card down and Ilya wrangles his hand back like they're arm wrestling until he gives up.

"I need to stop going to the gym with you," Shane grumbles. "I'm creating a monster."

"I was already a monster," Ilya politely informs him.

Mike turns to Shane, an excitable look on his face. "Baby. The night isn't over yet."

Shane blinks. "Oh." He worries his lip. "Did you want to watch a movie?"

Ilya steels himself. "No," Mike says. "Even better."

'Even better' is debatable. It is past midnight at Club Unity and Shane is three cocktails behind the pace with which Mike is buying them for him. The table is dressed in ice buckets and soft gold light, cordoned off with velvet rope.

Mike has gone off to the restroom. Ilya doesn't lean over and ask Shane if he's having fun, because Shane can't lie for the life of him and it hurts to see him try.

Instead, Ilya says, "Want help with those?"

He points to Shane's growing army of margaritas. Shane strains to make himself heard over the music. "Sure." He nudges one in Ilya's direction.

Ilya takes it happily and sips. "It is very strong."

Shane plays with his fingers, these slender creatures that catch in the strobe lights. His eyes are like disco balls, reflecting everything, including Ilya's own silhouette. "I'm not a big drinker."

Ilya hums. "I thought so."

Rose has decided to take candid photos of Shane and Ilya this time, since they're on one side of the table and her the other. "Does anyone want to dance?" She calls out.

Ilya reads Shane's face easily, deciphering his unease with surgical precision. It is such an odd feeling. With Ilya's own family, he is always left guessing. "What if we play a game instead?" Ilya suggests.

Shane sits up straighter, his competitive flame ignited. "A game?"

Ilya finishes off the margarita. "Count the number of dudes here with their flies down."

Wordlessly, Shane slides a second cocktail from his arsenal Ilya's direction. Ilya picks it up and brings it to his mouth without looking. "There's no way there are that many -"

Ilya smirks. "Found one."

Shane turns to Ilya, affronted. "What the hell? New rule. You have to describe who, so I know you're not cheating."

Ilya points to the dancefloor and whispers into Shane's ear. "Short guy, no hair, red shirt."

Shane's eyes alight in recognition. "Fine. That's one point."

Rose chimes in. “New *new* rule, girls count too. Look at the girl with the ponytail one table over.”

Ilya hums in approval. Shane whines. “How come I’m losing my own birthday game?”

Ilya pats Shane’s knee in sympathy. “Open your eyes, *zaychik*.”

Ilya watches as Shane’s careful gaze scans the room. “Okay,” he mutters, grin spreading across his face. “New new *new* rule is it’s double points if the fly is down and unbuttoned.”

“I’ll allow it. Tell me who.”

Shane takes on that smug celebratory look he only gets on nights the Metros win or the Raiders lose. “The dude dancing with red shirt guy.”

“Holy shit,” Rose says.

Ilya smiles to himself. “They’re made for each other.”

Mike returns to the table with a cocktail in each hand. “Sorry, baby. Bathroom line took forever.”

Shane accepts the cocktail pushed in his direction, albeit warily. “I might pawn this one off to Ilya.”

Ilya jumps in his seat. “Found another!”

Shane whips his head around. “Who?”

“Your boyfriend.”

They drop their eyes to Mike’s crotch in unison. Shane giggles, throwing a hand over his mouth.

Mike takes a sip of his own cocktail. “What’s going on?”

“We’re playing a game,” Shane explains, smiling. “You get a point if you catch someone with their fly down.”

“Oh.” Mike zips his pants and sits down on Shane’s other side, he and Ilya flanking him like guard dogs. He wraps an arm tight around Shane’s waist and raises a suggestive eyebrow, meeting Ilya’s gaze. “Just giving the birthday boy easy access for later.”

Ilya shudders. “You ruined the game,” he slurs, because he is too drunk to remind himself to zip it. “Is okay. I’ll think of another.”

“Dancing?” Rose chimes in.

Ilya tries to work out a way to make Shane feel included without forcing him to dance. He stands up and motions for Rose to join in. “The birthday boy will now rate our dance moves.”

Shane grins. “Alright, but I’m a harsh critic.”

“The harshest,” Ilya agrees.

Mike raises a hand. “What should I do?”

Ilya outstretches a hand. Mike doesn’t take it, but it makes Shane smile nonetheless. “Dance with us.”

Ilya goes first, performing a move he dubs the “Russian sprinkler” because he gyrates his hips as he moves his arms.

Rose does elaborate body rolls she defines as The Worm, only standing up.

Mike finishes them off with some off-beat shuffling.

Shane claps his hands together, pleased. “What is my criteria for judging?”

Mike rolls his eyes. “You don’t need criteria.”

“Half creativity, half execution,” Ilya says.

Shane hums. “Alright. First is Rose.”

Rose whoops. Ilya clutches his chest, faking a heartbreak.

“Second Ilya, third Mike.”

Mike scoffs. “The hell? Why am I last?”

“Well, based on the criteria,” Shane explains. Ilya thinks Shane should be in charge of their judiciary system, the dude is so fair. “Come on. If I was ranking based on love, you’d be first.”

Mike crosses his arms, unconvinced. Ilya reaches for another abandoned margarita, more sheepishly this time. “I can pay you back for these,” he offers.

Mike considers Ilya briefly. “It’s whatever.”

A tall, tanned woman with a French bob approaches their table. “Those were some moves you got there,” she tells Ilya, blinking her catlike eyes.

Ilya turns to Shane, only briefly. They share a knowing look.

Ilya thinks: *Thank God for gay guys and the beautiful female friends they bring to the club.*

He outstretches his hand in her direction. “Can I show you my favorite?”

She takes it. *Score.*

They end the night on the dance floor, Ilya kissing this woman - Francesca, is her name - while only a few paces away, Shane kisses Mike.

Maybe it’s odd, that mid-kiss Ilya cracks his eyes open. But he has never seen Shane kiss anyone. It’s like watching a nature documentary. Shane cords his slender fingers through Mike’s hair and kisses him with his dark eyebrows furrowed.

Rose calls a separate taxi across town, so they leave together, the four of them, because Francesca wants to go home with him.

That night, Ilya has just thrust himself inside of her, her gorgeous lengthy limbs spread-eagled on his tiny bed, when she says, “Is that your roommate?”

“What?” Ilya asks, dizzy from all the drinks.

“Those sounds.”

Ilya listens. There are moans sounding out from the other room.

“Yeah,” Ilya settles on. “The walls are thin. Sorry.”

“No, I mean.” She shrugs. Her golden skin moves with the motion. “It sounds like they’re in here, is all. It’s a bit weird.”

It is weird. Ilya spends only a second trying to parse out Shane’s sounds from the combinatory moans across the hall before he realizes that is an odd thing to do.

Instead he leans down and wraps his lips around her pert nipple. She cries out.

“How about,” he murmurs against her skin, “we get so fucking loud we can’t hear them anymore?”

She nods, once and then more frantically when he strokes her clit.

By the time they tire themselves out and fall asleep, the entire apartment is quiet.

Shane finds Ilya bent over a bowl of cereal the following morning, Mike trailing behind him.

The second Ilya makes eye contact with Shane, they bust out laughing.

“What?” Mike says. “What is it?”

“Nothing, just,” and Ilya can’t even finish the sentence.

“What?” Mike repeats.

“Just, last night,” Ilya wheezes. “It sounded like fucking Jurassic Park in here.”

Shane cringes, but he’s smiling. “You were way worse than us.”

“We were trying to drown you out.”

“Speaking of ‘we,’” Shane says, “where is the lucky lady?”

Ilya shrugs. “She left. Did not want Cheerios.”

Shane opens the fridge. “Ilya,” he chastises. “How many times have I told you you can use my eggs?”

“I can’t just take your food.”

Shane raises an eyebrow.

“Okay,” Ilya defends, “but that’s because you hate leftovers.”

That’s the thing, isn’t it? Shane hates leftovers and Ilya survives off them. Shane hates drinking and Ilya drinks like a fish.

“You two have a lot of inside jokes,” Mike comments.

What is Mike’s equivalent? Shane is attractive and Mike is unattractive? That’s not compatibility, Ilya thinks. That’s settling.

“I would not say a *lot*,” Ilya says after a moment.

“We do have a lot,” Shane acquiesces. Ilya gulps. His eyes follow the lines of Shane’s throat. Shane pinches Mike’s cheek, overly fond. “Not as much as we do. Obviously.”

Mike kisses Shane hard, more on his chin than his lips.

Ilya stares down at his cereal bowl and keeps eating.

Mike leaves, and weeks pass in their usual fashion. Shane and Ilya go to the gym together most weekdays until Ilya gets assigned to work the evening news show. At least then, Ilya is free in the mornings, and after Shane has his first client call they might go on a run or deep clean the apartment together.

This is all to say, they’ve built up a routine.

Said routine does not involve Ilya coming home bone-tired to Shane's wet, blotchy face buried in the couch cushions.

Ilya drops his work bag on the floor with a thump. He all but runs over.

Shane takes a tissue and rubs his face like the entire thing is one big stain. "Sorry."

There is no room on the couch next to Shane, given how he's sprawled, so Ilya kneels on the floor in front of it. "Hey. Hey," Ilya coos. "What happened?"

Shane blinks his red-rimmed eyes. Ilya watches the muscles in Shane's face twitch as he works himself up to speak. As he does, Ilya begs to whichever God is clocked in at the moment: *Don't let it be his mother.*

"Mike broke up with me."

"Oh," Ilya says. It's a reflex, to buy himself time. Shane curls in on himself, burrowing his nose in a hoodie so loose Ilya assumes it must not be his own.

Ilya is probably the least qualified person imaginable to deal with emotions. Still, he spreads his arms the width of Shane's torso, giving him the option of opting in or out like a used car salesman. "Can I give you a hug?"

Shane nods miserably. Ilya climbs onto the couch, personal space be damned, and gathers Shane into his arms with all the heft he uses to pick up his camera rig.

It's so much force that he lifts Shane off the cushion. Shane lets out a small yelp but otherwise leans into it, his wet nose brushing Ilya's neck like a puppy's. Ilya deposits him back onto the couch with much less grace than intended. He wobbles and Ilya steadies him with a hand on his lower back.

Leaning away, so they're eye level now, Ilya can't help it. "Is he stupid? Did he hit his head?"

Shane chokes out a wet laugh in Ilya's arms. "He said he can't take the long distance anymore. It makes sense, it's just. I dunno." He gestures to his splotchy face. His eyes are so red they look vampiric. "I'm sorry. I'm a mess."

"Shane," Ilya murmurs. "Have you seen my room? I like mess."

Shane smiles as best he can. "I think it's just hitting hard because, um, he was my first boyfriend."

The last time Ilya helped someone through a breakup was his old co-worker Marlow, who got so hammered that night he could hardly walk to the train. Ilya's form of solidarity was knocking back the same number of drinks so they were both as sick the next day.

Ilya knows that strategy won't work for Shane. Instead, he nods sympathetically.

"He was really good about a lot of my... things."

"Things?"

"I know some things about me are, like, odd. And could be seen as annoying, to a partner."

Ilya plucks another tissue for Shane when he sees the current one in his hand is soiled. "What is odd?"

"I'm a hypochondriac. I'm a neat freak. I'm -"

“What is that?”

“What, hypochondriac?”

Ilya nods.

“I’m always worried I’m sick. Or that others are. Which, by the way, not to freak you out but I do have a great dermatologist referral in case you want to get your moles checked out. Just to be -” and he cuts himself off as tears fill his eyes again. “Oh God.” Shane wipes his eyes with the collar of the hoodie. “I’m hard to be around.”

“You are not,” Ilya says firmly, and before he has determined what comes after it. It was a reflex, to refute it.

“I won’t find anyone else.”

“Of course you will.” He has a thought like a lightbulb switching on. “There is a guy at my work, Isaac. He is very nice, and smart too. He likes men. I could ask him about you.”

Shane considers him for a moment. “Well, thanks. I’m not ready, and, uh, won’t be for a while, but thank you.”

Ilya nods. He gets that. Out of nowhere, he says, “Fuck Simone D’Bon.”

That tears a startled laugh out of Shane. “What did she do?”

“Guilty by association.”

Shane's gaze suddenly turns steely. "I just need to power through this feeling. Distract myself."

Ilya is about to suggest Champs, that sports bar Mike shot down. Fucking Mike. Stupidest motherfucker in existence. But he is interrupted by a suggestion from Shane.

"Gym tonight?"

Ilya is so tired he could collapse. Also, they ran this morning. What the hell. "Always."

Ilya initially puts Shane on something of a suicide watch, considering his job is remote and he has nothing to do except wallow at home all day. That following morning, Ilya texts Shane hourly while he is at work and panics when he doesn't respond right away.

But this is Shane Hollander he's talking about. Ilya realizes very quickly that Shane's sadness is much more efficient than Ilya's own.

He is less lazy, basically.

Ilya comes home to an apple pie fresh out of the oven.

"Have some," Shane insists.

His hair is stuck up in odd places and there are bags under his eyes. Ilya takes a bite and just about melts.

After Ilya is sufficiently bloated from the pie, Shane reveals offhandedly: “Mike was allergic to apples.”

“Okay,” Ilya replies, delicately, after wiping the whipped cream off his lips.

The day after, Ilya comes home to find Shane has bought himself a walking pad.

Ilya picks up the remarkably light device and sets it back down onto their carpeted floor. “Don’t you need... what is it... standing desk, for this?”

Shane’s eyes blow wide. “You’re right.”

The next day, Shane buys himself a standing desk.

It is only when Ilya comes home to Shane crying again, only this time they’re silent tears dripping mindlessly down his face as he scrubs the dishes, that Ilya resolves himself to buck up and do something about it.

He texts Shane the next week. *Will you be home tonight?*

Shane replies after an hour. *Yes. Metros home game - can’t miss it*

When Ilya comes home, Shane is already in his Metros jersey. It’s a superstition thing. His favorite player is, inexplicably, Hayden Pike, which Ilya finds fucking astounding since he is average at best.

“Perfect,” Ilya says as he walks in. “You won’t even have to change.”

Shane tilts his head like a puppy. “Sorry?”

Ilya fishes into his work bag and pulls out two shiny tickets. He can't keep the grin off his face as he waves them in Shane's direction.

Shane shoots up off the couch. "No fucking way."

Ilya hands Shane the tickets. "Way."

Shane's grip on the flimsy cuts of paper is white-knuckled, as if sincerely worried they might grow legs and run from him. His voice comes out choked. "This is tonight's game."

"Do not go polite Canadian on me now," Ilya warns. "We are going."

"Of course we're fucking going, are you kidding me?" Shane's eyes are wild and giddy. "But I'm paying you back."

"Nope," Ilya says, popping the "P."

"These cost an arm and a leg. Of course I am."

Ilya tsks. "These cost nothing. The ticket fairy gave me these. You've heard of it? It's like tooth fairy."

"Ilya, come on." Ilya perks up at his name on Shane's lips, as if he were casting a spell. "How much was it?"

"Zero," Ilya enunciates, as if said tickets didn't burn a hole in his wallet. Whatever, he rationalizes; he just won't buy fresh produce next month. Or the month after. Worth it. "Let's go."

Shane gives him an assessing look. “You don’t even like the Metros.”

Ilya shrugs innocently. “Since when?”

Shane smiles at Ilya in a way that lights up Ilya’s insides like a lantern. “Thank you. Oh my God, thank you.”

“Can I borrow a jersey? If I wear my Raiders shit I will get jumped.”

“Duh.” Shane skitters to his bedroom with a hand motion like Ilya should follow, so he does. Shane has navy bedsheets arranged impeccably on his bed and an abundance of throw pillows that puts Ilya’s measly one to shame. “I have another Pike and one for Drapeau.”

“Drapeau,” Ilya replies. Shane tosses the jersey to him, which smells faintly of honey like Shane does. Ilya shrugs his shirt off. Shane’s gaze averts respectfully. When the jersey is on, it is tight around Ilya’s biceps in a way they both notice and neither comment on.

“Really, thank you,” Shane whispers.

Ilya tamps down his grin to something more appropriately sized. “Stop thanking me, okay? The seats are shit.”

Shane laughs with his head thrown back, his neck bared like an offering.

The Bell Centre is so packed when they arrive that Ilya nearly loses Shane in the crowd. He searches for a crown of brown hair that bobs up and down with excitement and relocates Shane with some difficulty.

“I need to put a chip in you like they do to fancy dogs,” Ilya says when they reunite.

“At this point, I’ll let you.” Shane stares back at him, his brown eyes blinking ferociously. “I can’t believe we’re here.”

“Well, believe it, and fast. Puck drop is in five and I need to piss.”

They decide Ilya will navigate to the bathroom to relieve himself while Shane finds their seats. Ilya returns with two hot dogs and poutine from the food stand. He attempts to place the hot dog onto Shane’s lap without him noticing, which Ilya wagers might actually work because Shane’s eyes have shuttered with the laser-focus he only gets when he watches hockey.

But he also has reflexes like a cat. So of course he notices.

“Ilya,” Shane whines. Ilya almost drops the poutine. “I wanted to buy the food. How much was it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Ilya fills his smirking mouth with a forkful of fries.

Shane rolls his eyes, which is so at odds with the tender way he says what comes next, which is: “Thank you.” He shifts around in his seat. “I may just go grab -“

With an air finality, Ilya procures his final purchase, a Canada Dry, from his back pocket. The condensation mars both his fingers and Shane’s when he reaches over Ilya’s lap to grab it.

“What are you, a mind reader?” Shane mutters, smiling.

Ilya shovels more fries into his mouth. “You should be offended, Hollander, that you are so easy to read.”

“I’ll take offense if it stops working in my favor. And anyways - oh!” Shane is up and out of his seat, clapping, as Pike scores. The conversation dissolves somewhere between their seats and the ice.

Tonight’s game is against Toronto, which Ilya finds almost poetic. He worried initially it might make Shane spiral, but it’s only making him more invested. The Metros lead in the first period, but not by nearly as much as they should, and Shane says as much.

Ilya scans the ice while the Zamboni trudges along like a sleepy caterpillar. When the Metros take the ice again, he clears his throat.

“So. Who is your favorite?”

Shane’s eyes don’t leave the ice. “Pike. But his backhand has been absolutely shot all season.”

“No, I mean. Are there any... what would you call them? Cute guys?”

Shane’s eyes drift off the ice to give Ilya a sideways look. “What, on the team?”

Ilya shrugs. “Celebrity crush is healthy, you know.”

“Yeah right.” Shane rests his elbows on his knees to get a better view. “I’ll find it ‘cute’ if Boiziau gets a hatty before the third.”

Ilya just chuckles. “Your brain is all hockey, huh.”

Shane nods once, a confirmation. “You know I’m not attracted to every man I see,” he says after a moment. “That’s not how it works.”

“I know.”

“I mean, are you?”

Ilya squints. “What?”

“With women, I mean. Are you attracted to every woman you meet?”

Ilya grins. “Pretty much.”

Shane shakes his head, a smile on his lips he tries to conceal with his knuckles. “I should’ve known you’d say that.”

Abruptly, Ilya takes his phone out and swipes the camera on. “For memories,” he says, and outstretches an arm across Shane’s shoulders for the photo.

Ilya keeps his arm there after the picture, because it’s comfortable and because Shane has goosebumps on the back of his neck. It is the kind of cold in the stadium that seeps past the skin and nestles under Ilya’s ribs.

“You just need to put yourself out there,” Ilya tells him, drumming his fingers along Shane’s shoulder.

Shane takes a final sip of his ginger ale and crushes the can. “If you say so.”

Chapter End Notes

I appreciate every comment. Thank you for taking the time to read!

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I am floored by the reception thus far! I literally thought I would be shouting into the void releasing this weekly. Thanks so much for reading.

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

Weeks pass in their usual fashion. In the newly freed time during which Shane would usually call Mike, instead he and Ilya watch the entirety of The Sopranos contorted in various positions on their couch. Ilya tries and fails to convince Shane he is a descendant of the Russian mafia. Shane is thoroughly unimpressed at Ilya's acting.

Even on the nights when Shane puts on some snooze-fest sports documentary, Ilya sits through it.

"This shit is so boring," Ilya complains one night, twenty minutes into the film.

Shane snorts. "There is this cool place, open 24/7. It's called 'your own room.'"

Ilya clears his throat and makes a big show of shutting his eyes, hoping he'll fall asleep in front of the TV and, fingers crossed, snore so loud Shane will smack him awake like he did last week. "Never heard of it."

Tonight, they are searching for the next show they both want to watch. Shane's rules are no workplace romances (overdone) and no romantic comedies (hit-or-miss).

Ilya has just one rule.

"This one won't work," Ilya points out. "No female lead."

“That’s your rule?”

Ilya nods. “I am feminist. What can I say.”

“The last one I suggested has a female lead,” Shane points out.

“Okay, well.” Ilya gestures vaguely. “That is different.”

“I think you mean, you want a female lead who takes her top off.”

Ilya splutters. “No,” he defends.

Shane rolls his eyes, though he’s smiling. “Hey,” he allows. “We each get a rule.”

“That was not my rule.” Though, he thinks, it would be nice.

“It’s fine.” Shane scoots away from Ilya in an overly obvious manner that will only result in Ilya scooting that much closer to be annoying. “We’ll find a show perverted enough for you, don’t worry.”

They settle on ABC’s ‘Lost.’ It’s six seasons, which is just fine with them since they hardly see anyone but each other these days. Another benefit is it involves hot people of both genders in survival scenarios that Ilya can brag about thriving in and Shane can catastrophize about living in.

When the first episode concludes, Ilya is all chatter. He talks about who he found interesting and whose scenes he micro-napped through.

Shane nods along, humming his agreement here and there, until abruptly he asks, “Have you ever had, um, trouble? On dating apps?”

Ilya shuts his mouth. He thinks very carefully about how to respond, but the truth is what it is. “No.”

“Oh.” Shane picks at the loose threads on their shared blanket. “Sorry. Nevermind.”

“Hold on.” Ilya adjusts himself so he is sitting up on the couch rather than slouched atop it like roadkill. Their bare feet are tangled up, Ilya’s ankle on top of Shane’s toes like the layers of lasagna Shane cooks for them. “Are you saying you...?”

Shane shakes his head. “It’s dumb.”

“You’re having trouble on dating apps?”

Shane nods. “Matching, I mean.”

Ilya gives Shane a once-over. He is more bedraggled than before the breakup, sure, but his eyes are as wide and open as they ever were, lips pink and freckled face in his permanent flush. Ilya doesn’t understand. “*You*,” he repeats, “are having trouble matching?”

Shane hides his mathematically perfect face in his hands. “Don’t rub it in.”

Ilya holds his hand out. “Give me your phone.”

“It’s embarrassing.”

Ilya wiggles the fingers of his outstretched hand. “Phone. Give.”

Shane finally hands it over. Ilya checks for Grindr, because he doesn't live under a rock, okay, he knows it exists, but finds only Hinge instead. It's one of those apps that requires you to share facts about yourself to complete the profile, which is why Ilya avoids it like the plague and sets up camp in Tinder's neck of the woods instead.

Ilya opens Hinge and scrolls through Shane's dating profile in mild disbelief.

"I thought really hard about my prompts," Shane says, rather miserably. His entire upper body is turned away from the phone, as if it will blow up then and there in Ilya's hands.

"Shane." Ilya orients the phone in Shane's direction. "Look at this."

"I don't need to look, I know," Shane mumbles. He explains his prompt response on the screen: *My most irrational fear*. "I didn't want to say my parents dying. I know that's not attractive. That's why I said being stranded in the airport overnight with no access to hand soap."

"No, Shane," Ilya persists. He jiggles the phone, to see if Shane will catch on on his own. When he doesn't, Ilya groans. "Shane Hollander. Are you a tree?"

Shane's eyebrows draw in. "What?"

"Are you a beach?"

Shane swallows. "No."

"Are you an ice rink?"

"Of course not. Why -"

“Then why choose these photos?” Ilya tosses the phone onto their blanket. No need for it anymore; Diagnosis reached. “You get no matches because you don’t use pictures of yourself.”

“I do,” Shane protests. “There’s the one.”

He picks up the phone himself and orients it towards Ilya. It is a mirror selfie from some hockey locker room, Shane with his outer gear peeled back and his base layers showing.

“The phone covers your face.”

“Half my face,” Shane corrects. “I thought the best way to find the right person would be to show my personality through my prompts, and pick photos meaningful to me.”

“A tree,” Ilya deadpans.

“It’s an old oak tree at my parents’ house,” Shane defends. “I practically lived under it as a kid.”

“Oh, I see.” Ilya makes an expression like everything makes sense now. “You want to attract a... how do you say? Tree-fucker.”

Shane shoves Ilya by his shoulder. Ilya cackles and shoves him back just as hard.

“Or maybe *you* are the tree-fucker,” Ilya laughs.

“Of course I’m not!”

Ilya is still laughing when he says, “At least it’s an easy fix.”

“How?”

“Is it not obvious? Replace the photos.”

Their feet are, remarkably, still entangled. It feels normal to Ilya now, like a phantom limb. “I don’t really have photos of myself,” Shane says.

“What about the ones you take at the gym? Girls love that.”

Shane shoots Ilya a look.

“Whatever, dudes too,” Ilya corrects. “It’s universal.”

“Those are my progress pictures. They’re private.”

“They are your best bet to someone else’s *privates*.”

Shane shoves Ilya again. Ilya knows he deserves it so he smiles through it like a crazy person.

“I am serious, though,” Ilya says.

Shane simply shakes his head.

“What about the ones Rose took on your birthday?”

Shane frowns. “Mike is in all of those.”

“Then use the ones she took of us.”

Shane tilts his head, considering. “I guess I could. Should that replace the tree or the beach?”

“Tree.” Ilya stands up from the couch, then, and takes Shane’s phone with him. “This one will replace the beach. Smile.”

Shane swats at Ilya’s hand. “Ha ha. Very funny.”

“I am serious. Smile.”

The camera shutters through a few photos of Shane’s surprised face, his lips parted in an O, before he recovers. “I’m not ready.”

“You look great,” Ilya replies honestly. Shane’s eyelashes are long, fluttering as he works through his various expressions of annoyance that Ilya has come to know well. “Just smile.”

Shane does. His smile is stiff, like he is held at gunpoint on his own couch, but his features make up for it tenfold.

“Now,” Ilya announces, because he is a little shit. “One with the shirt off?”

Shane’s entire face turns red, which he tries to distract from by snatching his phone back. He succeeds for a couple thrilling seconds, but Ilya wrestles it back from his grip easily. “Fuck off.”

“I am serious,” Ilya says through a smile. “Gay men are still men, hm? I know what they want.”

“Fuck you is what they want.”

“Mhm. Probably.” Ilya tugs on Shane’s shirt collar to continue the gimmick, but the material is so stretchy that in his ministrations, he reveals Shane’s collarbone and a sliver of his tanned chest, down to the pert nipple.

Ilya lets go and the wrinkled collar snaps back into place.

Shane glares at Ilya with narrowed eyes. “You almost tore this.”

Ilya finds his voice lodged somewhere deep in his body it usually does not descend to. “For a good cause.”

“What cause?”

Ilya plops back onto the couch. He arranges his limbs haphazardly under the blanket once more, his knee pressed into Shane’s thigh. “The cause of getting you laid.”

Shane kicks Ilya’s shin underneath the blanket. It actually hurts, which is unfair because Ilya never uses his full power against Shane.

Ilya says so, and Shane kicks him again, more gently this time, like a baby kangaroo testing his strength. It’s nice, Ilya thinks: being the person Shane Hollander punts around and gets bashful with. Maybe he’ll forget to update his dating profile. Well, that’s unlikely, because Shane never forgets to do anything. But perhaps he’ll second-guess Ilya’s judgment and put the tree picture back up, and all the hungry men of Montreal will continue passing him by. It’s their loss and Ilya’s gain.

Ilya has been so happy lately. He's been on assignment with Isaac and his manager Margaret, his two favorite co-workers, and when he comes home Shane emerges from his room like a mouse smelling cheese just so they can hang out. They exercise and watch TV and do the most boring shit ever and if Ilya falls asleep on their dollhouse couch, Shane wakes him up and drags him to bed.

But, if life experience has been any indication, Ilya doesn't stay happy for long.

Ilya prides himself in avoiding a breakdown on the anniversary of his mother's death, a date that has now been hellish for more years than it was innocuous.

Alexei doesn't call on the day. Ilya is relieved, because if he did, all he'd tout are those stories from his first four years before Ilya was born, when he had Mama all to himself. More favored in Alexei's arsenal are the ensuing four years, when Alexei was old enough to remember her - her youth, her smile before it dimmed - and Ilya was not. These anecdotes strike Ilya with a divinely hateful breed of jealousy he is otherwise unaffected by in other aspects of life.

This year, though, is different. Ilya goes to work, comes home, and goes to the gym with Shane with no one the wiser. He races and beats Shane in the 5K, and Shane lets him gloat for longer than usual. That night, Ilya skips dinner out of worry he'll throw it up, but the hunger pangs that seize him later on in bed suggest to him that he would not have. It's a good feeling if there ever were one.

This is all to say, when he wakes up on his mother's *birthday* some months later, he knows, like the weatherman sees tomorrow's rain in a spotless sky, that the day is fucked.

Ilya wakes up and drops himself straight to his knees in front of the toilet. He cranks the shower on to muffle the sounds and throws up what must be, by process of elimination, a frozen Costco chicken melt.

By the time Ilya has emerged from his bedroom, it must be later than usual because Shane is on a Microsoft Teams call. This one he takes from the living room because Ilya is never home for it.

“Morning,” Ilya mouths, so as not to disturb the meeting.

Shane takes one look at him and shuts his computer.

Ilya flinches, though it’s not a loud sound. Aside from sleeping in, Ilya made a point of showing zero tells that anything is amiss about himself. So he lets Shane do his thing and peers into the fridge, playing a fun game of pretending he has any appetite at all.

When Ilya shuts the fridge door, Shane is behind it. His eyebrows are furrowed as if stuck on a difficult math problem.

“Hello,” Ilya says. He even smiles.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Ilya opens the fridge again and takes out the first thing he finds, which is a carton of almond milk. “I love when meetings end early. Isn’t that great?”

“It didn’t end early. I left.”

Ilya raises an eyebrow.

“It’s an All-Hands, and no one has their cameras on anyways, so it - look. Not important. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Ilya deflects. “How is work?”

“For me, fine. But you’re late. You should have left an hour ago. And your eyes are bloodshot. Have you been crying?”

In his sleep, yes. That hardly counts, though.

“Thanks, Mom, I know I’m late,” Ilya replies dryly. He suddenly feels sick again, which is stupid. He never called his mother ‘Mom’ anyway.

Shane blinks his big eyes. “Ilya,” he says.

God, he’s like a human truth serum. Those eyes are a weapon. “It’s stupid.” Ilya takes out a glass and pours himself some almond milk for something to do with his hands. “Today is my mother’s birthday.”

“Okay.” Shane chews his lip. “Have you gotten a chance to call her?”

“She’s dead,” Ilya says. When Shane’s face drops, Ilya adds, “I set you up for that. I’m sorry.”

Ilya has heard all the replies under the sun in response to this tidbit of information. While he doesn’t particularly want to hear Shane say ‘I’m sorry for your loss,’ most notably because Shane is perfect and should never feel sorry for anything, he resigns himself to it.

Instead Shane says, “We’re going to the Adidas store.”

It tears a stilted laugh out of Ilya. “What?”

“The Adidas store,” Shane repeats. “Don’t you like it there?”

It’s hard to deny, seeing as he’s wearing one of their tracksuits now. He tries a different angle. “Are you high?”

Shane reaches out a tentative hand. When it meets Ilya’s shoulder, his entire arm erupts in warmth. “It might take your mind off of things,” Shane says quietly, as if afraid of spooking him. “And I owe you one.”

“You do *not* owe me one.”

“Then let yourself owe me one,” Shane argues.

Ilya has lost track of the logic. Instead he says, “You have work.”

“I have one meeting,” Shane replies, holding up a pointer finger, “that I’ll reschedule.”

“Okay, well, I have work.”

“Call in sick.”

Ilya chews his lip. “It’s the news. I can’t do that.”

“I thought you’re on Adriana Gentile’s show. That’s Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, right? So today is an off day.”

Ilya splutters. “I still need to be there.”

“But just to supervise,” Shane finishes. “Since it’s not your show. They have a dedicated cameraman tonight.” He squeezes Ilya’s shoulder. “Isn’t that right?”

Shane has this innocent look on his face and a knowing one underneath. He’s like a circus elephant who nails his tricks and knows a treat is coming. “Yes,” Ilya allows, though he has no memory of how Shane came across this information. “That is right.”

Shane grins triumphantly. Ilya can’t find it within himself to be irritated. If anything, something in his chest is ballooning. “So,” Shane says.

“So,” Ilya repeats.

“We’re leaving in ten minutes.”

Ilya gulps. “But is this something you *want* to do? Don’t do it just for me.”

Ilya can see the gears work in Shane’s head. His freckles have multiplied, perhaps from the summer sun. In the surgical lighting of their kitchen, he looks more like a painting than a man.

Finally, Shane settles on: “Why can’t it be both?”

Shane takes Ilya to an outdoor shopping mall he’s never been to. The street is cobblestone-lined and reminds him of Europe.

In the Adidas store, Ilya figures he should kill time, so he grabs a bundle of hoodies in the colors ‘Chalky Brown,’ ‘Wonder Sage,’ and ‘Dusky Petrol.’

“In Russia we have normal colors. Fucking English,” he tells Shane on his way to the fitting room. Shane looks up from his phone and laughs.

Ilya does not plan to seek out anyone’s advice about the hoodies. As is, he feels childish, like he’s a mental asylum patient on a state-sanctioned shopping spree. But he ends up genuinely torn between Wonder Sage and Dusky Petrol, so he tosses both aside and goes for Chalky Brown.

“Done,” Ilya says, pulling back the curtain of his fitting room once he is back in the tracksuit he owns. He’s holding all three hoodies in his arms so he can put the remaining two away. “I am going to get the brown.”

“Nice.” Shane nods in approval. “I do like the light one, though.”

That would be the Wonder Sage. “Yes, me too. But I could not decide, that or the Dusk Fucking Whatever. So brown is better.”

“Why not get all three?”

Ilya grins. “I point cameras for a living. You think I am Ilya Bezos?”

Ilya always feels a particular satisfaction when Shane laughs at one of his jokes. It makes him want to hop around like a court jester to hear that trill again. “Okay, fine,” Shane says. “But can you do me a favor? I think I left my sunglasses in the car. Can you grab them?”

“Oh. Sure.”

“Great. I’ll hold onto the hoodies for you.”

Ilya narrows his eyes. “Nope. Not happening.”

“Why?” Shane accuses.

“You do not ‘leave sunglasses.’ This is not like you.”

“Of course it is,” Shane says. He sits up from his chair, and his sunglasses choose that moment to slip from his back jeans pocket and clatter onto the floor.

Ilya chuckles.

“Look,” Shane starts.

“I know what you are up to. Don’t. You are not paying.”

“Yes, I am! It’s three hoodies, Ilya. Come on.”

“It’s not necessary,” Ilya argues.

“It’s something nice I want to do. And you spent a fortune on me.”

“It was not me, it was Ticket Fairy.”

Shane groans. “Please.”

“I can pay for myself.”

“I know you can. I don’t want you to.”

Ilya feels the need to disclose. He forces words past the lump in his throat. “It was twelve years ago.”

Shane blinks harshly. “What?”

“When she... died. I’ve had many years to get over it. So please, do not think you have to, you know.” Ilya gestures vaguely to the hoodies in his sweaty palms. “It’s not necessary.”

Shane brings a hand to his forehead, as if his head hurts. But his voice softens. “Maybe she would... want you to have them,” Shane says delicately. “Or, just, to have something nice for yourself. So, in a way, it’s like a birthday present for her.”

Ilya can picture his exact reaction if Marlow had said these words: *Enough with that philosophizing shit. Don’t quit your day job.* If Svetlana had said it, as pure as her intentions are, he might snap: *You didn’t know her.*

When it comes out of Shane’s mouth it’s like something warm settles within Ilya and builds a home there. “Maybe,” Ilya allows. “But we were never big on birthdays. And I don’t need more clothes.”

Shane grimaces. “Look. I hate to do this.”

Ilya’s eyebrows draw in. He clutches the hoodies protectively against his chest, the tags nestling into his neck. “Do what?”

“It’s either I pay you the exact market price of two seats in Section 304 of the Bell Centre, which were 318 dollars *each* last I checked ten minutes ago because I knew you’d make a big deal out of this, or -”

“Shane,” Ilya warns.

“*Or*,” Shane finishes, “you let me pay for three itty-bitty hoodies.” He grins, tentative and sly and like a puppy Ilya wants to sneak food scraps to beneath the table. “Your choice.”

“My choice,” Ilya repeats.

Shane nods primly. He looks perfectly toasted and tanned, like a marshmallow over a fire. The only way the Montreal humidity seems to affect him is to fluff his jet black hair up like Ilya aimed a leafblower at it.

“Are you always this annoying?” Ilya wagers.

Shane grins. “Are you always this stubborn?”

With a groan, Ilya unpeels the hoodies from his chest and deposits them into Shane’s awaiting hands. He accidentally lets go before Shane is fully ready, so one of them drops to the floor. It’s the Dusky Petrol. He watches Shane fumble to pick it up because Ilya’s own limbs refuse to cooperate.

“Thank you,” Shane replies behind the mound of fabric.

Ilya gulps and says nothing. He finds he can’t.

Ilya waits outside the store, too anxious to watch Shane pay. His trampled-upon brain can’t seem to find the difference between Shane taking care of him versus Shane actively planting a bomb to obliterate the Adidas store and surrounding restaurants. Ilya feels sick with anxiety, or at the very least achy all over, like he’s an accomplice to something dirty.

But when Shane emerges from the store with two big bags and his sunglasses all crooked and low on his nose, Ilya smiles despite himself.

Ilya reaches over to balance the slant of the sunglasses and pushes them to the bridge of Shane's nose.

"Thanks." Shane deposits the bags into Ilya's arms. "Don't hate me."

Ilya peers into the first bag. Sidled between the Wonder Sage and Dusky Petrol hoodies is a pair of navy blue slides with the classic Adidas stripe. "Shane."

Shane holds his newly freed hands up in mock-surrender. "It's your own fault! You're always wearing these around the house. They're like, smack-smack-smack." Shane slaps his hands together. "Against the floor. Of course I'm going to notice. And you don't have them in blue."

Ilya doesn't want to reply before he can look Shane in the eyes, so he reaches over and snatches the sunglasses he just adjusted right off Shane's face. Shane doesn't even flinch. He looks up at Ilya intently, squinting against the summer sun.

"I will wear them a lot," Ilya promises. "The shoes."

Shane's expression smooths itself out. The crease between his eyebrows becomes smile lines at the corners of his eyes instead. "Good."

"I notice things about you too," Ilya continues. They're still lingering awkwardly by the glass double doors of the Adidas entrance. Passersby part on either side of them, their bodies like a grassy median in the road. "You wear Ray-Bans," Ilya says, toying with Shane's sunglasses. "You buy Apple everything, except for your fitness watch."

"Longevity band," Shane corrects.

"Longe-whatever," Ilya allows. "And your scent is Tom Ford."

Shane blinks. It's not that he means to fan his eyelashes, but they're so long it's all Ilya sees. "Which Tom Ford?"

"Like, spicy. I don't know. Black bottle. Gold label."

Shane finally relents his heavy gaze. His eyes flicker down to Ilya's chin, or somewhere near it. "Stalker," he jokes.

"Yeah right. You forget we share a bathroom, *solnechnyy zaychik*."

"What's that one mean again?"

Ilya chews his lip. Perhaps it's better not to say. "Thank you," he says instead. "For the clothes. And, just, spending the day. You know. It means. Yeah."

God, he is about as articulate as a caveman on a conference call.

Shane bumps his shoulder with Ilya's like he understands. They begin a slow walk down the street. "Of course. Hey. Do you want lunch?"

Ilya's appetite, which has thus far done a vanishing act, returns full force. "Yeah," he says. "Italian?"

Shane nods and grins. "Italian."

Two weeks pass, during which Shane hits a new bench PR. Ilya can't even be mad about it, even though this means they now bench the same. If anything, it makes their gym trips quicker: no need to swap out the weights between turns. Though they talk so much between that it hardly makes a difference.

It's a Tuesday night and they're just finishing dinner. Ilya prepared his own meal, which is probably why it tastes like shit. He didn't cook the spaghetti long enough, so it's stiff in his mouth like a bundle of rubber bands.

Shane sits across from him at the dining table, a perfect plate of salmon and brown rice awaiting him. He gulps down his first bite. Ilya is about to ask him how it tastes, partially as a ploy to get Shane to offer him a forkful, when Shane clears his throat.

"I was thinking," Shane says. "Maybe you could give Isaac my number?"

Ilya drops his fork into his near-empty bowl with a clatter.

"Or give me his," Shane finishes. "Sorry. Whatever's easiest. Only if he's interested, of course."

Ilya takes several gulps of water. When he's done, and enough has sufficiently dripped down his chin like a toddler, he says, "Are you sure you're ready?"

Shane drums his fingers against the wood of their dining table. "As I'll ever be. I'm trying to put myself out there, like you said."

Ilya fidgets with his fork, scraping it through the sauce to make four parallel lines. "Did I say that?"

"Uh huh." Shane fixes him with a humorous look, like Ilya is messing with him. "At the Metros game."

“Right.” Ilya nods once, twice, three times. “Right.”

“You said he’s nice, didn’t you? I know you don’t... swing that way. But do you think we’d get along?”

“Yes. Oh, yes,” Ilya says, because it’s the truth.

Shane flashes Ilya a small smile. “Well, it’s only if you don’t mind.”

“No, no.” Ilya shakes his head. “Of course I don’t. I can talk to him soon.”

“Great,” Shane says.

“Tomorrow, even,” Ilya supplies. “I see him tomorrow.”

“It’s no rush,” Shane assures.

Maybe the spaghetti was more than just stiff; maybe it was expired. It sits in Ilya’s stomach like a brick.

“Did you still want to watch an episode tonight?” Shane asks, scooping some rice into his mouth. It fills his rosy cheeks like a chipmunk’s.

Ilya nods in lieu of responding. He gets up and places his bowl in the dishwasher without fully rinsing the leftover sauce out, even though he knows that’s how Shane prefers it. He is exhausted, all of a sudden.

They watch an episode, and Ilya knocks his ankle against Shane's beneath the blanket like they always do. Ilya reasons that he always has a pit in his stomach and thus tonight is nothing new.

"Can you hold this?" Ilya says to Isaac, already handing off the light before he finishes the sentence.

Isaac catches the stand, untangling the cable with one hand while removing the mic clipped to the mayoral candidate's collar with the other. Now that her interview has concluded, they can break for lunch.

In the dingy breakroom, Ilya pops another frozen meal into the microwave. Isaac squeezes past him to get to the fridge.

"Oh, fuck off," Isaac grumbles, peering into the top shelf. "Someone ate my yogurt again."

"I told you to label it," Ilya replies.

"You should've told me to poison it. I need to catch this office thief."

While Isaac continues his moaning about the stolen yogurt, Ilya's knuckles tighten against the countertop. "Um, Isaac."

Isaac turns to him, adjusting his glasses higher up his face. "Am I getting fired?"

"I don't have the power to fire you," Ilya reminds him. They have the same salary, for God's sake. "I - uh. Well. A few months ago you said dating was not going so well for you."

Isaac nods slowly, his nose twitching. “That’s true.”

The microwave beeps. Ilya makes no move to retrieve his food. In fact, he finds he is not at all hungry. “My roommate is gay, and -”

“Really?”

“What? Is that so surprising?”

“You’re just so…” Isaac gestures vaguely up and down Ilya’s body. “I didn’t expect that, is all.”

“Look.” Ilya grits his teeth. “Are you interested in my roommate?”

Isaac waits a long moment before replying. Ilya realizes only afterwards that perhaps he was meant to elaborate. “Is that all the information I’m getting?”

“You should be interested,” Ilya drones on. “He’s great.”

“Can I see a photo?”

Right. That is a normal question. Ilya fumbles with his phone and settles on the selfie of he and Shane in the stands at the Metros game, Ilya’s arm outstretched across the back of Shane’s seat.

“Here,” Ilya says.

Isaac grabs onto the phone. With his fingers, he zooms in on Shane’s face. “Wow.”

A flicker of irritation flares in Ilya's chest. He gestures for his phone back. Isaac obliges. "Wow' what?" Ilya grits.

"It's just - he's gorgeous."

Ilya brings the phone close enough to his face that Isaac can't peer over and ogle at the screen anymore. In the photo, Shane's hair is artfully windswept and a tad wavy. His grin is the kind of off-guard joyful that is rarely captured on camera, simply because he gets so shy. He had fewer freckles then than he does now, but they stand out against his wintry skin tone even starker than in the summer.

Ilya locks his phone and pockets it. He figures he gave it a shot, checked the box. Now they can move on. "Okay. Whatever," Ilya says. "Are you coming to tomorrow's shoot?"

Isaac shakes his head ferociously. "Dude -"

"You're not?"

"*Dude*," Isaac emphasizes. "I have never seen someone who looks like that, ever. In my entire life."

Ilya runs his tongue over his teeth. "Shane?" He clarifies, stupidly.

"Shane, is that his name?"

It feels like a misstep. Ilya has revealed more than strictly necessary. "Yes."

Isaac has an incredulous look on his face. "I owe you one."

Ilya bristles. “For what?”

“For - aren’t you gonna give me his number?”

Ilya takes his paper tray out of the microwave and fiddles with the peelable plastic atop it.

“Or his Instagram?” Isaac persists.

Ilya shoves the tray aside. “He does not have Instagram.”

Isaac blinks at Ilya dumbly. “Okay,” he says slowly. “Does he have, like, WhatsApp?”

Ilya shakes his head minutely.

“Or GroupMe?”

Ilya shakes his head again.

“Did I...” Isaac trails off, his face red. “Did I misread the situation? I’m sorry, if...”

Ilya wipes a tired hand down his face. “No.” He reaches into his pocket for his phone. “I’ll give you his number, yes.”

Ilya reminds himself that was the whole point. His finger hovers over Shane’s contact in his phone. About a month into them living together, Ilya deleted the “\$700/mo furnished” from Shane’s contact card, leaving it simply as “Hollander.” Then they watched the first few

episodes of Peaky Blinders together and he changed it to “Hollan-dah,” because that’s how it sounds when Ilya does his godawful British accent.

The contact photo is one Ilya snapped of Shane when he wasn’t looking. Shane is holding his freshly baked revenge apple pie between two hands sheathed in purple oven mitts, his hair pulled back and left oddly spiky by a fuzzy headband Rose bought him, grinning softly down at his own handiwork.

“Um,” Ilya says after a moment. His thumb roves over the photo, just Shane and his pie, three times before he glances up. “I am getting a call. Sorry.”

Ilya does what is perhaps the worst thing he has ever done in his adult life, which is bring the phone to his ear and pretend Shane is on the other end of the line.

He motions to the phone and Isaac gives him a weak thumbs-up. Ilya exits the breakroom, pretends to greet Shane because some co-workers are passing by and he has his phone to his ear, and paces the length of the hall for a few minutes until he wagers enough time has passed.

He finds Isaac back in the breakroom with a mouthful of sandwich.

What the fuck are you doing, Ilya thinks to himself. *What the fuck are you doing.*

“It’s my fault,” Ilya says.

Isaac sets his sandwich down delicately. “What is?”

“I thought it was not serious.” Ilya reaches blindly for the words. “Shane is seeing someone new. He just told me now. I am sorry.”

“Oh.” Isaac, for his part, takes it in a relative stride. He offers Ilya a small smile. “That’s okay, Ilya. You couldn’t have known.”

Ilya nods. His heart thumps incessantly against his chest.

“That sucks, ‘cause I was pretty excited. But, you know. It happens. Maybe we wouldn’t even have gotten along.”

“You would have,” Ilya insists, and the worst part is he knows it’s the truth.

Back home, Ilya deposits his laptop bag unceremoniously on the couch, alongside any hopes that he is an amendable person. Hearing Ilya’s shuffling, Shane emerges from his room in gym shorts and a muscle tee.

“How was work, Cronkite?” Shane asks. He has already begun his stretches, wide lunges across their living room. It must be a combination of the limited space and his long legs that forces him to change direction after each one.

Ilya pictures ripping off a bandaid. If he is going to be a piece of shit, he should be an efficient one. “Good, fine. Bad news about Isaac, though.”

Shane wobbles in his lunge. “Oh no. Is he alright?”

“Yes,” Ilya insists. His voice comes out thick, clogged as a storm drain. “It is just, he is seeing someone.”

Shane gets his feet back under him. “Oh.” He grips Ilya’s shoulder with his left hand, using it like a balance beam as he stretches his right hamstring. He huffs, a self-deprecating one. “That sucks. At least I tried, right?”

Ilya layers his hand atop Shane’s in what he hopes is a comforting gesture. He lets go earlier than he wants to, because he considers he doesn’t deserve it. “I am sorry,” Ilya says, meaning it in more ways than one.

Shane shakes his head. Tufts of black hair droop close to his eyeline. “You couldn’t have known.”

Ilya winces despite himself.

“No rush, but do you think you’ll be ready to go soon?”

“Oh, uh. I’m not feeling it tonight.” Ilya feels vaguely sick as he says it. “I am sorry. I know you waited for me.”

“It’s okay,” Shane assures. He flashes Ilya a smile. “Everyone there’s so nice. I’m sure I can find someone to spot me.”

That causes the same beast to flare in Ilya’s chest as the one from Isaac’s breathless exhalation of ‘Wow.’ He pictures the jacked-up beefcakes, eyes glazed over from all the steroids, peering down at Shane’s athletic frame spread across the bench. He imagines them watching Shane’s bare arms beneath the barbells, and the delicate veins in them pop, as they weigh whether they need to step in.

“Don’t lift,” Ilya says before he can stop himself. “We have done weights all week. Take a break. Do cardio instead.”

Shane nudges Ilya affectionately with his elbow. “You just want me weaker than you.”

Ilya finds it within himself to smirk. “You are already weaker than me.”

Shane rolls his eyes. “Fine. Mister controlling. I’ll do cardio.”

Ilya feels his stomach twist. “I’m not controlling.”

“I know.” Shane’s eyes flicker over Ilya’s face, assessing. “I was joking.”

“Right,” Ilya nods. “Yes. Right.”

When Shane leaves, Ilya spends forty minutes in the shower, oscillating the water between scalding hot and icy cold. He wonders if Isaac and Shane would have hit it off. Would they have dated? Became boyfriends? Husbands, even?

He’s spiraling, he realizes, but the thought of them two together strikes Ilya as something dirty, like a stranger’s gum on his shoe. He pictures Isaac stroking Shane’s cheek or picking up their shared bill, and there is no word to describe the taste it leaves in his mouth except disgusting.

Disgusting. And these are two people he considers friends, for God’s sake. Ilya has never been one to be squeamish. He switches the water off and stands there for minutes, shivering, a poor excuse for punishment.

When he towels himself off, he gets water droplets all over his phone screen typing into the Search bar: *is destroying the seed same as killing the plant.*

When Shane returns, though, Ilya puts on a brave face, because he figures it's over, and that his toying with fate today is something he can atone for and pray about and distract himself from in about twenty minutes when he and Shane are tangled up underneath the blanket watching their favorite show.

Shane comes in sweaty and grinning ear-to-ear.

"The craziest thing," Shane huffs, toeing off his Reeboks. "You remember the guy who works the front desk?"

Ilya scrunches his wet hair by handfuls. Water drips between his fingers. "The one with the long hair?" Ilya makes a frantic gesture towards his own curls. "Except on sides?"

"The one with the mullet, yeah," Shane agrees. His tone holds no judgment about Ilya not knowing the word. "My treadmill broke while I was on it, so I went to tell the staff. You know how they put up those caution signs? Yeah, for that. The guy said that can actually be quite dangerous, because I was sprinting, and that I reacted well, all things considered."

Ilya waits patiently for the point.

"I figured I had said my piece. So I turned to leave, but he caught my arm. And, basically," Shane says, rubbing his forehead with his forefinger, "I now have plans this Saturday."

Ilya blinks. Once, twice, then three times, as if following along to an invisible metronome. "As friends?"

Shane's face goes red. "Maybe," he allows. "Jack - that's his name - he said this isn't the first time he's noticed me. And that..." Shane chuckles. "This is embarrassing."

It dawns on Ilya that the conversation has taken a turn, a roller-coaster he can't yank himself off of. He imagines that burly employee's mustache scraping along Shane's Cupid's bow; his

tattoo sleeve around Shane's waist. Isaac in comparison seems as threatening as a caterpillar. Ilya's stomach seizes. "You don't have to say."

"Just that he always thought I was attractive. Yeah. That's the gist." Shane grins sheepishly. "Maybe this is more of a Rose conversation."

Distantly, Ilya remarks, "Yeah."

Shane's smile dims. "Okay. Sorry."

"No, no." Ilya attempts a show of enthusiasm, but the smile feels stiff even to his own muscles, so he can't imagine how it must appear. "The *one* time I don't go with you to the gym, huh?"

Shane, bless him, doesn't seem to notice Ilya's expression. He smiles wistfully. "Funny, right?"

Ilya nods along until his neck pulses in pain. Yup, yup, yup. Funny.

Chapter End Notes

Me trying to engagement bait: Guys exit the tab if you're team Jack and comment if you're Team Ilya 🥰

LMAO but in all semi-seriousness, what do you think is going on in Shane and Ilya's minds?

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I love how these chapter lengths are sooo vibes-based bc tell me why the last one was 6k and this is 10k... mind you I pre-wrote this story.

I'm also OBSESSED with all the various ways you guys have found this work - Twitter, Reddit, etc. Thank you so much for reading and recommending this to others.

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

When Saturday rolls around, Ilya does not see Shane off for his date. He has no idea what Shane is wearing, or how many spritz of Tom Ford he placed along his neck, or whether he added the extra spray along his collarbone like he sometimes does when wearing low-cut shirts.

Ilya doesn't know any of this because he scheduled his own date, which began an hour earlier.

"I love Happy Hour," says Nancy, who has been doing all the talking. It is working for Ilya thus far, because he is not in the mood to speak.

They've finished up their drinks and split a variety of chips and dips between them. The restaurant-grade guacamole tastes good, though not as good as the one he and Shane made a few weeks ago. Their secret ingredient was roasted garlic. Ilya ate an entire clove and huffed his breath in Shane's face like an unhygienic dragon, just so Shane would smack him or kick at his legs or bump him with his sturdy shoulder. He likes when they roughhouse, like two foxes tumbling in an underbrush.

"So," Nancy continues. "Do you live around here?"

"Yes," Ilya says. The *but* is almost fully formed: *Yes but my roommate is on a date and on the off chance they come back to our apartment, I would treat the place as the site of a chemical explosion and would not be caught dead nearby.* "Do you?"

“Oh yeah, like four blocks away.” She rolls the plastic straw from her cocktail between her thumb and forefinger. “You could come over, if you want. Meet the dog I was telling you about.”

Ilya does not remember hearing about a dog, which is probably reason number one thousand why he is a horrible person. “That would be great.” Delicately, he adds, “I do want to say, I am not looking for something very serious. Just, where I am at right now. My job is very... it’s hard to find time.”

It’s a partial truth; the only person he has time to see outside of work is Shane.

When Nancy doesn’t reply, Ilya tacks on, “Sorry. I hope that is fine.”

She smiles. “Yes, just fine. You’re very attractive, but -”

“Oh, thank you.”

“You’re very attractive, but you don’t seem very interested.”

Ilya balks. “No, I am. You are fun to be around. I am interested. You are -”

“I said interest-*ing*,” she clarifies. “Or maybe it’s that you seem guarded. Sorry, is that rude?”

Ilya blinks, considering the full sentence. *You don’t seem very interesting*. The waiter comes with the check and Ilya wordlessly hands over his credit card. “No. Not if that is your opinion. Can I do anything?”

She takes a final sip of her drink. “To be more interesting, you mean?”

Ilya nods.

“Aw. No, don’t worry about it. Men don’t have to be interesting to get the girl. I’m just a very perceptive one.”

Ilya licks his lips, which have begun to prune from the dryness in the air. “I am Russian,” he settles on. This seems to be the aspect most interesting to Canadian girls.

“Yeah, I assumed so.”

Tough crowd, Ilya thinks. He comes up with a few more off the top of his head, the kind of stuff only his mother or Shane might know about him: *I can ride a bike backwards. I like tofu if it’s crispy on the sides. I love to dance and don’t mind being the first, or only, person on the dance floor. My least favorite English word is “the,” and if you spoke Russian you’d hate it too. No one in my family speaks softly. So I like soft voices.*

He settles on: “I work in news.”

Nancy uncaps a wand of lip oil and drags it over her bottom lip. She is beautiful, in a straightforward, geometric way. Her face has perfect symmetry. “You don’t have to prove anything to me. You had the whole date to talk and you didn’t.”

Ilya winces.

“I really don’t mean anything bad by it,” she adds, hurriedly. “I mean, obviously. Because I want to go back with you.”

Ilya checks the time on his watch. Shane’s dinner is likely still underway. “Yes. Should we do that, then?”

They do. Ilya meets the dog, whose hair is curly like his, though his coat is inky black. Nancy kicks him out of her bedroom. Ilya mourns his absence for five seconds before he gathers himself and begins the familiar ritual: grabbing onto her chin, leaning down, and kissing.

Ilya comes home past ten and Shane isn't back yet.

He sits still on the couch for all of ten seconds. Then he brings the phone to his ear and dials Shane's number.

"Hi, this is Shane Hollander. I can't make it to the phone right now. Please leave a -"

Ilya hangs up. He shoots off a text to Shane.

Ilya

Butt dial. Sorry

Shane replies quickly.

Hollan-dah

No worries. I'm on my way home now.

Ilya

Texting while driving causes 25% of car accidents

Hollan-dah

Very true. I'll come back in one piece though, promise. Jack is driving.

Ilya

Nice car?

Hollan-dah

Pretty nice, yeah.

Ilya

On Planet Fitness salary?

Hollan-dah



Ilya

Kidding!

Hollan-dah

It has CarPlay. He's letting me pick the songs.

Ilya

White noise, I assume

Hollan-dah

Ha ha. Nope, I'm playing some songs you introduced to me actually.

Ilya

Skryptonite??

Hollan-dah

No, Bad Bunny.

Ilya

Did he pay for ur meal?

Shane doesn't respond for a few minutes.

Ilya

If you ordered some weird sad spinach thing I will laugh so hard

Hollan-dah

I ordered a very normal and happy salad, thank you very much. I paid this time.

Ilya

??

Ilya

But he asked you out, no?

Hollan-dah

*It's different with 2 guys, I don't know. I should probably stop texting now in case it's rude.
We will be there in 5. Both of us, if that's okay?*

Ilya's stomach swoops. It's like someone struck a match under his skin. He is irritated at Shane, he realizes. He just wants to go to bed. Now there will be a man who he's never met spreading his grime in their bathroom and on their couch.

And maybe in Shane's bed, but Ilya doesn't let his mind get that far.

Ilya

Fine

Shane enters the apartment winded, which Ilya finds odd since there are only two flights of stairs.

"Hi," Shane greets him, his voice soft and warm. He's in a navy button-up, wrinkled by the collar, where the top two buttons lay flayed out to expose the ripe skin of his collarbone.

Jack waltzes in behind Shane. "Hey man! I see you two all the time at the PF."

PF. What kind of douche calls it The PF? "Yes," Ilya says stiffly. "How much do you bench?"

Shane smiles at that. "You don't have to answer," Shane tells Jack, with a featherlight touch to his tattooed wrist. Ilya's eyes narrow to that point and don't waver until Shane is right in front of him. "How did your date go?"

Ilya gulps. How it went was, Ilya had sex with her but has about a five minute chunk of memory missing. He Googled it and it said something about 'dissociation.' He chalks it up to his mind being elsewhere, which used to happen a lot when he was younger anyway, and she didn't seem to notice because she asked to do it again sometime.

What he says is, "Good."

“This place is nice,” Jack says. He walks closer to the couch and Ilya thinks he’d rather swallow all the cushions whole than have this guy sit down on them. “The walls are beige. Interesting.”

Shane nods. “It came like that.”

Jack rests an unassuming hand on the small of Shane’s back. “Is it the same in the bedrooms?”

Some small part of Ilya’s soul shrivels up and dies. *Don’t*, Ilya wants to say. *Don’t fall for that. He hasn’t said anything about the paintings you chose or the drapes by the windowsill that match your eyes. He doesn’t know you.*

“Yeah, I mean, I can show you,” Shane tells him.

“Walls in the lobby are a different color,” Ilya chimes in dryly. “If you like paint so much, you should leave. Check them out.”

Shane chuckles. “He’s joking.”

“I’m starting to see that,” Jack says, grinning. His thick arm, which defies human biology by maintaining the same circumference all the way down like a sausage, snakes its way around Shane’s hip. “You his guard dog, or something?”

Ilya stands up from the couch. “Or something.”

“O-kay.” Shane laughs stiltedly and side-steps out of Jack’s hold to place a delicate, friendly hand on Ilya’s shoulder. With a flicker of his fingertips, giving the smallest of waves, Shane whispers, “Good night, Ilya.”

The pair disappear down the hallway. So too do Ilya's hopes of sleeping well tonight.

Unless Shane is giving Jack the live user guide to their new LG washing machine, like he did for Ilya the first month he moved in, they are going to Shane's bedroom.

There is so much rage in Ilya's body, down to the pads of his fingers, that he is sure he could clap and start a fire.

He can't label this feeling, so instead he tucks the blue blanket tight around his legs and turns the TV on. Out of pure spite, he debates watching the next episode of "Lost" without Shane. But that would really only punish himself. Shane is remarkably self-sufficient and independent; whereas if Ilya is left alone for more than a day, his mind descends to a place too humiliating to say aloud. Sometimes Svetlana can tell when he gets there by the way his voice cracks over the phone.

Ilya switches to a beach volleyball game instead. He scrolls on his phone while it plays in the background. Abruptly, he thinks: *Do I see something about this Jack that Shane cannot?* Some people say dogs and babies can read a person's true intentions. Can Ilya read Jack's? Is that why he feels some preternatural urge to separate Shane from him like meat slides off the bone?

Fuck. He shuts the TV off. After an elaborate nighttime routine that Ilya is sure buys him enough time for Jack to finish whatever he came over to start, Ilya crawls into bed starfished over the covers.

A sound pierces through their shared wall and dashes Ilya's hopes. Fitting itself between Ilya and the darkness of his bedroom comes a choked off, breathy croon, deep as the Caspian Sea and sweet as sugar.

The noise bypasses Ilya's brain and shoots straight to his cock.

Ilya clamps one hand over his own mouth and the other, almost absentmindedly, over his crotch.

That was Shane, his mind supplies. That was Shane's voice, the same one that asks him about his day and what he's having for dinner and what winters in Russia felt like and *do you miss them*.

Another moan rings out, deeper still. Ilya's hand rises over his groin without him moving it, the rush of blood filling out his skin like water poured into a vase. At the same time, Ilya sits up, breathing hard. This is an invasion of privacy. Shane wouldn't want him to hear. Whatever dysfunction his body is experiencing now, it will pass. It will pass.

He hears another voice, that tattooed motherfucker, but his words are hard to make out. They make something hard and brittle crystallize in Ilya's bones, and he feels disgusted at the man, but also at himself for thinking it. Instead of touching himself, Ilya thinks he might cry. Or do both at the same time.

Instead Ilya leaves his bedroom entirely, shoves his new Adidas slides on, and paces up and down the two staircases separating their unit from the lobby.

So. The reality is that Shane sounds like a girl when he moans. Well, not really, because the moan was deep and guttural and manly, but Ilya must have mistook Shane for a girl, because his body had a perfectly natural reaction. Shane doesn't *look* like a girl, what with the cut of his jaw and skew of his shoulders. Perhaps his waist could be mistaken for a girl's, but that's about it. Ilya thinks he could wrap two hands around it and have the middle fingers touch. That wouldn't work with just anyone's hands, but his own are big enough that it just might.

He paces up and down the stairs until he's dizzy, then paces through that feeling until he becomes nauseous, and only then once the building slides in his vision does he take a seat on the top ledge.

He hears, distantly, a door open and close. There are footsteps Ilya doesn't bother checking for, his chin resting neatly atop his tucked-in knees.

“Scuse me,” comes a deep voice, awkward and chuckling.

Ilya lifts his chin up and meets a pair of eyes. “Oh.” This seems an adequate replacement for what he wants to say, which is: *Thank God. If you had stayed the night, I would have killed myself.*

Jack clears his throat. “Did Shane kick you out?”

Ilya narrows his eyes. “Nyet. No. Seems like he kicked *you* out.”

“Jesus, dude. Chill. Did I do something to you?”

Ilya tries for a solid thirty seconds to come up with a reason. “Long day.”

“Sure. I bet mine was just as long, but, what the hell. Take it out on a complete stranger.”

Ilya scratches the back of his neck. Finally, he mutters, “Sorry.”

Ilya considers a second too late that it might be better to stand up to have this conversation, since he has a few inches on the guy. But Jack is already side-stepping past Ilya’s rung of the stairs when he replies. “You know, Shane thinks you’re the best thing since sliced bread. He talked about you a ton at dinner.”

“Did he,” Ilya says dryly. His heartbeat picks up speed.

“Yeah. All this about, ‘he’s basically the only straight guy who’s ever treated me like a person.’” Jack finger-quotes. Ilya finds it disturbing, hearing Shane’s words from another man’s mouth, like they’re a football that’s been intercepted. “Imagine how much it’d hurt him if he’s wrong about you.”

Ilya sits up, his joints cracking. “He is not wrong. And, most of all, it’s none of your fucking business.”

“If I see you again -”

“That is very big ‘if.’”

Jack scoffs. “The fact that you would even say that -”

Ilya laughs, a full-bodied, disbelieving laugh. He feels like his head is exploding.

“What the fuck is funny?”

“Look,” Ilya cuts in. “Happy you two hit it off. Go adopt a dog. Plan the wedding. The fuck do I care. Good night.”

Ilya stalks over to his front door. As his fingers grip the handle, Jack calls out: “He’s sleeping. Shane.”

Said casually, as if Ilya isn’t fucking fuming at the revelation that another man saw Shane relaxed enough to fall asleep, his pink nose burrowed into the pillow. Ilya slips inside before he can hear another word.

Shane creeps up on Ilya the next morning at breakfast. His footfalls are like a ballerina’s, utterly undetectable. “Hi there,” Shane says.

Ilya looks up from the dining table. Shane’s plaid pajamas are rumpled and his hair static like a mad man’s. Ilya pushes himself up with both hands on the wood, marches over, and flattens Shane’s hair with his own palms like staking a claim.

Shane dodges at first, laughing. Ilya gets one hand around Shane's attacking wrist as the other cords through his jet black locks. "There. Fixed."

"Did it look bad?" Shane asks, with a tilt of the head.

Ilya chews on his lip. "No. Never bad."

It's only when Shane glances down at Ilya's fingers clamped around his wrist does Ilya let go. He assumes his post behind his cereal bowl while Shane rummages through the fridge. In a soft, unassuming voice, Shane says, "You seemed crabby last night. No offense."

Ilya drags his spoon through the milk, watching as the liquid parts. "What is that? Like a crab?"

"It means 'irritated.'" Shane cracks an egg into a sizzling pan. Not once has he made Ilya feel embarrassed of his grasp of English, which is nice, because Ilya already feels embarrassed enough without goading. "Did I not give you enough notice?"

"No, no. Was not that."

"Long day at work, then?"

Ilya grunts. "No. It was fine."

"Did your date not go as planned? You didn't say much about it. Normally it's, like, nonstop."

Ilya wonders distantly if Shane means 'nonstop' in a bad way. "No, that was fine too. Well, she said I was boring, basically."

Shane scoffs. “You are the farthest thing from boring. If anything, I’m boring.”

Ilya stays quiet long enough that Shane looks up to glare at him.

“This is the part where you say, ‘No, Shane, Shane my beloved friend, you are the *opposite* of boring, you are so funny and witty and -’”

“What does that mean? Witty?”

Shane flips the egg in the pan. “It means smart. For example -” Then his warm brown eyes meet Ilya’s and find Ilya stifling a laugh. “You motherfucker,” Shane accuses, pointing the spatula at Ilya’s face. “Don’t make me define words you already know.”

“But it’s fun.”

Shane rolls his eyes. “Are you going to tell me what’s wrong or do I have to torture it out of you?”

“Torture, probably.”

“Ilya -”

“We do that already. Torture. Every time you put Metros game on.”

Shane takes the time to place his egg strategically on the most blackened side of his toast slice before he sets the spatula down, crosses his arms, and fixes Ilya with a serious look. “Ilya.”

That's Shane's tone when he means business. Ilya gulps. "I guess I was feeling... protective."

Shane brings his plate to the seat across from Ilya at the table and plops down. "Over who?"

Ilya tries very hard not to move.

"Over *me*?"

Ilya cringes. He scoops some milk into his mouth.

"Well," Shane acquiesces. "I know we're the same age, but that's your big brother instincts, I guess."

"I am younger than Alexei," Ilya says around the spoon.

Shane pauses mid-bite. "Really?"

Ilya nods. "Only four years, though."

"Oh. Wow. I mean, I don't have siblings so I guess I'm not one to judge. But I could've sworn you were older."

"You've never seen him," Ilya points out.

"Yeah, but just - the way you check in on him. I don't know. You act older."

Ilya can't quite articulate how much Shane's subtle acknowledgement means to him — how Ilya has felt the burden of Alexei's wellbeing his entire life, even across an ocean. Instead he smirks; aims for levity. "Ah. So you speak Russian now?"

Shane doesn't take the bait. "It's more about the tone you use, versus the one he uses. It's different."

The cereal hasn't yet settled in Ilya's stomach. It swirls around in there like a ladle through soup. This is an evening conversation, not a first-thing-in-the-morning Ilya-still-reeling-from-last-night conversation. Still. "Different how?"

"You adopt, almost, a motherly tone, when you're on the phone with him. Concerned, or chiding, depending on the call. Sorry if that's weird. Um, and he's more whiny."

God. Ilya could reach over the table and... do what, he's not sure. He wants to chew on Shane's shirt collar, or smell his hair before he showers, or turn his pulse into a drumbeat and dance to it. "Alexei is whiny," Ilya agrees, voice thick. Then his mind drifts and curiosity gets the best of him. "Are you going to see him again?"

"Who?"

Ilya feels another wave of disgust. He starts to wonder if it's becoming an issue beyond his own understanding. "Jack."

"I'm still debating," Shane says. "He kind of shot down all my date ideas at the end of the night. Seems like he just wants to hang out at home, which I'm not a huge fan of." Shane saws off a piece of toast with the knife. He shrugs and meets Ilya's gaze. "But I'm not opposed to, you know, giving it another go. Because - Jesus, Ilya."

Ilya pushes his bowl aside. "What?"

"Your face."

“What face?”

Shane shakes his head and laughs. “I need to take a photo. You look like you could murder someone. Seriously. Did you hate him that much?”

“I told you,” Ilya repeats, “I feel...” Well, he can’t articulate how he feels. “I did not like him.”

“Based on what?”

Ilya licks his lips. “Intuition.”

“Really,” Shane deadpans.

“I can’t help it, okay? You are one of...” *Fuck*, Ilya thinks. *Why sugarcoat it?* “You are my best friend. I want to protect you.”

Shane’s gaze softens. The fuzz of his eyebrows is tantalizing, like the fur of a sheep at a petting zoo. “I appreciate that. I do. But you have to trust me. I have pretty good judgment, where dating is concerned. I didn’t always, but that’s why I spent a lot of time working on myself. I learned.”

Ilya’s mind catches on to the phrase at the end. “What do you mean by that? You didn’t always?”

“Oh God.” Shane rubs his right eye sleepily. “It’s a long story.”

“I have time,” Ilya says.

Shane sucks in a tight breath. "Alright. The short version is, back in college, I was the only guy out on the team."

"Out," Ilya repeats, brow furrowed.

"Meaning, they all knew I was gay. If it were up to me, they would never have found out. But they all suspected, and it became increasingly harder to deny than to just admit it."

"So you admit it," Ilya concludes. "Why is that bad?"

"Not - it's not *bad*," Shane concedes. "But, um, one of my teammates was... exploring, I'd say, liking men. He came to me in private and told me he liked me. And - well, looking back, it's so embarrassing."

Shane's face has turned pink. Ilya reaches across the table to thread their fingers together. It's something Svetlana used to do to him from time to time. It's the first time Ilya's ever done it with Shane, but Shane's fingers feel warm and familiar in his hand, even as they twitch. Shane acknowledges the gesture with a small smile.

"We started dating," Shane continues. "But he had all these rules. He didn't want me to greet him in the locker room. He didn't want to be seen with me in public." Shane gulps and unlaces their fingers to scratch his nose. "And I agreed, because I thought, 'Oh. This is what love is going to look like for me.'"

"Fuck this motherfucker," Ilya hisses.

Shane chuckles. "It's fine. It's been years."

"Then what happened? You ended things?"

“I wish.” Shane winces. “One day, he showed up to practice and told the whole team he had a girlfriend. I checked my phone and he had blocked me on everything. He never actually broke up with me. I just... sort of... got the memo.”

Ilya’s stomach swoops. “What the fuck? And he got away with it?”

“Well, yeah.” Shane fiddles with his fingers. “Who could I tell?”

Ilya takes a long, deep breath. “Sorry if this comes out wrong,” he manages, “but that is supposed to make me *less* worried about you? Not more?”

Shane bites back a smile. “Okay. I see how it looks. But what I’m saying is, that whole situation prompted a lot of self-reflection. I’m not going to let someone treat me like that again.”

Ilya takes another calculated risk. He has now told Shane about his dead mother, his freeloader brother, and his sick father, all on separate occasions as if breaking up the events might make each seem less consequential. He clears his throat and mumbles: “And I thought *I* was fucked up.”

It has the desired reaction. Shane cackles and smacks Ilya’s arm across the table. “You’re a fucking asshole.”

Ilya holds his arms up in surrender, including the one now pulsing from Shane’s touch. “Kidding.”

“Well I’m not,” Shane replies victoriously, smiling. “What I mean is - are you listening?”

Ilya schools his smirk. “Yessir.”

Shane rolls his eyes. “What I mean is, while I appreciate your intuition, I have my own. And it works just fine.”

Shane’s plate is empty now. Ilya gestures towards it, and when Shane nods, Ilya clears both their dishware and begins scrubbing his bowl in the sink. “I’ll try to be nice,” Ilya says.

“Thanks.” Shane squeezes behind Ilya to grab a banana from the kitchen. His presence makes the hairs on Ilya’s neck stand. “By the way, can Rose come over tonight?”

Ilya dries the plates with a hand towel. “Of course.”

“Great. She’s a little pissed it’s been so long.”

Ilya eyes Shane from the tufts of his hair down to the innocent bend of his saliva-slick bottom lip. “Who can stay pissed at you?”

Shane’s lip stretches into a smile. “She is pissed at *you*, to be exact.”

“The fuck did I do?”

“Kidnap me, brainwash me, she has her theories. She’s just annoyed I’ve been spending all this time with you and none with her. But she’s just joking,” Shane reassures. “I think.”

Ilya squeezes his eyes shut. “*O bozhe moy.*”

When Rose enters the apartment, she gives Shane a soul-crushing hug and Ilya a warm, friendly one. Then she pulls back, fixes Ilya with an assessing look, and whispers, “Your

reign is over.”

Ilya’s eyes dart frantically between Shane and Rose. “Rose,” Shane chastises. “Don’t scare the boy.”

“What is ‘reign’? Is it raining?” Ilya asks innocently.

Rose frowns. “God, now you’re making me feel bad.”

“He knows what that word means,” Shane calls out blithely over his shoulder as he leads Rose to the couch. “He’s pretending not to.”

Ilya curses under his breath. “What happened to loyalty?”

Shane sinks into the couch cushion and sticks his tongue out at Ilya. Ilya makes a palming gesture to the air, like he’s snatching Shane’s tongue right out of his mouth, and brings it to his own lips. He makes a big show of gulping down the air and lets out a satisfied pant.

Shane giggles, at the same time as Rose puts her head in her hands. “What the fuck is going on in this house,” she mutters.

After Rose has given Ilya a proper scolding, then a weaker one to Shane because - in her words - he’s “too fucking cute to stay mad at,” she launches into her proposal.

“Next Friday, we’re going out,” Rose announces.

Shane chuckles awkwardly. “Well -”

“Ah.” Rose makes a hand gesture like she’s clamping Shane’s lips shut. “This is not a question. This is a demand. I miss you, and it kills me that the last time we had a proper night out it was with your doofus ex.”

Shane looks to Ilya, but Ilya has no rebuttals, and in fact his mind blanks completely when Shane’s eyes meet his. “Where would we even go?” Shane splutters.

Ilya’s eyes light up. “What about Champs?”

Shane and Rose turn to him and ask, in unison, “What?”

“It is a gay bar downtown,” Ilya explains. “But sports bar, also.”

Rose narrows her eyes. “You know this how?”

Ilya just smiles. “I think Shane would like it.”

Rose crosses her arms, feigning petulance. “And what am I? Chopped liver?”

“Your liver will be very busy at this Champs. Fridays are two-dollar drinks,” Ilya sing-songs.

Rose perks up. “I’m in.”

Ilya turns to Shane. He means no offense to Rose, but it’s only Shane’s buy-in that matters to Ilya. “Fine,” Shane groans.

Rose lets out what can only be described as a shriek of joy. She leans over and raises two hands; Ilya meets hers in the middle for a high-five that echoes off the walls and makes Shane giggle.

“You two are one and the same,” Shane says with a laugh.

“That’s not true,” Ilya complains.

“I’m prettier,” Rose argues.

Ilya rolls his eyes. Rose bumps Ilya with her shoulder. “I’m going to the bathroom, dweeb,” she calls out, and sashays down the hall.

Noting the empty space where Rose’s body was, Ilya scooches the tiniest bit closer to Shane and inhales. There’s that spicy honey scent he loves, with a hint of something antiseptic because Shane wiped the countertops an hour ago.

Shane leans in close, close enough that Ilya’s pulse trips over itself. “You know,” Shane whispers conspiratorially, “that’s how Rose flirts.”

Ilya blinks. “Sorry?”

“She’s flirting with you,” Shane says.

Ilya is quiet for a few moments, until he’s not. “...No.”

“She is. Give me some credit, I’ve known her for years. Her insults are banter.”

“Okay, so what?” Ilya rubs his forehead. “If she is flirting, so what?”

Shane sighs deeply. “You are one of the only men on this planet I’d let near Rose with a ten foot pole. You’re a really good person, Ilya.”

Ilya feels his throat close up. He feels quite strongly that he is the exact opposite of a really good person, the exact opposite of Shane and all the virtue that comes with him.

“I might be shooting myself in the foot here, because you’re my two closest friends, but I think you’d hit it off,” Shane continues.

Ilya feels his head nod up and down like you might feel a mosquito pierce your skin: something being done to you.

“Should I set it up? I know I’m, like, awkward, but I can be slick about it.”

Ilya takes several deep breaths.

Shane bends down, so his face fills where Ilya’s gaze has drifted. “Ilya? *Row-zanov?*” He asks, in his awful British accent.

“Sure,” Ilya settles on. He can’t live his life watching reruns of “Lost” on their couch. Or, he could, but Shane wouldn’t be there with him. Shane is moving on. “Set it up.”

Shane is just about to open his mouth to reply. Rose comes skipping in. “I love the bidet. That felt amazing. Ilya, was that your doing?”

Ilya opens his mouth and nothing comes out for a solid five seconds.

“No, actually,” Shane jumps in, shooting Ilya a wayward glance. “My mom recommended I get that one. It’s a bidet attachment. Common in Japan.”

“Right,” Rose says. “I should have known it was you. But Ilya, the 3-in-1 shampoo bottle has your name written all over it.”

This is a beautiful woman, in front of him, teasing him. She has full lips and clear skin. No freckles in sight. All of mankind could be divided into two camps: freckles or no freckles, and if there were an ironclad gate between the two Ilya thinks he could bend it from sheer force of will.

“Yes, that’s mine,” Ilya says. He excuses himself after a polite thirty more minutes of small talk.

It’s the following Tuesday and both his and Rose’s plates are cleared. It is quiet in the restaurant, eerily so.

“So,” Ilya says, attempting a smile. “Shane is great.”

“Oh, the greatest,” Rose agrees. Her hair is dangerously close to the candle wick lighting their corner booth table. Ilya should reach over and adjust it for her, but his hands stay politely interlaced in his lap. “He’s awesome, isn’t he?”

“So awesome,” Ilya replies.

“Are you excited for Champs on Friday?” Rose asks eventually, after another lull in conversation.

“Sorry,” Ilya says, and hopes she understands he’s apologizing not just for his silence at the restaurant tonight but for his existence on Earth in general. “I am. I hope we will see Shane dance.”

“My two older sisters are coming to visit me the weekend after. If it’s really that fun, we’ll have to go there, the three of us.”

Ilya nods. “Oh, you should. I hope they like it.”

The waiter comes with the check. Ilya quiets Rose’s protests and hands over his credit card.

“Is your brother going to come out here and visit you any time soon? Or you go back and visit him?”

“I think I will go back,” Ilya says.

“To Russia? When?”

When my father dies, Ilya thinks. To arrange the funeral and set up the trust for my niece and pay off Alexei’s debts with what’s left of my savings. “Just, you know. When it feels right.”

They walk outside the restaurant, a breeze biting at Ilya’s cheeks, when Rose turns to him in her pea coat and winces. “Look, Ilya.”

“I’m sorry,” Ilya repeats, uselessly.

“Don’t be,” Rose says. “I’m just not sure I felt... a spark, tonight, like I thought I might.”

Ilya grasps at straws. She does look beautiful, with the streetlights reflecting in her eyes. “Should we check?”

Rose smiles sweetly. “Test-drive?” She jokes.

“Something like that,” Ilya replies, and it’s the first time all night he has felt relatively alive and in his own body. This, he can do. “Can I kiss you?”

Rose nods. Instead of falling for any move Ilya has in his arsenal, she takes him by the scruff of his neck, tugs him down to her height, and kisses him slow.

It’s over before it starts. Her lips were warm and wet.

“What do you think?” Ilya asks.

“You’re a very good kisser,” Rose notes, which is kind of her.

Ilya aims to be playful. “What is your diagnosis, doctor?”

Rose shoots him a pitying smile. “Friends, I think. But good, real friends.”

The relief is overwhelming. So too is the sadness. “Friends,” Ilya agrees.

“I just don’t think we’re aligned,” Rose says. “I’m big on family.”

Ilya wants to say: *I’m big on family too. I just don’t have one.* Instead he nods, and he hates himself for how his voice cracks. “I understand.”

Ilya fits his key into their door with his head hung low. He finds Shane standing right in the entranceway, like a dog runs up when the doorbell rings, with his unblinking eyes and fingers that curl and uncurl into his palms.

“Hey.” Ilya keeps his tone light.

“Rose already called,” Shane says. He lifts a hand, and it seems for a moment to want to land on Ilya’s shoulder. Like a frightened bird, it drops back to his side. “Sorry it didn’t pan out.”

“It’s okay.” Ilya toes his sneakers off. “I still like her a lot.”

“She said you two kissed,” Shane mumbles, quieter this time. Ilya catches him chewing his lip, how he does at the junction when the Metros can’t turn a game around and a loss is imminent.

“Yes, but just to see.” Ilya shoulders past Shane to plop down on the couch. He pats the cushion next to him almost absentmindedly. Shane settles where Ilya indicates, resting his hands on his knobby knees. “Is okay, as I said. It was mutual.”

After a moment, Shane picks off a fleck of lint from Ilya’s shirt collar. “She also said you’re closed off.”

Ilya scoffs. “Great.”

“That you flat-out refused to talk about yourself.”

Ilya laughs. It stings, even though he knows it’s true. As embarrassed as he felt clamming up in front of Rose, he somehow never expected it to get back to Shane.

“Ilya, I’m not saying it to be mean.”

“You are not saying it to be nice,” Ilya mutters.

Shane takes a long, deep breath. Ilya’s eyes track his throat, this pale thing as delicate as a waterlily. “I was just wondering if you wanted to talk about it.”

“It?” Ilya repeats.

“Why it’s hard for you,” Shane urges. Then, as if sensing Ilya’s unease, Shane’s left hand leaves his own knee and wraps itself around Ilya’s. His touch is like a fucking horse tranquilizer. Ilya’s entire body untenses.

“It’s just how I am,” Ilya says.

“Not with me.”

“Yes.” Ilya gulps. He stares at Shane’s hand on his leg. “But it’s easier with you.”

“Why, though? I’m not so special.”

Ilya thinks: *You are a shooting star or a meteor or my national flower or the bike I had in Moscow when the cobblestone streets felt like flying.*

“Is it because it’s easier with friends?” Shane presses on. “You find it easier to open up to a friend, compared to a significant other?”

“Yeah,” Ilya remarks, distantly. “It must be that.”

Shane smiles, then, and removes his hand from Ilya's skin. "Sorry," he says, "if this is awkward. I just want you to find someone. Rose is great, but it doesn't have to be Rose."

"I want you to find someone too," Ilya says.

Shane's eyes dart over Ilya's face.

"Someone who's not this Jack."

Shane laughs. "I'm not going to see him again. He's been all over the place over text. Rose helped me decide how to end it."

"Good."

"Will you two really be fine, on Friday? No bad blood?"

Ilya nods. He is so exhausted. He needs to return Alexei's calls. He has about a million of them from last night alone. "We will be fine," Ilya assures. It's true: Rose is friendly and warm. She can diffuse any situation Ilya makes worse with his own unpleasantness. "Can we watch an episode?"

Shane considers Ilya, sizing him up. "Duh," he says. "Scoot over."

When they enter Champs on Friday night, the first thing Ilya does is block a blundering pool player from smacking Shane in the cheek with his flailing cue stick.

“Fucking watch out,” Ilya spits at the dude, this scrawny college-type. He grabs Shane by his shoulders and positions him closer to the bar.

“It’s fine,” Shane assures, offering Ilya a smile. Shane gazes up at the ceiling in wonderment, his brown eyes reflecting light back like two gemstones. There are three disco balls hooked up to the ceiling and a Pride flag hung on the far corner, behind the DJ booth.

“Busier than I expected,” Rose comments. The crowd presses into them from all sides, but it’s even more congested here by the bar.

“Do you want a drink?” Ilya asks Shane, straining to hear over the chatter. “I’ll pay.”

“Maybe later. I want to find us a pool table.” Shane pokes Ilya’s ribcage with his finger. “And stop trying to buy me things, you... zee-chick.”

“*Zaychik*, ” Ilya corrects, “and that does not mean what you think it means.”

Shane furrows his eyebrows. “Then what have you been calling me all this time?”

Rose reminds them of her presence by groaning loud enough that both their heads turn to face her in the dim light. “Great,” she mocks. “Let’s both have penises and not tell Rose.”

Shane goes red. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“This boy is, like, perpetually confused,” Rose says, placing a thoughtful hand under Shane’s chin to move his head up and down like a bobblehead. “It means I feel left out from your fucking telepathic roommate connection. Ilya,” she orders, “buy me a drink.”

“Yes ma’am,” Ilya says, and flags down the bartender.

When Ilya recovers from the sheer lack of personal space at the bar - he likens it to the cave diving videos he watches on Instagram sometimes, a surefire way to induce non-mother-related nightmares - he places a margarita in Rose's hands. "Where is Shane?" He asks.

"Off to conquer us a pool table," Rose replies. She offers Ilya her hand to help them weave through the bodies. After a moment's consideration, Ilya takes it.

When the crowd finally parts, it spits them out right in front of a scene that is nightmare fodder in its own right.

"Oh, fuck off," Rose complains. "They're robbing the cradle. Poor boy just got here."

At the sight before him, Ilya's body fills with an acute sense of being robbed. He feels around for his phone, but it's still in his front pocket. So too is his wallet.

Shane is indeed by a pool table, his hip resting up against it as if staking a claim, but a broad-shouldered redhead has joined him. When the man offers Shane a beer, Shane bows his head bashfully and accepts it.

"What happened to not wanting a drink?" Ilya mutters.

"What happened is, Shane is a polite Canadian boy who likes free stuff. You should see him at a yard sale."

"I have seen him at a yard sale," Ilya grumbles, because Shane once dragged him out to one in Westmount. Ilya left with gold rings the same shade as his mother's cross, and Shane with four Le Creuset cast-iron pots to drop off at his parent's house the next time he visited. "And," Ilya adds with irritation, "the drink would have been free for him if I bought it."

Rose rolls her eyes. "Do I have to spell it out for you? The guy is cute."

Ilya blinks a few times, as if Shane and the man were a cloak of mist he could dispel from his eyes. But they're still there when he glances again. Shane has taken a polite step backwards, fiddling with the tip of a pool cue. He's not holding eye contact with the man, instead nodding along absently.

"I'm going over there," Ilya announces.

Rose grabs his forearm. "No you're not."

Ilya shrugs out of her grip. Rose's expression flashes with surprise, then hurt. Ilya feels numb to it. "If he wants me to fuck off, he'll say so."

"Sure, but not before you scare that man off with your..." Rose gestures frantically at Ilya's face. "...Your RBF. Your Slavic stare."

Ilya doesn't bother asking her to define it. "Who cares if I scare him off? He's a dinosaur."

Rose gives the man a thorough look from across the bar. "He looks thirty, max."

"So, older than a dinosaur."

Rose scoffs. "My sister is thirty-one."

Ilya places his tongue strategically between his teeth, biting down on it until it throbs. He succeeds in that he doesn't say what he wants to, which is: *I don't give a fuck about your sister. I give a fuck that my best friend is absorbed in conversation with someone who is not me. That he's consuming a liquid I have not bought. Nodding along to something I have not said.*

"I don't know about you," Ilya huffs, rubbing his hands together like a hungry fruitfly, "but I want to play some fucking pool."

Rose opens her mouth to reply, but Ilya is already turning on his heel. He weaves through the crowd as an eel evades capture from a fishing net, side-stepping and slithering past bodies writhing in laughter and shaking with music. Shane's head of fluffy hair is the beacon of a lighthouse. Ilya's eyes never leave it.

The redhead notices Ilya first. He shoots Ilya a wayward glance. Ilya smirks, stomps over, and slings a heavy arm around Shane's shoulders with such force that Shane stumbles.

"Hey," Shane greets, righting himself.

At least Shane doesn't twist out of Ilya's arms. He stands within them, bunching up his shoulders so he fits better. His body is warm against Ilya's torso, like cookies right out of the oven.

Ilya tugs Shane closer. "Hello," he says tightly. "Who is your friend? Weasley, right?"

"I'm Andy," the man says. "I don't know what you mean by that."

Ilya grins. "Oh. Sorry. Before your time?"

"Ilya," Shane scolds, but the corner of his lip is upturned. His hot breath hits Ilya's neck like a tornado.

Ilya finally lets go of Shane long enough to clap his hands together. "Let's play some pool, no?"

Shane gulps and nods. "Yeah. Let's do it." His beer bottle is still nearly full. Ilya has the sudden idea to down what remains in one go and do a spit-take that takes out all the men in a twenty-foot radius. "Um - Andy," Shane offers. "I know you said you wanted to play, right? That's why you came over?"

Andy, for his part, seems amused by Shane's cluelessness. "Well, that's not the only reason."

Shane tilts his head, confused. Ilya grits his teeth, thinks, *fuck it*, and grabs the beer from Shane's hands. He manages to stop himself from using it as a biological weapon by spitting up, but he does chug it, holding eye contact with Andy until the last gulp.

Andy looks between the two of them, before his eyes land and hold on Ilya. Shane still seems almost laughably unaware. "Oh," Andy says, finally.

"Yeah," Ilya says.

"I don't..." Shane trails off. "Did you still want to play? We can play Cutthroat with four people. The fourth being our friend Rose. She's the stylish one chatting everyone up by the barstools."

"There are only three wooden things," Ilya points out.

"Pool cues," Shane whispers, low enough that only Ilya hears.

Ilya grins, endeared, and then fixes his gaze back onto Andy. "Yes," Ilya says. "Only three pool cues."

The entirety of Ilya's ROYGBIV or Slavic whatever-Rose-called-it fixates on Andy like a bug to be squashed.

"I... you know what, it's fine." Andy scratches the back of his (wrinkled, Ilya thinks) neck. "I should go check on my friends."

"Oh, alright," Shane accepts. "It was nice meeting you."

“So nice,” Ilya echoes. After Andy walks away, Ilya shudders into Shane’s ear. “What is this place? Geriatrics unit?”

Shane laughs sweetly. “First off, he was not that old. Second, how can you know ‘geriatrics’ but not ‘pool cue’?”

Ilya neglects to point out the reason why he knows this word, and others: *Dementia. Delirium. Palliative care. Hospice. Assisted living.* And, Ilya’s personal hell, since this word sucks the lifeblood from his biweekly paycheck: *Ancillary charges.*

Shane knows the gist of Ilya’s father’s care. No one should be burdened by the gory details.

Instead Ilya uses the pads of his fingers to reorganize Shane’s choppy little bangs on his forehead, his own form of Jenga. Once they’re arranged how Ilya likes them, all fluffy and ruffled, he grins. “You ever want a man to leave you alone,” Ilya murmurs, “just say.”

Shane gulps. “Sure. But he was just being friendly.”

A worse version of Ilya might have laughed in Shane’s face. Does he walk around the world thinking everyone who ogles him is just a friendly person?

But Shane looks so incredibly earnest under the red-tinted lights, with his big eyes and sun-soaked freckles, that Ilya can’t even bring himself to poke fun at Shane’s utter oblivion. He aims to be instructional.

“You know,” Ilya says, “just because your dating profile is a picture of a tree does not mean you look like one.”

Shane blinks. “I look like a tree?”

Ilya groans. “Hollan-*dah*.” There’s his British accent again. “You don’t get it.”

“What don’t I get?”

Many things. Many, many things. Rose approaches them and wraps Shane in a hug from the back and makes them all forget about it, Ilya included. They play three rounds of Cutthroat, though Rose sits out on the third to gossip with the bartender.

Ilya spends a second too long watching Shane bent over the pool table, his cotton tee riding up past his hips and settling at the lowest knob of his spine. His pink tongue pokes out in concentration as he angles the pool stick. The ball ricochets into the cubby closest to Ilya, and Shane grins, straightening up. “How’s it feel to lose, Rozanov?”

Ilya’s mouth feels dry. “Not bad,” he answers, honestly. “Not bad.”

Ilya excuses himself to use the restroom. He fluffs up his hair in the bathroom mirror, using the sink water to tame the frizz. He stops by the bar and orders two more beers. He thinks that if Shane doesn’t want one he’ll down both himself.

Ilya turns back to the pool table and finds it completely overtaken by a new group, six giggling women in tight skirts. Ilya frowns. He squeezes past a surly looking couple to find Rose chatting up the bartender. “Where is Shane?”

As if Ilya doesn’t deserve even the decency of a reply, Rose simply points across the room. A different man, this one younger and donning a flannel, has his fingers curled around the edge of Shane’s jean jacket. Shane leans in, presumably to hear better what the man across from him is saying. The man cups a hand around Shane’s pinked-up ear.

Ilya grits his teeth. “I don’t like this place.”

Rose finally acknowledges him again, this time with a roll of her eyes. “Too bad, Ilya. Think about it. How you’re feeling right now is how gay guys feel all the time at any other club. This feeling of, ‘There’s no one here for me.’”

Ilya, oddly, doesn't feel that way at all. *There's no one here for me.* It doesn't sit right in his chest.

The man finally takes his hand off Shane's jacket, but only to free up his fingers to trace idly, almost unconsciously, over Shane's waist.

Ilya chugs the first beer. A swallow of it comes up, and he forces that back down too, the bile swirling down the drain of his body and pooling in his stomach. He chugs the second, wipes his nose with his thumb, and marches over.

"Shane," Ilya says. His voice comes out so stern that Shane jumps. The stranger's hand leaves his waist. "I want to leave."

Shane blinks. "Oh. Right now?"

"Yes," Ilya hisses. "Right now."

"Hello," the man says.

Shane gives Ilya a friendly pat on the shoulder. "Sorry. Um, this is my roommate, Ilya."

"Nice to meet you. My name is -"

Ilya ignores him. "Are you coming with me or not?"

It's only because Ilya knows him so well that he notices Shane's breathing pick up. His chocolate eyes get bigger, if even possible. "Well." Shane's eyes flicker between Ilya and the mystery man. Ilya is tipsy enough that he struggles to follow the movement. "Could you wait, maybe, twenty minutes?"

Ilya feels like laughing. Very hard, until his stomach clenches and he throws up or dissolves into fizz and melts through the sewer grates. “No.”

Shane frowns. “Ten?”

Ilya scrubs his face with the heel of his palm. “Okay.”

He leaves the bar entirely, walks to the corner store, and buys a pack of Marlboros. He pulls a lighter from his pocket and brings the cigarette to his lips. The smoke curdles all the way down, settling into his bones. In the intersection bordering the bar, a car blows past a red light.

Ilya’s hands shake as he pulls out his phone. He doesn’t think. He just dials.

“Hello, sweet boy. Need I remind you it’s the crack of fucking dawn over here? Ever heard of a time difference?”

Svetlana’s croaky voice is soothing, even in its irritation. Ilya has long associated speaking in Russian with being berated, ever since he was young, but when Svetlana does it somehow it makes him feel cared for. “I have a problem.”

“Uh oh. I’m all ears. By the way, Alexei’s taken to texting me so you’ll pick up the phone. Ilya, he’s a pain in the ass.”

“I have been picking up the phone,” Ilya defends. “I just sent him rent money last night.”

Svetlana groans. *“You know he has a job, right? One that pays better than yours?”*

“Thanks,” Ilya snarks.

Svetlana's tone grows serious. *"You can't keep doing this. It's a problem."*

"I have a different problem." Ilya takes another drag. "It's my roommate."

"Hollander, right?"

Ilya hums.

"Well. You can't possibly have fucked him, and I know that's your preferred method of ruining good things in your life. So what could it be?"

Ilya rolls his eyes, though she can't see him. Across the street, a man screams out of his car window. "Something else."

"Wait. Did you fuck his girlfriend?"

Ilya scoffs. "What kind of person do you think I am?"

"I love you, so I won't say."

Ilya winces. He inhales sharply, then coughs. He might be drunker than he thought. "He has no girlfriend. He is gay."

All Ilya hears is Svetlana's quiet breathing. *"Then what is this problem?"*

Ilya pictures a stranger's hands in Shane's jacket. On the small of Shane's back. The windchimes of his laughter. "When I see him with men, I freak out."

“Freak out?”

“I get angry.”

Svetlana audibly gulps. *“Angry.”*

“I feel like - like -” Ilya flicks the glowing tip of the cigarette, scattering ash to the ground. He locates a brittle clump by his shoe and crushes it under his heel. “Okay, so tonight I am at this bar with him. Every man who comes near, I want to fucking kill. If I sense even any inkling of... of... that they want him, I feel sick. And, Sveta, it is actual sickness, like the summer we all had rotavirus as kids. I almost threw up.”

“You almost threw up,” Svetlana repeats.

“That is what I said. When I see men with him, it disgusts me.”

Svetlana laughs, then. *“Ilya.”*

“Yes?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

Her voice doesn’t sound right. “Of course I’m not kidding. Can you help?”

“Can I help? Can I help?”

“Yes, that’s why I called!”

Svetlana continues laughing, and this time Ilya recognizes the cruelty within it. *“You’re bigoted.”*

Ilya tosses the cigarette to the ground, and fumbles with the flimsy pack to pull out a second. “What?”

“You’re homophobic. Fuck you.”

“Fuck me? What the hell are you talking about?”

“It’s either that or you’re jealous. Are you jealous?”

“Of course not.” Ilya scratches his nose. “Of course not.”

“O-kay,” Svetlana drawls. “Then what am I missing? Did you not just say that seeing your gay roommate with other men disgusts you? Makes you sick with anger?”

Ilya delays the first drag of his second cigarette long enough to defend himself. “No, you don’t understand. We are friends. He is my best friend here in Canada.”

“Oh,” Svetlana deadpans. “Because you have so many friends in Canada.”

Ilya’s fingers begin to tremble again. “You know what? I shouldn’t have called.”

“Tell me what I’m not understanding. Your father is a homophobe. Your brother too. Don’t you think it’s possible some of this tracks down to you?”

“No,” Ilya protests, his voice rushed. “He is my friend. He had a boyfriend when we met, for God’s sake. I was fine with it.”

“‘Was’?”

“‘Am,’ fuck, I don’t know!”

Svetlana speaks slowly. *“Have you met this boyfriend?”*

“Yes.” Ilya takes a long drag and coughs again. His chest hurts. “Once.”

“Once.”

“They were long distance. What was I supposed to do?”

“What I’m hearing is, you are okay with this boy being gay from a distance. As long as you don’t have to see it, you are fine. The second you do, it disgusts you. Do you see how that sounds?”

“You’re not listening to me. Sveta. Come on.”

“The problem is I am listening. And, beyond that, I’m offended. You know I like women too. I never thought it’d be a problem for you.”

Ilya throws his arms up, exasperated. A group of passersby move to the edge of the sidewalk to avoid him. “It’s not a problem!”

“So it’s a masculinity thing?”

“It’s not an anything-thing. I fucking - I helped him fix up his dating profile. An ex treated him horribly, and I would do anything to - to fucking jump the guy or smack him around. Do you hear me? Hear what I’m saying?”

Svetlana sighs. She sounds so weary, like Alexei does when Ilya calls, and Ilya wonders if this is a talent of his: draining the life from people. *“What I hear is you are okay with him being gay in concept. But in practice? Not so much.”*

Ilya squeezes his eyes shut. He thinks he feels them wettening, these treacherous globes jutting out from his face. All the worst scenes he has ever seen with them flash before his eyes: his mother sprawled on the box spring, his father with the newspaper bundle wielded as a bat, the goodbye hug to Sveta when she left for Moscow without a return date in sight.

Svetlana takes his silence as understanding. *“Prejudice is a spectrum. Just because you are not throwing around slurs like Alexei does not mean you are in the clear.”*

“That’s not what it is,” Ilya whispers. “I am sure of it. I like him.”

“You must like all the pieces to like the whole.”

“Stop fucking - you’re talking in riddles.”

“Don’t you curse at me. You brought it up.”

“Right.” Ilya flexes his jaw. He grits his teeth so hard he tastes blood. “And I see now I should not have.”

“Do some research,” Svetlana insists.

“Goodbye,” Ilya says into the phone.

Sveta drones on. *“If you really want to change, then educate yourself. I’m saying it because I care. Ilya -”*

The dial sound rings out. It takes Ilya a moment to step back into his body and realize he is the one who hung up.

Ilya grinds the cigarette out under his thumb and tucks the stub away into his coat pocket to dispose of back in the bar.

With his phone, he types into the search bar: *homophobia*. He scrolls frantically through the results before tapping the search bar and editing his query. It becomes: *late-onset homophobia*.

“Late-onset,” funnily enough, is one of many buzzwords Ilya learned via his father’s care.

Ilya takes one scroll through the results: Reddit, mainly, and a few academic articles on ScienceDirect. A bubble of laughter, harsh and jagged, rips its way through his throat. He locks his phone and storms back inside.

The music has only gotten louder and the crowd more boisterous. There is no room to play pool anymore; bodies flank all sides of the billiards tables like an army preparing for siege.

Ilya locates Shane again with some difficulty. He is conversing with the same man as before, and smiling shyly as he does so.

Ilya feels badly interrupting, but not badly enough to do anything else. “I am leaving.”

Shane turns to him and jolts, again. Ilya wants to scream. Is he a scary person?

“Alright,” Shane says, after a moment. “I might stay a while longer, I think. I’m sorry. But you don’t have to wait up.”

Ilya’s nostrils flare. “Fine.”

Shane gulps, his eyes searching. “I can check if Rose is leaving anytime soon. Maybe you two could travel back together.”

“Nope,” Ilya says coolly. “No need.”

Shane’s pearly front teeth set to chewing on his bottom lip. He pulls Ilya aside, and closer. “Are you mad at me?”

“No.”

His eyes set on Ilya again like an equation to be solved. “You say you’re not mad but your face says you are.”

“Shane, I am not mad.”

“Then why -”

“We both know you are not the best at reading people,” Ilya jeers, “so just take my word for it. Hm?”

Shane takes a step back. His shoulderblades collide with the person behind him, a stubby man in a ball cap. The crease between his eyebrows looks like it hurts to maintain. “That was rude.”

Shane's voice comes out smaller than he intends, Ilya can tell. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, I'm not the best at reading people," Shane admits. He frowns and blinks hard. "But I can always read you."

"I'm sorry," Ilya repeats.

Shane stares down at the scuffed hardwood. "It's okay."

Ilya's not sure if it is.

"I'll see you at home," Shane says.

Ilya wants to wrap Shane in a hug. He thinks about the hair-raising one they shared when he found Shane sobbing on their couch. Shane had buried his nose in Ilya's neck. His skin gave for Shane, arranged itself to make room. His nose felt soft and slimy and like a shoe that fit.

Instead of a hug, Ilya tips his head in Shane's general direction and walks away. On the train home, he nods off and misses their stop. He thinks about texting Shane how stupid he is but thinks better of it; he waits thirty minutes for the next train going South and boards the first empty car he finds.

In bed, Ilya hears the front door open again hardly forty minutes after he arrived, with no voices to accompany the sound; he can't help thinking all his fuss was for naught. Ilya knew he wouldn't be able to sleep until Shane came home from the bar, alone. What he doesn't expect is that he still can't sleep for hours afterwards.

Chapter End Notes

Please comment and share your thoughts. What was your buzziest moment and, conversely, the moment you most wanted to lovingly shake poor Ilya or poor Shane by the shoulders?

One chapter left... haha... what could possibly happen... haha.. probably more of the same right... Right??

As Sabrina Carpenter once said: I can do a lot with fifteen minutes (AKA 13,000 words which is the length of chapter 4), lot of pretty boys, lot of funny business!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Three weeks pass in relative peace. They watch ten more episodes on the nights Ilya doesn't work the evening show. Rose comes over and complains about boys she's been texting. Ilya nods when appropriate and waits for Shane to offer his advice, since the one time he offered some of his own ("learn how to fuck without feelings"), he was booed out of the conversation.

It is late on a Friday and Shane isn't home. He is out on a date, some friend of a friend of Rose's. She met this man at a cooking class, apparently, and liked him enough to ship him and Shane off to some fancy wine bar.

Ilya is nursing a bottle of Absolut Vodka on the couch, cradling it in his lap like a baby. Tonight he didn't bother with the perfunctory phone call to Alexei to check in. He just wired him the money. Ilya still has the gall to write "medication" under the transaction description, though he's eighty-percent sure that wiring it straight up his brother's nose would be more efficient. Alexei replied like he always does, curt and without feeling: *Received*.

When the door creaks open, two bodies pour in. Shane walks in first, but he's trailed by a tall, meek-looking man with glasses and a mossy fringe.

Ilya pushes himself up from his slouch on the couch so he's sitting up. He hides the vodka bottle from view, setting it by his feet, which are clad in the Adidas slides Shane bought for him. He burps and only covers his mouth after the fact.

Shane doesn't seem to want to say much. He waves to Ilya, and so does the newcomer.

A myriad of factors motivate Ilya to speak; one of them being that he is stupid.

"Is this the same guy as last week, or different?"

Shane freezes in the hallway. His joints lock up, one by one, wrist to elbow. For a few seconds, the only part of him that moves are his eyelids, blinking rapidly.

An awkward chuckle escapes the stranger's mouth.

"Er, not last week," Ilya corrects. "A few weeks ago. At the bar." Ilya leans forward, not towards Shane but towards his date. Ilya cups his hands around his mouth and whispers conspiratorially: "After a while, you all blend together."

The man shirks back. He glances at Shane warily.

Shane takes several short breaths. "I am so, so sorry about him," he tells the stranger.

"It's... fine," the man mumbles.

Shane turns to face Ilya, his neck craning slowly, as if he is forcing himself. His cheeks are red as a rash, like he has been slapped or spun. "No," Shane whispers. "It's really not."

Ilya, stupidly, is caught up in wondering whether Shane has noticed the bottle of vodka. Ilya knocks his ankle against the glass in his haste to conceal it further beneath the coffee table.

Shane rubs a hand over his chest. Ilya can see his pulse throb and come alive under the skin of his jugular. "Do you mind, um - my room is the first door on the left."

The man walks dutifully down the hall. A door swings shut.

Ilya waits a few beats. Shane scoffs, then huffs, then rubs his chest again. Ilya begins to recognize it as self-soothing.

“I can’t believe you,” Shane says.

“Sorry,” Ilya says flatly. “Is he your new boyfriend?”

Shane lets out a sound that might only otherwise be heard if it were punched out of him. “I can’t do this right now.”

“Of course,” Ilya replies coolly. “Not with company.”

Shane rubs his fingers so thoroughly over his eyes that Ilya is sure his vision is blurred when he removes them. “Ilya, *what?* What’s going on?”

Ilya toes his slides off, then slips his feet back into them. He likes how the underside is cold. “Nothing.”

“This isn’t over. We’re talking in the morning.”

“Whatever you want.”

Shane scoffs again. Mutters something under his breath. He stomps down the hallway and slams his door shut.

The next morning, Ilya wonders, after hours of languishing on his mattress with a mind-numbing headache, how much longer he can spend in bed before Shane busts his door down for their ‘conversation.’

It is now nearly two in the afternoon. He missed their morning trip to the gym, but he knows Shane went without him because he heard the front door click open.

In the end, it is the base need to piss that rouses him. Once Ilya leaves the bathroom, Shane is already on the couch, legs crossed, chewing on his thumbnail.

Ilya approaches like a man off to the gallows. His head bowed, he says, "Morning."

Shane lowers his thumb from his lips and wipes it absentmindedly on the collar of his crewneck. It reads: *McGill Redbirds Men's Hockey*. "Hi. Can you sit?"

Ilya thinks his legs might bow out if he stands any longer. He lowers himself delicately onto the couch cushions. "How was your night?"

Shane drums his fingers over his knees. They're bruised. Ilya is always the one to remind Shane to lay out a yoga mat when he does burpees, but today he must have forgotten. "Nothing happened. He left twenty minutes later."

"Bummer."

"Yeah," Shane scoffs. "Bummer." Shane fits his calves underneath his hips on the couch, turning to face Ilya in full. "Do you know how stupid I feel?"

Ilya's breath hitches. "Shane -"

"I told this guy not even an hour prior to coming home that I have the best roommate ever. Then we walk in and the *first thing* you do is embarrass me?"

"I'm sorry."

“That’s not ‘protecting me.’” Shane gestures with air-quotes. His face is crumpled, confused. “That’s being a douchebag.”

“I’m sorry. I really am. You were...” Ilya can’t find the words. “I was surprised, I mean. I did not think he would come here.”

“But I texted you.” Shane waves his phone around, dark blue with a clear case. “I gave you a heads up that we were coming back. It was going to be for an hour, tops, and just for a glass of wine in the living room, because the bar closed early. I asked if it was okay.”

“I didn’t see it.” As an afterthought, Ilya tacks on: “I was drunk.”

“I can’t help it if you don’t check your texts.” Shane scratches the pink shell of his ear, a nervous tick. “Maybe I should have called. Would that help, next time? Is that what you were so worked up about?”

Ilya feels his throat begin to thicken. He gulps down the feeling. “No.”

“No?”

“No, Shane - I can’t stand it.”

Shane is hardly breathing, he’s so focused. “Can’t stand what?”

“The - all the -” It’s not coming out right, no matter how many entry points he tries. “All the men.”

Ilya can hear it: when Shane stops breathing entirely. His face shutters. When it reanimates, it is equal parts outraged and humiliated. “All the men? Do you mean the total of *two* people I

have brought back here in the past six months?”

Ilya scrubs his face with his knuckles. “Yes. No. I don’t know. I don’t know.”

Shane stands up. The sleeves of his crewneck are bunched up at his forearms. His fingers are balled into fists, one green vein jumping. “Do you see how that is a bit hypocritical?”

Ilya’s chest tightens. “Well -”

“You can have all the one-night stands you want, and go on all the dates you please. But the second I do the same it’s a problem.”

Ilya gets the distinct feeling that the conversation has become slippery, fishlike, and that he has lost his grip on it fast. “It’s different when it’s you.”

“Oh my god.” Shane looks, sincerely, like he is about to cry. He bites his trembling bottom lip and forces it into submission; when his teeth leave it it is steady again. “How? Because you’re dating women and I’m dating men?”

“No,” Ilya splutters, uselessly. Ilya thinks about living in Boston, Marlow explaining the right to remain silent over beers. *Because, Roz, you’re the type to get yourself into trouble.* Now, with Shane looming over him like a statue, Ilya thinks: *I plead the Fifth. I plead. I plead.*

Shane grows increasingly frenzied. “I grew up in hockey locker rooms. They called me every name under the fucking sun.” Shane blinks hard, as if he could dispel the memories by force. “Do you think there is *anything* you can say to me that I haven’t already heard, or - or haven’t already called myself six inches from the mirror?”

Ilya stays quiet.

Shane’s voice breaks. “Do you?”

In the end, Ilya can think of only one. “I’m in love with you.”

All the momentum of Shane’s speech comes crashing down. He stumbles backwards. His ankle hits the TV stand with a clank. “What?”

That’s what it is, Ilya thinks. This plant within him, growing, taking root. In speaking it, he knows it’s true; and if it was always true, it comes alive. “I am in love with you.”

Ilya stands up too, but like a puppet with its strings cut, Shane lurches back, his shoulders slumping. His expression is like porcelain, as close to shattering as Ilya has ever seen it. “That’s cruel,” he croaks. “Ilya, that’s cruel.”

“I mean it.”

“You’re joking. It’s a joke.”

Ilya takes so many steps forward he realizes he’s cornered Shane, his shoulder blades pinned up against the peeling beige wallpaper. Ilya forces himself back against the couch again. The words tumble out, loose and unmoored, like a cork from a bottle. “Shane, please. It’s not. It’s - I think about you all the time. I think about how you take your coffee and how you smell and how you laugh. And I know it sounds... bad, but -” Ilya stutters - “but I want you.” He forces himself to meet Shane’s eyes. “And I don’t want to share.”

Sunlight cuts through their blinds, lighting Shane’s face like an ornament. His turmoil, his confusion, are strung up like a Christmas tree for all to see. “Do you... do you like men?”

“I don’t know,” Ilya answers, honestly.

Shane burrows his face in his hands. His fingertips twitch against his eyelids, as if electrocuted.

“I really don’t know. I mean - yes,” Ilya stammers, “because -”

“You’re confused.”

“I am *not* confused,” Ilya says. “I was, but I am not. I would not risk -” Ilya cuts himself off, gasping, blinking away an invader in his eyes that feels awfully close to tears. “I would not risk the one good thing in my life if I was confused.”

Reluctantly, Shane steps closer to the couch. Ilya scooches over. Shane sets himself down, delicately, onto the chaise of the sectional. “Sorry,” Shane rasps, “that I’m quiet. Just thinking.”

Ilya can’t help it. If he’s already laid bare his entire heart, cut open his chest for the neighborhood to gawk at, he figures he should go all the way. “Do you feel the same?”

Shane sits still as a statue. He’s like a child playing hide-and-seek, who believes if you don’t move, you won’t spot him. The only motion is that of his eyes, darting around the room.

Ilya can’t possibly be having a heart attack. It feels that way, but it would be too on-the-nose. Finally he clears his throat. “It’s fine.”

“No,” Shane says. “I need -”

“Do you or do you not?”

“You have to understand,” Shane pleads. His face is flushed. He looks healthy, vibrant, but also afraid. “I never even considered it. I didn’t let myself. I built -” He lifts one trembling palm up and down, slicing through the air like a machete. “I built a wall, like this, in my mind. You’re straight. You went on one side of it. Me on the other.”

“But I’m not,” Ilya says. “Or - I can’t be.”

Shane licks his lips. His eyes take on a kind of intensity that Ilya recognizes only comes with planning. “I think I need some time.”

Ilya shakes his head. “Don’t. Don’t leave.”

“Just for the day,” Shane says, and turns to him, finally. Locking eyes hurts. Shane’s lips are perfect, Ilya thinks, but they’re frowning. “I’ll come back tonight. I swear. I need to... to think, and talk to Rose, and -”

“Rose? Why?”

Shane looks at him like his brain is catching up in real time. “Well, you kissed her, for one.”

Ilya groans. “That meant nothing.”

“You don’t know that.”

Shane stands up. Ilya forces himself to wait two seconds, counts it out in his head like Americans reach for their Mississippis, before he follows. “When will you be back?”

“Tonight,” Shane repeats, and turns towards his bedroom. Ilya lingers in the doorway. The bed is perfectly made, each pillow stacked atop the next like dominoes. Ilya’s bed looks like the aftermath of a tornado. “Ilya,” Shane says pointedly. “I just need some time alone to gather my thoughts. Please don’t spiral.”

Ilya is already spiraling, hard, fast. He sucks on his bottom lip. “Okay.”

“I mean it.”

Ilya blinks. His vision blurs. He blinks again, dispelling it. “You are packing a bag.”

“No,” Shane says, midway through shoving a water bottle into his backpack. “Just some basics. Not in the way you think.”

Instead Ilya clears his throat. “I should be the one to leave, probably.”

Shane’s eyebrows knit in the middle. “Why?”

Because I ruined it, Ilya thinks. *What we built*. “Because it’s your apartment.”

Shane zips up his bag and slings it over one shoulder. He meets Ilya in the doorway of his bedroom, sucks in a breath that fights its way out of his throat, and opens his arms.

Ilya, reluctantly, steps forward. Shane wraps his left arm across Ilya’s shoulderblades and the right around the hollow of his back. The hug is soft. It’s over before it starts. Shane leans back, staring at the space between Ilya’s eyebrows. “Hey. It’s not mine, it’s ours.”

Ilya watches as Shane slips past him. He slides his feet into a pair of blue Reeboks by the entranceway, and doesn’t bother tying them before he leaves the apartment. The door clicks shut behind him.

Ilya sinks to his knees, a leg on either side of the threshold between the hallway and Shane’s bedroom. He doesn’t say much, just eases them underneath his hips. He lays there, carefully tucked into himself, and waits.

By ten p.m., Ilya has gone to the gym, picked up McDonald's on the way back, paced the living room forty-two times, and called Alexei of his own volition. It's only really the last one that is indicative of his being unwell.

(Even Alexei knew something was off. *"Why the fuck are you calling me?"* He had asked, because the phone has only ever worked one way their entire relationship, like a helpline. *"Are you in jail?"*)

"One of my own creation," Ilya had mumbled.

"Oh, fuck off.")

When the front door clicks open, Ilya is in the middle of dangling his head off the edge of the couch to feel the blood rush. His head jolts, craning to catch a glimpse of the front door. He stumbles until he's standing and all but ushers Shane inside.

"Hi," Shane mumbles, offering Ilya a plasticky smile. He drops his backpack into his bedroom and comes slinking back into the living room, meeker than he's ever looked.

"Forget it," Ilya blurts. "Just forget I said it. Please. Let's go back to how it was."

Shane motions for Ilya to sit down. He does, on the area of the couch nearest their hallway in case he needs to make a run for it.

Shane fiddles with his slender fingers. There are freckles even on his wrists, lining them like bracelets. "Did you mean it?"

Even after the disaster he's caused, a lie refuses to fit itself past Ilya's lips. "Of course," he says. "Of course I did."

Shane nods, so slightly that the motion loses meaning. “Sorry. This is hard for me.”

“I am not asking you to feel the same,” Ilya says. He wants to lift Shane’s face up by the chin. But he doesn’t; he interlaces his sweaty hands in his own lap. “You can’t help if you don’t. I am just asking that you believe me.”

Shane reaches for his ear again. His hair is silky, long enough at the front to conceal the edge of his eyebrow. “I spoke to Rose.”

Ilya winces.

“She told me, ‘Ilya watches you like you watch the puck.’” Shane cranes his head up to scan Ilya’s face. “Which sounds pretty bad on my part, but not to -”

“Not to anyone who knows you,” Ilya finishes. Shane nods. “Hockey is everything to you.”

“*Was* everything.” Then Shane shakes his head. “Sorry. That’s not - that’s not what we’re here to talk about.”

“We can talk about whatever you’d like,” Ilya says, to delay the inevitable.

“Rose also said, um, not to worry about the date.”

Ilya’s heart thumps.

“She said it’s fine,” Shane says, “and that she kissed you first, which I’m not sure is true but it means something that she’s rooting for you enough to, um, cover for you.”

Ilya holds his breath, as if it could help him hear better over the rush of blood in his ears.

“And she said it’d be totally okay with her,” Shane rambles, “or - or funny, even, if we were, um, spit sisters.”

Ilya reaches desperately into the folds of his brain and comes up empty. “Spit sister,” he repeats, sounding the words out. “What is that?”

Shane, who has thus far taken to sitting on his fingers to get them to cease their wavering, freezes. His cheeks turn bright crimson. His eyes drop, almost imperceptibly, to the divot of Ilya’s upper lip.

“Oh,” Ilya says.

Shane’s throat bobs as he swallows. “Yeah.”

Ilya smiles. It’s slight but it’s there. “Oh.”

Ilya lunges for Shane. He catches him by the nape of the neck, fingers sinking into Shane’s black locks before he even knows what he means to do with them. In that split second of motion, he sees the smallest of grins tug at Shane’s rosy lips, and suddenly, he understands.

Ilya throws himself forward, toppling onto Shane with a grunt, no grace about it, and kisses him.

Shane comes alive like a wire underneath him. He snatches his hands out from under his thighs and lays them delicately across Ilya’s shoulders.

Ilya is not delicate in any sense of the word. He’s rabid, stroking Shane’s cheek with one hand while the other rubs circles into Shane’s collarbone. Shane’s lips are as soft as the

Canada fleece he wears to bed, or softer even; he tastes like cherries and those leaf-shaped green tea mints at the corner store.

Fucking Canada. Inventive enough to produce poutine and Hawaiian pizza and this beautiful boy underneath him.

Ilya pulls back long enough to pant. He's scared to open his eyes, but he does anyway because it's Shane fucking Hollander underneath him and you don't walk past *The Starry Night* without taking a mental picture. "Sorry," Ilya huffs, "if that came out of nowhere."

Shane looks utterly ravished. His hair is ruffled and his lips swollen, coated in Ilya's saliva like a buttercream frosting. "Don't say sorry if you're just gonna do it again."

Ilya gulps. He sets himself down next to Shane, an arm's length away.

Shane knocks his knee against Ilya's shin. "I *mean*, do it again."

"Oh," Ilya says, dumbly. He grips onto Shane's chin this time. They meet in the middle, Ilya pushing, prodding, until Shane's lips part with a gasp. His tongue gets acquainted with the roof of Shane's mouth and the lining of his gums. Ilya feels like an explorer on an expedition, intent on mapping every curve and divot of the boy beneath him, lest he fail some unnameable quest.

Ilya swings his leg over Shane's hips, and an arm follows, pressed to a cushion to the left of Shane's head. Without breaking the kiss, Shane wraps his fingers around Ilya's wrist, propping him up above him. Ilya licks into Shane's mouth again and Shane mewls, breathy and unplanned. Shane breaks off the kiss and winces.

"Sorry."

"Don't be." That's about all Ilya can manage right now. He leans in and sucks, tentatively, on Shane's bottom lip. Shane's lips part for him, as if they have a mind of their own. Ilya strokes

the apples of Shane's cheeks with his pointer fingers and says, simply, "Freckles."

Shane turns his face away. "You have a way with words," he mumbles.

"I'm an immigrant," Ilya points out. "Limited vocab. Freckles. Lips. Freckles. Shane. Shane."

In Ilya's hold, Shane goes silent. Ilya delicately hoists himself off of Shane and hopes it wasn't his entire body weight pressing Shane into the cushions. Though, his mind provides unhelpfully, Shane is so strong he could take it.

"You are quiet," Ilya notes.

Shane cranes his flushed face to face Ilya. The couch gives under the weight of his head, pressing into his soft skin. The zipper of the cushion cover leaves an indent near his jaw. Shane blinks a few times, his eyes fixated on some point near Ilya's nose.

Ilya fidgets. "Are you regretting?"

"I'm not regretting," Shane says. "I'm freaking out. Which is different."

"Hey." Ilya pushes himself so he's sitting up and has to look down at Shane to hold eye contact. He reaches for Shane's hand. Shane lets him interlace their fingers. "Why freaking out? We are good here."

Shane squeezes Ilya's hand. "I'm not a woman, Ilya. It's one thing to want someone as a person, and another to want them... sexually."

Ilya shifts his hips subtly, so his thighs don't press up against his hard-on. It developed approximately four seconds into kissing and yearns to make itself known. "Do you need me

to explain,” Ilya drawls, his wet lips hovering over Shane’s knuckles, “all the ways, and positions, and locations, I want you sexually?”

Shane smacks Ilya weakly with their entwined hands. It lands near Ilya’s hip and does little to quell the throbbing there. “Fuck off,” he mumbles weakly.

Ilya tugs their interlaced hands together and procures one of Shane’s fingers from the bundle, pressing it against his own sweaty forehead. “It’s better you don’t know what goes on in here, *Hollan-dah*. Very perverted. Save yourself.”

Somehow, that seems to calm Shane rather than unnerve him. He squirms on the couch. Ilya rests another hand on his knee, and Shane’s body responds immediately, settling down. “And you don’t think I, like, came onto you,” Shane whispers. “Right?”

“No.” Ilya’s eyebrows knit. “Of course not.”

“Okay.” Shane offers Ilya a grim smile. “I didn’t do anything that... made you uncomfortable?”

“I wish you did,” Ilya says, blasé. Shane’s big eyes blink up at him, shining with worry, and Ilya quiets. “Shane, no. You could never.”

“Thanks.” Shane shifts, cracking his neck. “I just get worried. I don’t know.”

Ilya watches where the collar of Shane’s crewneck dips, exposing the divot of his collarbone. “What were the names of your teammates?”

Shane seems to get what Ilya’s implying. “J.J. Boiziau. We also had Comeau - um, Gilbert Comeau. And Dallas Kent, he was a center too. So if I was out there, they’d kick him over to the wing. He hated it.”

Ilya nods. His fingers have begun to sweat an astronomical amount, so he gives Shane's palm one last squeeze before extricating his hand to instead rub circles into Shane's lower thigh through his jeans. "Can you write those down? My memory is shit and I want to cast a spell on them."

Shane smiles softly. "Hey. J.J. was my friend, at least."

"Was?"

Shane's gaze turns contemplative. "At least I have Rose."

Ilya holds his breath, counting to five, and listens to Shane's steady breathing in the silence. "To be clear," Ilya wagers, "you like me."

Shane chews his bottom lip. "I always found you handsome," he admits.

"That is not the question," Ilya says, though he's pleased.

"I - yes. I do like you. A lot. Like, an embarrassing... well, nevermind." Shane's lip pops out from under his teeth, wet and supple. He scans Ilya's face as if logging his tells. "Of course I do. What's not to like?"

"I can send you a list," Ilya says dryly. He's joking, mainly, so he's smiling. Though it's also a warning of sorts. He knows how he can get. "PDF or DOCX?"

"No, I mean it," Shane says. Something in his exacting stare sobers Ilya. "You are the only person on this earth, I think, who can get me out of my own head."

Ilya's voice comes out unreasonably small, nearly a whisper. "It's the same. For me, I mean." He clears his throat, then. "When did you first...?"

Shane nods; somehow he understands. “For me, I think it was... well, when was that? When I made that humongous apple pie?” Shane makes a lumbering gesture with his hands, like he’s carrying a boulder. “And you ate five slices,” he recalls, grinning.

“You told me to keep eating,” Ilya protests.

“You had whipped cream *everywhere*. In your hair, on your eyelids.” Shane lays his head back, his gaze wistful. “I just thought, wow. He’s endearing.”

Ilya swallows down a lump the size of Jupiter in his throat.

“And he’s kind. And funny. And completely, totally, off-limits.” Shane strokes Ilya’s finger, the one busy drawing circles into his skin. “I didn’t let myself feel it, really. And nothing felt the same as... us,” Shane says delicately, “but I felt like I owed it to myself to try. You know. Dating. ‘Cause that’s the story of my life: Life sucks, but nothing sucks as bad as crushing on a straight guy.”

Ilya changes his pattern on Shane’s leg, from drawing circles to drawing stars. Shane’s thigh lets out an involuntary jerk. “I understand,” Ilya whispers.

“And, of course, we live together,” Shane drones on. He winces and drops his face into the couch. “Oh God.”

“Ah-ah-ah,” Ilya chastises. “Do not disappear. Do not go into your pretty turtle shell.”

Shane groans, muffled by the fabric. “I’m freaking out.”

“Why? Shane, it’s okay.”

Shane lifts his head up. “Should I move out?”

“Why, you don’t like the neighborhood? But where would we go?”

Shane smiles despite himself. ““We,”” he quotes. “The idea would be, *we* wouldn’t go anywhere.”

Ilya chortles. “Ah. No, you can’t move out. I would die of starvation -”

“Malnutrition, more like it. You can’t live off of frozen chicken melts -”

“And I would die of loneliness, with no one to watch TV with.”

“What about your Russian friend?”

Ilya’s breath hitches. “Fuck.”

Shane leans forward and, with what seems to take immense mental effort, combs Ilya’s curls back with the pads of his fingers. Like a puppy getting scratched behind his ears, Ilya leans into it fully, bestowing the weight of his head into Shane’s palm. “What happened?” Shane prods.

“We fought.”

“What about?”

“You,” Ilya says simply. Shane’s hand freezes up against Ilya’s face, so Ilya noses into it until Shane relaxes again. “Not like that. Nothing bad. I was having fucking aneurysm about guys flirting with you. I couldn’t stand it.”

“When? At Champs? And how do you know what that -”

“From my father. He had a small one a few years ago,” Ilya says. “And yes. At Champs.”

Shane sinks his fingers deeper into Ilya’s curls, scratching the nape of his neck. Ilya wants to thump his leg like a dog. It should be illegal, Ilya thinks, for a feeling like this to exist, or to allow it to end. “Okay, so you fought?”

Ilya groans mildly. “It’s okay. I will call her. Sort it out.”

Shane smiles, and - bless him - doesn’t pry. “That sounds like a good plan.”

Ilya presses his nose into Shane’s palm, inhaling the scent. He smells like honey and the cardamom buns from corner stores back in Moscow. Maybe that’s just Ilya’s brain crossing wires, mixing up what he considers home. “Don’t move out,” Ilya begs.

“I won’t.”

“I would die.”

Shane scratches behind Ilya’s ears. “I believe it.”

Ilya lifts his head, meets Shane’s eyes. “Can I -”

“Yeah,” Shane breathes. “Whenever you like, I think.”

It's like being gifted the keys to heaven. Ilya cradles the back of Shane's neck, tugs him forward, and kisses him slow.

They break away and come back, this time for a peck. Ilya wants to lick into Shane's mouth again. Maybe later tonight. Or tomorrow.

Whenever you like, I think.

"You want food?" Ilya asks.

Shane tilts his head, contemplating. Ilya can't help it: he leans in and presses his nose against the juncture where Shane's jaw meets his throat, inhaling. Shane is remarkably unfazed by this development. "Sure." Ilya feels Shane's vocal chords vibrate against his skin. "How about Mandy's?"

Ilya groans against Shane's Adam's apple. Mandy's is a gourmet salad bar that makes Ilya feel like herded cattle when he eats there. "Gross. Okay."

Shane sighs contentedly.

They train to the nearest location. "You know," Shane says, as he heaps arugula into his ceramic bowl and follows the queue of customers, "this is kinda like our first date."

"No," Ilya grunts. "You paid. It can't be."

Shane rolls his eyes. "I'm not a girl. That stuff doesn't matter to me. That is heteronormative thinking."

"Then I am a hetero...normal thinker," Ilya rebuts, grinning. "I will take you somewhere nice." He leans in and drops his voice an octave. "Want to get you in a suit. Tight, preferably."

Shane scatters pomegranate seeds across his mound of lettuce. “A tight suit? That’s pretty tame for a self-proclaimed pervert.”

“I have not said what you will be wearing *under* the suit. I am thinking -”

Shane pokes him right in the ribs. “Not in public, please.”

Ilya gasps, feigning offense. “You can’t hit me anymore.”

Shane juts his leg out - red Reeboks, this time - and Ilya doesn’t dodge in time, tripping. He prays his abominably healthy bowl will tip over in the chaos, but instead it remains remarkably balanced in his tray.

Ilya regains his footing. “That’s spousal abuse.”

“Spousal means you’re married.”

“I said what I said.”

When they’re sat side-by-side in a corner booth, Ilya poking at his bowl like it wronged him and Shane ravaging his, Ilya thinks about that familiar mantra: that love requires sacrifice. The thought doesn’t ruin him like he thought it would. It remakes him instead.

Shane is, apparently, all about enforcing ‘boundaries,’ so they sleep in their respective bedrooms. When Ilya emerges the next morning for breakfast, Shane sneaks up on him from

behind the parted fridge door.

“Hi,” Shane says. “Sleep okay?”

Ilya side-steps around the door, past the cartons of milk, and places his hands delicately on Shane’s waist, giving him time to step away if he so chooses. Ilya is slightly worried that last night was all one big dream. But then Shane steps closer, so close that their noses touch.

Ilya tilts his head. Shane matches, tilting his the opposite direction. They kiss. Ilya drops his hands from Shane’s waist to his hips and maneuvers him until his spine hits the marble countertop with a thump. Shane’s breath hitches.

Ilya inhales the sound, groaning into Shane’s mouth. “Don’t think I’ll ever -” Ilya mumbles into Shane’s mouth, tongue heavy - “get used to this.”

Shane’s hands fumble, deciding where to settle, but they find Ilya’s biceps and make a home there, squeezing. It takes less than a minute of kissing for each to realize - Shane first, because he chuckles against Ilya’s lips, and Ilya a second later - that they are both mind-numbingly hard and poking into each other through their cotton pajamas.

Ilya peels back. “Fuck.”

“Fuck,” Shane agrees.

Ilya quirks his head. “How’s that for good morning?”

Shane licks his swollen lips, layering on another layer of sheen. The corners of his mouth upturn. “We should probably talk.”

“Okay.” Ilya squeezes Shane’s hips on either side. He trails one hand from Shane’s belly button up his sternum and down again. He can feel the ridges of Shane’s abdomen through

his cotton shirt. “Hello, how are you, my name is, your name is. This is talk.”

Shane bows his head. His forehead rests in the crook of Ilya’s shoulder. “I mean, about... yeah.”

“Sex?”

Shane nods against Ilya’s collarbone.

Ilya pets the nape of Shane’s neck like he might to a kitten. “There is no rush.”

“I feel rushed,” Shane mumbles against Ilya’s sleep shirt.

Ilya’s stomach swoops. “What? Why?”

“No, not by you.” Shane groans into Ilya’s shoulder. Ilya orients his hips away from Shane to be considerate. His cock is like a gun in his pants. “It’s me. I want to, like, do stuff. Really bad.”

Ilya pauses. “With me.”

Shane lets out a small squeak. “Yeah.”

Ilya smirks and resumes his petting. “How bad?”

“Fuck you.”

“That’s the idea.”

Shane reluctantly lifts his head up. His chin is doing this loopy wobble, like a bird deciding where to land. His gaze is half-lidded, almost drunken. If they were downtown, the bartender would take one look at Shane and cut him off. But they’re not: they’re in their shared kitchen and it’s hardly ten in the morning. That’s just how Shane looks at Ilya, now. Ilya could pass out.

“Let’s eat,” Ilya decides, “then talk. Okay?”

Shane sucks in a short breath. “Okay.”

Breakfast is scrambled eggs. Ilya has his on a sesame bagel, Shane on a bed of lettuce. Ilya finds this blasphemous, so he says so. Shane rolls his eyes and grins.

Abruptly, Ilya clears his throat. “So. The talk.”

Shane straightens up from his slump, looking oddly nervous. “I assume you’re more of a... pitcher than a catcher.”

“A what than a what?”

Shane scratches the tip of his nose. There is a single freckle right in the center of it, like the nucleus of a cell or the sun of some miniature galaxy. “Sorry. That goes without saying. You’ve only been with women.”

Ilya takes a massive bite of his bagel. When he has swallowed, and is picking seeds from between his teeth with his tongue, he says, “I will do either.”

Shane blinks. “You will?”

Ilya pushes down the unease. This is about being open, he reminds himself. “You might have to... what is the word? Tranquilize.” He wipes the corners of his mouth with the pad of his thumb. “Tranquilize me. To get me to relax. My asshole hairs are like the Red Army.” Ilya makes a punching gesture in the air. “They ward against invaders.”

“Ilya,” Shane chokes out. “That’s gross.”

“Is that what you prefer?” Ilya takes a sip of coffee. Tries to be cool. “To invade?”

Shane is red all over, though most notably on his ears. “I’m not answering that.”

Shane doesn’t let up, not until Ilya reaches across the dining table with his palm facing the ceiling like an offering. As if they have a mind of their own, Shane’s fingers crawl the length of the wood until they wrap themselves around Ilya’s.

Ilya blows his eyes as big as they go, blinks his blond lashes. “Talk to me.”

Shane glances at their interlaced hands. “I prefer to... be invaded.”

Without meaning to, Ilya sags against his chair. His toes uncurl and his shoulders loosen. “Thank *God*.”

“Mister ‘I will do either.’” Shane chortles, then quiets, a considered look on his face. “Do you view me differently? Now that you know?”

“Well, I’m about to cream my pants just thinking about it.” As if on cue, a thrum runs through Ilya’s groin. “So yes, a little differently.”

“You’re a menace,” Shane says. But his hand has gone limp in Ilya’s. His eyes are all over the place, unable to settle.

“Hey.” Ilya leans forward and squeezes Shane’s hand. “Not as a person, of course. I view you just the same.” Shane finally meets his eyes. “Better, even,” Ilya adds hurriedly, “that you would trust me with that. With you.”

Shane licks his lips. Ilya lets his gaze linger there for only a second before he meets Shane’s eyes again. “Thanks.”

“And fuck anyone who has made you feel differently.” Ilya lets go of Shane’s hand, but only to walk around the table and behind Shane’s chair, sinking his nose into the juncture of Shane’s neck. “That is just bedroom preference,” Ilya says into Shane’s skin. He smells soapy and like the lavender-infused honey Ilya spreads onto toast. “You can still beat my ass.”

“And I will,” Shane says, grinning.

Ilya kisses the underside of Shane’s jaw. “And you do.”

They decide, unanimously: there is no rush.

They get tested, separately, with almost a clinical air about it, the way you might renew your passport without a trip planned. They think it best to take it slow.

When Ilya comes home from work a week later - no evening show, luckily, though he had to stay back to decide which segment to cut for time - he drops his laptop bag onto the floor with a slam. Shane comes scurrying out of his bedroom. When he enters the living room, he leans leisurely, almost uncaringly, against the wall, as if to make up for the sheer speed he ran out with.

“How was work?” Ilya asks. He works at the knot of his tie.

“Good. We signed a new client,” Shane says. “Big Spanish bank. I’m on onboarding duty.”

Ilya grins. “Mister Businessman.” He notes Shane is still in his business casual clothes. “Are we still going to the gym?”

Shane speaks very slowly. “We did agree to... exercise today.”

“Yes.” Ilya blinks. “We did.”

Shane leans even more heavily against the wall. He’s almost diagonal in the doorframe. That can’t be comfortable. Ilya wonders if Shane thinks he looks nonchalant. “Did we specify,” Shane says, a single eyebrow raised, “what kind?”

When Ilya was little, he and his mother would stay up watching this British show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* with Russian subtitles. Ilya had always argued that the contestant reactions were staged. There’s no such thing as happiness so great you scream like a banshee or fall to your knees.

Well, Ilya gets it now. He could somersault to the local Costco and back again. To Russia and back again, probably.

Shane, meanwhile, has grown increasingly red and increasingly horizontal in the doorframe. He might actually fall over if Ilya doesn’t do something.

“Fuck,” Ilya mutters, and charges towards Shane so immensely that the force of it makes both of them stumble.

Shane gasps, but half of it gets swallowed by Ilya's mouth when he plants a wet kiss against Shane's lips. Ilya reaches for Shane's face, thumbs feeling for the plushness of his cheeks, before his hands drop greedily to his hips instead.

They move with all the grace of a potato sack race into Shane's bedroom. Ilya flings Shane unceremoniously onto the bed. Shane tugs Ilya by his necktie until he collapses onto the mattress with him.

The mattress dips so deeply and luxuriously under Ilya's knee that he curses. "Holy shit. You've been living like a king, *Hollan-dah*."

Shane either doesn't hear the British accent or chooses to ignore it. He pants into the warm gap between their lips. "Then fuck me like one."

Ilya chokes. Actually chokes, on his own saliva, but recovers enough to moan into Shane's mouth and slip his tongue past his teeth. It tastes like crossing the border into a new land, somehow conquering and unifying at once.

Ilya paws at Shane's shirt like the material has personally offended him. His hand dips lower and tugs at what he assumes is Shane's pants; he doesn't want to break off the kiss long enough to check.

Shane stutters out a whiny breath, like a moan but longer, more sustained. Ilya could only liken it to a whistle of pleasure. Shane works his fingers into Ilya's tie, undoes it, and flings it across the room. It smacks against a mason jar of pens and sends them all clattering to the floor.

Ilya grins against Shane's lips. "Clumsy *kotik*." He decides to stop fighting Shane's shirt and sneaks his hands under it instead, scratching at Shane's waist until he can get a firm grip on it on either side. He was right, all those weeks ago. His middle fingers touch. "Clumsy boy. My boy."

"Your boy," Shane preens. He sinks his fingers into Ilya's hair above him and squeezes, like he could strangle the curls.

Ilya groans, half in pleasure and half in complaint, and licks into Shane's mouth. "Want your fucking..." Ilya tugs blindly again at Shane's collar. He's sure they both hear the material stretch, close to snapping. "Want all this off."

Shane giggles into Ilya's mouth. "Okay." He separates their lips, much to Ilya's chagrin, but shimmies out of his shirt and undoes the top button of his pants. His chest is a desert plain, vast and all-consuming. His tanned nipples bob up and down as he pants.

Just as Ilya is about to descend onto Shane's mouth again, with Shane sprawled against the mattress and Ilya hovering above him like a shield, Shane tilts his chin away.

Ilya grunts.

"I brought snacks," Shane says hurriedly. He motions somewhere near his desk.

Ilya's eyebrows draw in. Delicately, and with some difficulty, he pushes himself up from his elbows to his palms and locates the snacks in question: three different brands of chips, none of which Ilya has ever seen Shane actually eat before. "Are we packing for road trip or having sex?"

Shane fidgets. There is not much room for him to wriggle, what with Ilya's thighs bracketing his hips. Still, he tries. "I dunno, I just thought it'd be nice to offer. And I wasn't sure what you like."

Ilya picks up the first bag and dangles it above Shane's head, smirking. "So you thought... Doritos?"

Shane cringes. "Okay. Just forget about it."

Ilya leans down and pecks the corner of Shane's lips. For his cock being as heavy as it is in his boxers, Ilya feels awfully tender. "Hey. No. I will eat your chips, okay? Should I now, or later? You tell me."

Ilya brings the corner of the Doritos bag between his teeth, ready to tear into it. Shane makes grabby hands for it. Ilya complies, and when Shane has his fingers around it he tosses it somewhere on the ground. It practically floats. "Later. Definitely later."

"Those bags are all air these days," Ilya laments.

Shane hums in affirmation. His fingers ride up Ilya's chest and up to his neck, squeezing there. Ilya's entire body erupts in goosebumps. "Will you...?"

Ilya trails a finger across the band of Shane's boxers. Calvin Klein. He feels briefly jealous that another man's name is written across Shane's skin before he reminds himself that sanity is an attractive quality in a partner. "Yes?"

Shane's eyes look wet, almost, and full with feeling. "Touch me?"

Ilya leans down to press a kiss against Shane's belly button. Ilya lifts Shane's limp wrist and deposits the hand into his hair, so Shane can grip onto Ilya's curls like a handlebar. Ilya tugs on Shane's cargo pants, and Shane lifts his hips to allow them to slip off. Ilya hovers his fingers over Shane's boxers, waits for a nod, and tosses them aside too.

"Wait," Shane says. Ilya blinks up at him, his head hovering somewhere near where Shane's cock has sprung from his boxers. "I'll talk you through it. I know it's your first time."

Ilya can't help it; he laughs. "That ship has sailed. To the moon and back, by now."

Shane manages as best an eye-roll as he can accomplish while being naked. Embarrassment is the key to humility. "I mean with a man."

Ilya sits back on his haunches, so Shane's hands fall from his curls and go limp at his muscled sides. Ilya's cock is still achingly hard within his pants. He adjusts where it lays. "Okay. Talk me through it."

Ilya watches as Shane's toes curl and uncurl. His skin is so soft, like a deer's. He has freckles even at the juncture where his belly meets his pelvis. "So you..." Shane starts. He plays with his fingers, twisting them against his stomach. "You... can start by... yeah. If you want to - or, I can, you know, do it first."

Ilya grins. "Was that English?"

Shane squeezes his eyes shut. "I've never had to narrate a sex act, Ilya."

"I was thinking," Ilya says, trailing a stray finger down Shane's hip, dangerously close to his cock, "I finger you until you come. Then, Dorito break. Then, I fuck you and you come again."

Shane lets out a sound that is some hybrid of a scoff and a moan. "I always say dream big, but that's never happened before," he says. "That I come from... yeah. Fingering."

Ilya, sly as he is, has already procured lube from the nightstand. He uncaps it. Shane's eyes dart towards the source of the sound, and it's clear he didn't know Ilya had found it until then. Ilya smirks. "Can I try?"

Shane nods, slowly to start and then fervently when Ilya wraps a hand tightly, almost analytically, around the head of his cock.

With his left hand occupied by Shane's cock, Ilya rubs the pad of his index finger slowly over his puckered hole. Shane's torso seizes, arching up. It is unthinkable to Ilya that he is privy to a sight like this. Ilya sucks in a tight, marvelled breath and sinks a finger inside Shane's warm heat.

“Fuck,” Shane mutters. He squeezes one eye shut, then cracks it open. “Wait. Take your pants off too.”

Ilya works in a second finger. “Why?” He grins. “Is there something you need in there, *Hollan-dah?*”

Shane, bless him, just smiles. “Obviously.”

Ilya removes the hand from Shane’s cock to shimmy out of his pants. The other hand is quite at home inside Shane and he’d like to keep it that way. When they’re off, and he is naked as the day he was born atop Shane’s ruffled navy bedsheets, he works his three longest fingers inside Shane to the hilt. Ilya curls them upward, as if texting their dexterity.

Shane cries out so loudly that Ilya loses his rhythm, fumbling. He finds it again, though, quickly, and works his fingers diligently in and out of Shane, whose thighs are beginning to twitch and jerk like a bolt of lightning has passed through them. “Good?”

“There,” Shane says. He rears his head back against the pillow, burrowing as much of the right side of his face into it as he can get. “Right there.”

Ilya keeps working his fingers in and out.

“You’re beautiful,” Ilya says simply. It’s not sexy-talk. It’s just true. Shane’s cheeks are flushed and his lips are wet. His skin is soft as silk. He is so warm inside.

Shane breathes out, wheezing, like it costs him effort. Ilya is so hard it feels like he’s in violation of Canada’s open carry laws. He leans in and, when he sees Shane’s stomach begin to seize up, blows a mouthful of hot, arid air onto the stiffened head of Shane’s cock. It passes over Shane like a wave.

Then, because he's a little shit and he's curious, Ilya licks the head of Shane's cock, one long stripe like mapping a lollipop. Shane tastes salty and oddly familiar, some ancestral recipe written into Ilya before he was born. He isn't sure in the end if it's the puff of hot breath or the flick of his tongue that does it. Shane spurts up until come coats his belly. His body sags against the sheets like a puppet with its strings cut.

Ilya, satisfied, removes his fingers from Shane's hole. Shane lets out a low hiss at the loss. Ilya presses his fingers to his lips, kisses them, and rubs them against Shane's reddened entrance as if in thanks.

Ilya drapes himself along Shane's side. There isn't much he can do about how his own hardened cock prods against Shane's hip, so he lets it.

"That was incredible," Shane says, after he can finally breathe again.

Ilya flexes and curls his fingers, testing their dexterity. "I am, you mean."

"It's pure anatomical advantage. Your fingers are unnaturally long."

Ilya smirks. "So is my cock."

Shane cranes his gorgeous face in Ilya's direction, smiling. It's like a beam of sunlight. Ilya has to squint. "Good one." Shane hums, considering, before he collects himself. He props himself up by his elbows. "I'm gonna blow you. Okay?"

"*Bozhe moy*," Ilya mutters. He feels like a teenager again, one touch away from climaxing with nothing to be done about it.

Shane backwards-crawls his way to the end of the bed. His pillowy lips are a finger's length away from Ilya's tip.

“Is that fine?” Shane asks.

“If I ever say no to that question,” Ilya says measuredly, “kill me.”

“Ilya,” Shane scolds.

“In cold blood, kill me.” Ilya gazes up at the ceiling, muttering a prayer. “Shane Hollander’s going to blow me.”

“Now it’s embarrassing.” Shane sits back on his haunches. Ilya sits up, kisses Shane slow and with probably too much tongue for zero warning, and plops himself back against the mattress once Shane is sufficiently weak from it.

“No. Not embarrassing,” Ilya protests, licking his saliva-soaked lips. “Shane. My friend. My sweet friend. Sweet, sexy friend. I need it.”

Shane smiles. Again, it’s as if the clouds part. “Alright.” He crouches down. If Ilya cranes his neck up high enough, he can see the divots on Shane’s back, these soft dimples like airbrushed craters, and below it the soft swell of his ass.

Ilya is so focused on Shane’s ass that he nearly misses it: the sight of Shane’s pink lips wrapped around his cock.

Shane starts with a few kitten licks, tentative. He takes the time to close his mouth and swirl his tongue within it, perhaps pooling saliva, but also tasting Ilya, the saltiness of his skin.

Shane’s lips part and he’s back on Ilya’s cock with renewed energy. His hands grip hard on the remaining length his mouth can’t take. He rears back to lob a wad of spit onto Ilya’s tip. The sensation is so arousing it almost stings. Ilya groans into the air, and just the sound seems to add more fuel to Shane’s fire beyond where the smoke has already billowed, and his eyebrows draw in as he takes in more and more of Ilya’s cock. He sinks so deep, his

hollowed cheeks accommodating Ilya like a shoe fits to a foot, that he gags and rears back, but only momentarily.

Ilya is panting like a dog. He's not sure how he hasn't thrown Shane off him with how much he's writhing. Shane's mouth feels amazing, but what's more is the sight: his soft, short hair, just long enough for Ilya to sink his fingers into; the way his shoulderblades flex as his hands work their way along Ilya's shaft; the veins along his forearms as he fondles Ilya's inner thighs.

Ilya provides somewhat of a warning when he's about to blow, but it might have been in Russian. He makes an attempt to tug Shane off by his hair, albeit with very little enthusiasm, and Shane for his part does not seem to want to stop sucking.

It's an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object. Ilya comes hard down Shane's throat. Shane makes a small surprised noise, then depththroats, his nose buried somewhere in Ilya's pubic hair like a bird builds its nest. He pulls off, wipes his mouth, and swallows with an audible gulp. Shane smiles at Ilya, and it is innocent somehow, rubbing a finger to his swollen bottom lip.

Ilya grabs Shane's nearest body part. It turns out to be his wrist. He tugs Shane on top of him, their cocks knocking together. They readjust. Shane slides off of him and instead rests with their ribcages pressed together on the bed.

"How's the taste?" Ilya asks.

Shane grins. "Like a Costco chicken melt," he teases.

Ilya pulls Shane in by his hair, hard enough it should hurt. He kisses him, those lips with all the give in the world, and tastes himself on Shane's tongue. He pulls away long enough to whisper, "That was hot."

"Thanks," Shane says, with all the smugness of knowing it was. "I like doing it."

“Blowjobs?”

Shane hums. “Whenever you want one, just say.”

“*Gospodee bozhe.*” Ilya fondles the cross around his neck. “You do not know what you’re agreeing to.”

Shane trails a delicate hand down Ilya’s side, stopping near his hipbone. “I do. I swear to you, I like it. And you’re very sensitive, which is a plus.”

“I will like it too, I think,” Ilya says. He presses his nose into Shane’s hair and inhales the scent. “Why can’t I fuck you and blow you at the same time?”

Shane giggles. “This pesky thing called anatomy.”

“Fuck anatomy. I want to.”

Shane’s hand down Ilya’s side is now tracing triangles. It tickles. Ilya stays still and lets him. “You’re really committing, huh?”

“Well, I love my cock,” Ilya says, matter-of-fact. “So of course I would like yours.”

Shane laughs into Ilya’s shoulder.

“Hungry?” Ilya asks. He reaches over the nightstand for the Doritos bag and tears it open. “I am. I was stupid to make fun of this.”

“You’re not stupid, but I’m glad you get it now.” Shane takes a red-dusted chip when Ilya offers and chews it roughly fifteen times before swallowing. “Watch for crumbs, please.”

Ilya dutifully retrieves a few from the surrounding bedsheets. They pass the bag back and forth for a few minutes in companionable silence, their bodies turned into each other.

“Can I say something?” Shane says after a while. “That could potentially ruin the mood? Or make you angry?”

Ilya’s stomach drops. “Always.”

“I don’t want to go back into the closet.” Shane fidgets, strokes Ilya’s neck with the fingertips not dusted in chip residue as if coaching him through it. “It’d be bad for me, I think. Mentally. But I know I don’t get to dictate your - your, you know, coming out.”

Ilya blinks. Once, twice. “Shane.”

Shane’s voice comes out small. “Yes?”

“The sooner we go back to Champs with my lips on your neck, the better.”

Shane gulps. “You mean - in public?”

Ilya’s not done with his fantasy. “And I’ll flip off every *mudak* who turns to stare.”

“But your brother, your - Svetlana?”

“My brother is an ocean away. And he calls me *xyecoc* - er, cocksucker anyway.” Ilya collects more crumbs. He sprinkles them onto his tongue. “And Sveta will be happy, probably. Right now she thinks I’m a piece of shit.”

“That can’t be true,” Shane says. “She’s known you for so long. She knows your heart.”

Ilya scratches his nose with his knuckle. “I hung up on her,” he says simply. “I was confused, but it’s not an excuse.”

“She’ll understand,” Shane whispers. He noses at Ilya’s neck until Ilya tilts his head. Shane plants a kiss under Ilya’s ear.

“I don’t know how,” Ilya says, relishing in the feeling of Shane’s lips on his skin.

“How she’ll understand?”

Ilya cups a hand around the nape of Shane’s neck, pressing his face impossibly deeper against Ilya’s throat. “How I could have been confused.”

Shane tilts his face, forming a tight pocket of air he can speak into. “I was too, at one point. I didn’t know that I was gay - actually, fully gay - until midway through college.” Shane clears his throat. “You’re not gay, though,” he says. “Right?”

Ilya shakes his head. “All I want is you these days, which feels pretty gay.” He hoists Shane’s head up by his chin and plants a kiss on his Cupid’s bow. “But I guess I like both.”

“Both,” Shane repeats, into Ilya’s mouth. He pulls away. “So, not just women?”

“Shane.” Ilya gestures frantically between their bodies, then down to where their pelvises are nearly touching. “What part of this screams ‘just women’?”

“Maybe I’m an exception, I don’t know.”

Ilya dusts the crumbs off his fingertips and palms Shane's chest, one hand on each pec. He squeezes the flesh until it pools in the middle. "Well, your tits are pretty great."

Shane swats Ilya's hand away, grinning. But Ilya doesn't miss the way Shane's cock twitches against his thigh.

As Ilya leans in for another kiss, Shane says, "So you have liked men, though, in the past?"

Ilya blinks. "Is it important to you that I have?"

Shane cringes, if the way his nose scrunches beautifully is any indication. "Sorry."

"Don't be," Ilya says. He leans in and steals his kiss anyway. Shane's lips are so soft that Ilya is worried he's leaving a permanent indent. "Talk to me."

"I guess - I guess I'm just searching for signs that this isn't a fluke." Shane meets Ilya's eyes. It takes Ilya's breath away, the depth of the brown, the worry beneath it. "Signs you won't wake up and feel differently about me."

Ilya meets his gaze head-on. "Every day I have lived here, I wake up and feel differently about you."

"Ilya -"

"Shane," Ilya counters. Shane quiets long enough he can finish. "I wake up more happy. More excited. More sure. With more random shit I want to tell you and more faces I want to see you make."

Shane's breath picks up. "Oh."

“Okay?” Ilya flicks a strand of hair out of Shane’s eyes. “This is how my feelings will change. Grow. No other way.”

“Me too. I feel that way too.”

“And if you really want to know, then yes, I realize now - I probably wanted to fuck my athletic coach’s son back in Russia. And Lewis Hamilton. And the guy who does Captain America.”

“Chris Evans,” Shane supplies, breathless. “Okay, good. Good list. No more, though.”

“Why?” Ilya tilts his head. “Jealous?”

“Duh,” Shane says. He tugs on Ilya’s shoulder, the one farthest from where Shane lays on the bed, until Ilya gets the memo and hoists himself up and over Shane like the roof of a convertible blocks the sun. “But none of them get to see you like this.”

Ilya grabs a handful of flesh at Shane’s squirming hips and squeezes. “And you like this,” he manages between hot breaths. Shane reaches over to stroke Ilya’s cock, which grows so achingly hard again that it looks irritable, almost, veins bulging out that Ilya hardly knew existed. Ilya does the same to Shane until he’s hard and blushing. “How do you feel?” He asks, as Shane blinks underneath him. “Good? You need more?”

Shane’s tongue darts out and coats his cherry pink lips. “I need you inside me.”

It takes all the power in Ilya not to come all over Shane’s stomach then and there. “I see that,” he says, something of a psychopathic grin on his lips, “but I mean, more fingers? Or you are good?”

Shane blinks a few times. Ilya lifts Shane’s right leg up, muscles and all, and lays it deftly over his shoulder. Shane’s hole twitches, exposed to the cool air. Ilya kisses the inside of Shane’s leg, by his knee.

In Shane's silence, Ilya decides. "More fingers, I think." He uncaps the lube and spreads it across all four, save for his thumb, then onto his bare, aching cock too for good measure.

"Just for, like, five seconds," Shane rambles. "Because - *God*." Ilya sandwiches his fingers into Shane's hole, still as warm and welcoming as it was when he fingered Shane to completion. "Because you're kinda, mhm, big, really big, and I haven't done this in a while."

"I give you more than five seconds," Ilya says. He marvels at the way Shane's hips move almost of their own volition, chasing Ilya's fingers.

"No, no." Shane is breathless, panting. "No, because I'll come, and I want to come on your - with you. In me." He clears his throat and smiles up at Ilya, his cheeks flushed and freckled. "Please."

Ilya thinks his vision whites out. He pulls his fingers out, hoists Shane's other leg onto his shoulders, and lines the swollen head of his cock with Shane's entrance. Their bodies make contact at that one point, Ilya's bare tip to Shane's puckered hole, and Ilya feels almost sick with pleasure. "The way you look - Shane," Ilya warns. "I may last, maybe, one minute."

"Then last a minute." Shane wiggles his hips and reaches blindly for Ilya's torso, which he can't quite reach from this angle. "Just fuck me. Please."

Ilya mutters a prayer or compliment or something in between in hushed Russian. He juts his hips forward, rolling, and his eyes drop to the slow thrust of his cock into Shane's warmth: a vanishing act, inch by precious inch.

He stops halfway inside when Shane makes a sound underneath him, a breathy croon, and throws his head back. Ilya fucks all the way inside Shane, his hips snapping, and Shane groans. "Oh, Ilya. *God*."

"Ah, *blyat*. Fuck." The first drag of his cock out of Shane feels like a thousand tiny pinpricks all across his body. It's like discovering a new form of acupuncture. Even with all their

preparation, Shane is impossibly tight; being inside him feels like a consummation of sorts. It's the closest Ilya can get to becoming one with Shane, at the junction point where their hips are fused together. "You feel so - *hng*h - good."

"Yeah?" Shane babbles. Ilya fucks into him harder, in earnest. Ilya watches as Shane's hips chafe against the mattress. "Oh, fuck. Oh, oh. Oh fuck."

"Dirty mouth," Ilya gasps. He's begun to sweat again. He can feel it congealing behind his neck. Underneath him, Shane's lips are parted just enough to let his sweet noises through. Ilya needs to kiss him so suddenly and badly that it hurts. He lays Shane's legs back onto the mattress on either side of Ilya's hips, relishing in how his toes curl, and bends down mid-thrust to capture his lips.

Shane can't quite maneuver his lips properly to kiss back; instead he uses Ilya's mouth as a sounding board for a chorus of choked-off moans. Ilya, at this moment, prefers the latter anyway.

Ilya brings his hands to Shane's waist, palming it greedily until his fingers touch again. "This is mine."

"It's yours," Shane whimpers. "I just -" Shane squeezes his eyes shut and tilts his head away. Ilya nudges Shane back to him with his nose and thumbs Shane's eyelids until they crack open again. "I just want this all the time."

"To fuck -" Ilya says, snapping his hips impossibly deeper, so hard Shane jolts, "to fuck all the time?"

Shane nods incoherently. "This is like -" He cuts himself off and just hums. Ilya strokes all along Shane's body, his knuckles roving down far enough that he palms Shane's ass. Stretching each cheek apart allows Ilya to seat himself the tiniest smidge deeper inside Shane, and from the way Shane wails, he can feel it. "This is beyond."

"It is," Ilya says, because somehow he understands. His curls are clumped together with sweat, and a drop follows the crease of his forehead.

Shane tugs Ilya in by the nape of his neck. This time he's the one to initiate the kiss. It's sloppy. Shane is rough with it, pressing Ilya's face against his until their noses mash together so hard that for a moment Ilya cannot breathe. They pull away with both their chins doused in each other's saliva.

"It's because it's you," Shane says. He doesn't bother wiping his chin because Ilya does it for him with the back of his reddened knuckles. Ilya begins rolling his hips inside Shane in place of the rapidity of the thrusts, and Shane's fingers twitch against his stomach. "Oh *fuck*, Ilya. Do - do that. Do that. That. Do it."

"I am," Ilya laughs, incredulous now at Shane's babbling. But he's so close to coming that even the stomach contractions required to laugh push him close to the edge. He spits in his own open hand and reaches down to Shane's cock to give it a few loving tugs.

"Oh, fuck. Fuck. But - I'll come," Shane protests weakly. He's alternating between shutting his eyes and opening them so wide they bulge.

Ilya strokes the tip of Shane's cock now, running the pad of his thumb over the slit. It's so hot - Shane's cock, his torso, the bulk of his shoulders - that it's almost unfathomable. "That's the point, *moy malysh*. You want to be here 'till morning?"

"Kind of," Shane says. He grins up at Ilya. His freckles deserve their own day of appreciation. One day, Ilya thinks, he'd like to come all over them.

Ilya leans in and kisses him again. It's the final push into oblivion: With Ilya's lips on his, Ilya's hand wrapped around Shane's cock, and Ilya's own cock seated so deep inside Shane his organs must be taking cover, Shane comes. This time it's into Ilya's palm.

Shane sighs, long and audibly. Almost unconsciously, his hole clenches from the force of his release.

Ilya's knees nearly give out. "I'm gonna -"

Shane wraps his shaky legs around Ilya's hips, keeping him at his deepest. "I want it in me," he whispers.

"Say it," Ilya groans.

"Come inside of me. Please. Ilya," he whimpers, "I've wanted your come inside me since you toured this fucking -"

Ilya comes so hard he sees stars.

"- place," Shane finishes, and gasps at the flood.

Ilya might need a medic, he thinks distantly, or maybe just Shane's hands on his chest. He fills Shane up. There's nowhere for his come to go but in. It's safe there, he thinks. It's warm and it's home and it's safe there.

He goes boneless a few indiscriminable moments later, sidling himself behind Shane so he can throw an arm across Shane's waist. He doesn't pull out, not yet. Ilya watches as his arm rises and falls in tune with Shane's sharp, heaving breaths. Ilya's own breathing is possibly worse: racked with pants like a sick dog.

"I am dead," Ilya croaks. His voice is half-gone.

Shane shimmies his shoulder blades until they hit Ilya's chest and fit there like two pieces of a puzzle. He sounds spent too, more than Ilya does - if even possible. "We should have fucked the second we met."

"Ah," Ilya rasps, grinning. "In the doorway?"

Shane laughs. “Earlier, even. If it was gonna feel like that. The parking lot.”

“I took the train.”

Shane adjusts his hips, sending prickles from Ilya’s engulfed cock up his spine. “On the platform, then,” Shane decides.

Ilya kisses Shane’s shoulder, above his puckered scar. “You had a boyfriend.”

“You had an outdated sexuality.”

Ilya changes his tune, because he realizes he’s still inside Shane and Shane hasn’t shown any signs of leaving like Ilya might expect him to. “You are perfect.”

Shane chortles weakly. “Oh, don’t say that.”

“Why? It’s true.”

“That’s your dick speaking.”

“My dick is dead. How can it speak?”

Shane grins, though Ilya can only see the crease of one cheek from behind him. “If it’s dead, why’s it still inside me? Is it rotting?”

“Resting,” Ilya corrects. ““If I am killed for simply living, let death be kinder than man,”” he quotes.

“Wow. Where’s that from?”

Ilya shrugs. “I don’t know. Instagram?”

Shane chuckles fondly. “Okay, you big baby. Can we turn around?”

Ilya frowns. “I have to pull out?”

“All good things must come to an end.” Shane reaches behind him and, with remarkable accuracy, smacks Ilya right on the ass. “Come on. Up, boy.”

Ilya obliges. He takes just a moment to watch his come leak out of Shane’s puffy hole as he pulls out. He drags a finger through it curiously, making Shane twitch. Then he flips over and Shane sidles up behind him and a little above, so Ilya’s head of golden curls tickle the underside of Shane’s chin.

Shane drapes his arm across Ilya’s hip, tucking him flush against Shane’s chest. “There,” Shane hums. He leans down and kisses Ilya’s sweaty forehead. “Good.”

Ilya fidgets weakly in Shane’s arms. “I think I should be the one holding you.”

“I like it like this. If that’s okay.”

“Yeah?”

“It feels nice.” Shane buries his chin in Ilya’s curls, parting them like a cat tongues back the fur of a kitten. “You’re a good shape, to be held.”

Ilya's first thought is of his father, oddly, and of himself as a child. "You are the first who thinks so."

He means it as a joke. Shane doesn't take it that way. "You deserve good things, Ilya."

Ilya wets his lips. "I don't know if I deserve them, but I have them," he whispers. He cranes his head up, catching a glimpse of Shane's eyebrows, furrowed that way they get when he's thinking hard. "I have you."

Shane briefly removes a hand to wipe his nose. He lays it right back onto Ilya's ribs. Ilya threads his fingers through it on reflex. "I'm gonna make you see it."

Ilya allows himself to relax as best he can. He nuzzles his head back into Shane's chest. "It is hard to make a Rozanov do anything."

"Not for a Hollander." Shane leans down and kisses Ilya, once on each eyelid. It feels less like being touched than being told. "Not for me."

It takes a while, and a bit of convincing from Shane, but Ilya works himself up to call Svetlana. He dials her at a tame 9 at night, Moscow time. He goes on a walk in the Montreal sun because the sight of him pacing the living room makes Shane anxious. She is reasonably calm when she answers.

"Ah. He speaks."

"I'm sorry," Ilya says. It feels nice, speaking Russian to someone who isn't Alexei. "I should have listened to you when we last spoke."

“When we last spoke, or every time we speak?”

Ilya grins despite himself. “Every time we speak.”

“Because?”

She is warming to him, Ilya can tell. They’ve played this game before. “Because you are always right.”

Svetlana sighs. *“I’ve missed you.”*

“Me too. That’s why -”

“Ah.” She interrupts. *“Have you rehabilitated yourself?”*

“About that,” Ilya says.

“Or removed yourself from the situation entirely? Like, why live with a gay man if it bothers you. You’re doing him a disservice.”

“We’re dating,” Ilya blurts.

Svetlana does not speak for a few precious seconds. *“Who?”*

Ilya gulps. Across the street, a man holds a leash that forks off in three directions, with dogs of various sizes and colors trotting along with it. “Shane and I.”

“Who is she? Someone from Tinder?”

“He. My roommate, Hollander. His name is Shane Hollander.”

Svetlana gasps, chortles, and then, in lieu of responding, Ilya hears the familiar ring of a video call. He moves the phone from his ear and aims the camera on his face - forehead, really, since his cheeks are red as tomatoes. Her mouth takes up the entire screen, gaping in shock. *“Holy shit. Ilyusha. You’re for real?”*

Ilya nods. “I’m ‘for real.’”

She shrieks, then. *“You’re gay.”*

“A little.” Ilya grins. “I like both.”

“Fuck off,” Svetlana says. She pulls back. Her eyes are wide as saucers, her smile nearly as big. *“You’re like me. Wow.”*

Heat fills Ilya’s face.

Svetlana grins, rather deviously. *“You copied me.”*

Ilya cranes the phone away from his face to hide his blush. “If you say so.”

“You’re sure about this? You’ve, like, fucked and everything?”

Ilya nods.

“And you like it?”

“More than anything,” Ilya says simply.

“Oh wow. Wow. Can I see a photo of him?”

Ilya brings the phone closer to his face so he can pull one up. “Don’t jerk off to it,” he warns.

“Ilya!”

“What? I would if I were you.” He picks a selfie of them that’s rather recent: the two of them on a hiking trail last weekend. Shane’s backwards cap is the slightest bit crooked and his smile is so sweet it seems candied. “There.”

“Wow.”

“Do you know any other words?” Ilya teases. He thumbs the bridge of Shane’s nose through the screen. “Handsome, right?”

Svetlana, on the other end, is quiet. Her gaze is contemplative.

“Stop thinking of jerking off.”

“Jesus, I’m not. I’m looking at you, actually. In the photo.”

“Why? You know what I look like. Look at Shane.” Ilya pauses. “But not too hard.”

“No...” She rubs a finger over her bottom lip. *“I’m looking at you.”*

“You have known what I look like for the past 15 years.”

“Yes,” she agrees. *“And I have never seen this smile.”*

“What smile?” Ilya squints at the photo. He finds it very difficult to look anywhere but at Shane’s face, but he tries. “Is it bad?”

“You have gums.”

“I have always had gums.”

“But I can see them.” She shifts some curls out of her tanned face. *“You look really happy.”*

It is true, Ilya realizes. Alarmingly so. He notices smile lines on his pale skin he’s never seen before. He swallows past the lump in his throat and mutters, “Gross.”

“You know, if you had just shown me a photo of him, I would not have doubted for a second that you were seething with jealousy. One selfie would have cleared you. He has fucking freckles.”

“I know,” Ilya says, oddly emotional. He blinks harshly. “And more come in the summer. They’re seasonal. Like sunflowers. Or apricots.”

“And you’re dating? You are boyfriends?”

Ilya nods.

She grins. *“Sweet. Who asked who?”*

Ilya scratches the back of his neck. He’s stopped walking, at this point, and settled on a bench by a local bus stop. “We haven’t really - well, I did not ask, officially.”

She blinks. *“So he’s not your boyfriend.”*

“No, he...” Ilya feels his pulse race. “He... fuck.”

“You should probably get on that.”

“How do I ask? I thought we already were.”

“Then it will be easy. He will say yes.”

“Shouldn’t I do something big? Like, bouquets? Or plan a whatever-the-fuck, a picnic?”

“That is you looking to procrastinate.” Svetlana reads him so easily. *“You are afraid he won’t say yes, if you ask outright. But of course he will. You are great. Just ask.”*

“But -”

“Get flowers after, if you want to. There is no special flower discount today over tomorrow.”

Ilya pouts. “At Costco, there might be.”

Svetlana sizes him up through the tiny camera. *“Don’t let this one get away.”*

“Now that you’ve said it, that’s the first thing I’ll do,” Ilya ribs.

Svetlana narrows her dark eyes. *“Don’t even joke.”*

“Okay.” Ilya hums his assent. “And I won’t. Let him get away, I mean.”

She sighs contentedly. “Aw, Ilyusha. You big softie. I know you won’t.”

Ilya stares at the screen for a long, long time after she hangs up.

Ilya waits a respectable amount of time after they’ve had sex to pop the question. This time it’s up against the kitchen countertop, Ilya taking Shane from behind. Shane’s head had knocked into the bunch of bananas and sent a few apples rolling to the floor. Ilya kicked them in the direction of the fridge to the music of Shane’s laughter and kept thrusting.

Now, they’re lounging in Shane’s bed. Shane has his silk pajama pants on, no shirt. His reading glasses are perched on the bridge of his nose, helping him sort through a convoluted onboarding email for work.

Ilya crawls up Shane’s legs until his head hovers right above the computer. Shane’s face gets dimmer as he powers it down.

Ilya sits back on Shane’s legs. “Um,” he begins.

Shane smiles at him. “Want a kiss?”

Ilya, like a fucking dog, salivates. “Yes please.”

Shane leans in. Ilya can’t resist it, not tonight and not ever, so he kisses Shane back and palms his bare chest as he does it.

When Shane’s breath starts hitching, though, Ilya pulls back. “Will you be my boyfriend?”

He doesn’t have even a second to feel sick with worry. “Yes,” Shane says. He reaches up and coils one of Ilya’s curls around his pointer finger. “Yes, I will.”

“Good,” Ilya manages. “Oh God. Good. Thank you. I couldn’t live with myself if - if I let you get away, or if you - if I saw you with, um, someone else. Again. No offense.”

Shane sinks his fingers deeper into Ilya’s curls. Ilya just bought a scalp massager; he thinks this is reason enough to throw it away. “None taken.”

“Obviously, you can be gay,” Ilya clarifies.

“Oh, thanks.”

“Just be gay with me. Only me. Please.”

Shane laughs, that softly sweet sound that can lull Ilya to dopey affection or sleep, depending on the occasion. “Alright. I can do that. I’m good with instructions.”

“Oh, I know so.”

Shane shoves him by the shoulder. Ilya boomerangs back onto Shane's legs and nudges his head up into Shane's hand again. Shane resumes stroking Ilya's nape. "You know, I was dying too. Hearing about your women."

"Really?" Ilya furrows his brows. "But you're so cool about it."

"Years of experience, I guess." Shane shrugs. His chest is flushed a cherry red. Ilya's handprint is partially to blame. "I would school my expression sometimes, in the mirror, before you'd come back. Practicing. You know me. My face hides nothing."

"I like your face." Ilya trails a finger down it, from Shane's nose to his pliant lips. He sneaks his finger between them. Shane entertains him for a moment, good sport that he is, and takes the finger in. Then he spits it out and laughs.

"I like your face too. Very pretty."

Ilya blushes. He hides it behind a scoff. "Pretty like a Casanova, right?"

Shane drones on. "I think I just wanted to see you happy. If it was with Rose, or Nancy, or that woman in tech sales -"

"Yasmine," Ilya supplies.

"Watch it."

Ilya laughs. After a moment, so does Shane.

"That part, wanting you to be happy, was true," Shane says. His Adam's apple bobs with his swallow. "*Is* true."

Ilya is happy. Perhaps more than Shane can conceptualize. “I will get you flowers, um, tomorrow.” Fuck, he spoiled it. Why’d he spoil it? “And a picnic later this week. With little sandwiches and toothpicks, like the Brits. Since we’re boyfriends.”

“You know,” Shane says, and smiles that coyish way that makes Ilya want to swallow him whole, “I kinda thought we already were.”

After Ilya’s elaborate picnic, during which a particularly ballsy seagull snatches the entirety of Shane’s tea sandwich from his plate, it becomes a Monday again and work calls. The difference is that now, every time Ilya misses Shane - which he did all the time when all they were was friends, anyway - he texts and says so. Shane will write back something sappy, like *I bet I miss you more. Or Just attended the most boring Zoom training on Earth and all I could think about was your fucking biceps. Real promotion material.*

But Shane does get promoted, in fact, only a few months later. He’s a manager now, which makes Ilya feel all hot inside, thinking about Shane bossing someone around. Ilya throws what he deems a “Shane party” to celebrate the milestone: it includes Ilya, and Rose, and fourteen rounds of Trivia Quest on Netflix Games on the TV. Rose taps out at round nine. Ilya goes until the end, and while Shane beats Ilya unquestionably in the Sports category, Ilya clinches a win in Geography.

It intrigues Shane so much that when they fuck that night, he asks Ilya to recite the geography song he learned in Russian primary school to memorize the entirety of Europe, Asia, and its capitals. (Shane comes with a whine on “*Prague*,” Ilya shortly after on “*Stockholm*.” It’s a miracle they make it that far.)

Time passes differently in a relationship, Ilya finds. One night of sex in Ilya’s bed, segue to sleeping in Shane’s - which works wonders when the washing machine breaks in August - seems to last a year. But the next day passes in a blink. Ilya gets a promotion next. With their new pocket change, they tour two-bedroom apartments across town: one bedroom for the both of them and another for Shane’s office.

“Or for sex dungeon,” Ilya had joked. They were hardly the only couple on the apartment tour, but from the looks of it the only ones with a sex life so lively that they inspected the soundproofing before the kitchen.

Shane had tilted his head, though, at the sex dungeon comment, as if in legitimate consideration. Ilya’s pants grew uncomfortably tight. Shane noticed and laughed in his face. They signed the lease.

People still stare at Shane, much to Ilya’s chagrin: the landlord, the local grocer, the regulars at their new gym since Shane wanted to avoid Jack and Ilya wanted to kill him. It’s a fact of life, one Ilya begrudgingly tolerates. But he handles it, one sly grope to Shane’s hips or kiss to his cheek at a time. And Ilya, selfishly, loves to see their faces drop: *Like, yes, he is mine, not yours, aren’t you so sad, I would be too if I were you, and actually I was you, for way longer than I fucking needed to be.*

So maybe what he feels is sympathy after all. Sympathetic, and so fucking smug.

Perhaps it only makes sense when Shane brings up an entirely new topic one night, innocuously, sprawled on the couch they first kissed on.

“I’d like you to meet my parents,” Shane says.

Ilya’s stomach does a backflip, like its contents have decided to riot. “Of course.” He mentally traces fourteen different conversation starters to Shane’s father, and each somehow ends with him getting catapulted from the house. “It will be fun.”

A week later, he finds himself in a navy dress shirt with a shiny bottle of wine in tow. Shane drives the two hours to Ottawa, hands at 9 and 3 o’ clock on the wheel. Ilya’s knee bobs the entire ride. Occasionally he loses control of it and bangs it against the car door. Shane shoots him a look, irritated, then another, fond, and whispers just loud enough to be heard over the music: “They’re gonna love you.”

When Shane slows to a stop, Ilya takes in the house before him. It is aggressively beautiful, with pink and yellow tulips crowding the porch. Sweat pools under Ilya’s armpits and coats

his fingers. He nearly drops the wine in his haste to pop open the car door.

“Don’t be nervous,” Shane says. He takes the wine bottle from Ilya’s hand, but Ilya motions for it back because as the guest he feels he should be the one to hand it over. “My family is, like, super laid-back.”

“Your mother sent me a Google Form for ‘dietary restrictions,’” Ilya deadpans.

“Well. It wouldn’t be very ‘laid-back’ for you to have an allergic reaction, now would it?”

Before they enter, Ilya notices a wooden picket fence blanketing the porch, the door slightly parted. He stops dead in his tracks. “The back. Can we enter through the back?”

Shane furrows his eyebrows. “I mean, if you want. But -”

Ilya is already shimmying past the gate. It spits him out into a well-kempt backyard. It’s there that he sees it. He feels like crying, or laughing, but he’s not sure of what he’s found yet so he does neither. “Shane. This is your tree, no?”

Shane comes up behind Ilya and places a thoughtful hand on the small of his back. The sun is at its peak in the sky, beating down on their foreheads. Shane’s face is perfectly golden, like a mango just before it softens. “Yeah. Wow. You remember that?”

Ilya nods. “That you would sit under as a kid.”

“I would read, or dig for worms, or play with my chess set.” Shane’s eyes go wide and wistful. He stalks over to the sprawling oak tree and leans against it, even though he’s wearing a baby blue shirt that it’s sure to track sap onto. “Do we look alike?” Shane sticks his hands out in a mimicry of its thick, crooked branches. “Me and the tree.”

Ilya grins. *My friend*, he thinks. *My boy*. “Yes.”

“Who’s cuter, though?” Shane mirrors Ilya’s smile tenfold, both rows of teeth on display. “Between me and the tree?”

Ilya gulps. He doesn’t respond. Shane’s arms waver, straining to match the shadow of the hulking branches.

“Every second of hesitation is one more piece of clothing I’m leaving on tonight.” Shane beams and wiggles his eyebrows. He wiggles his arms too, without trying, some lapse in his mind-body connection. Still he attempts to imitate the tree. He even pops his hip, simulating where the trunk curves. “Who’s cuter? Hm?”

“Shane,” Ilya says.

“Ilya,” Shane counters, aglow.

“Shane?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

Shane loses his footing; he trips and catches himself on an overgrown root. “Oh.” He stumbles over and presses a hand to Ilya’s chest, right over his heartbeat. “I love you too.”

Ilya layers his palm over Shane’s knuckles. It’s so sweaty it must feel like a lilypad, but Shane only smiles. “That’s a relief,” Ilya chokes out.

“But not a surprise,” Shane says. “Right?”

Ilya feels his breath hitch. He nods, because there is a difference, an important one. “Not a surprise.”

A sharp female voice calls out from a newly minted gap in the sliding door. “Lamb chops, anyone?”

Shane must notice Ilya’s instinct to pull away, as if caught, because Shane drags him closer. “We’re coming!”

“They’re burnt,” comes a deeper, male voice from inside the house.

“They’re not burnt, they’re lightly crispened,” comes her rebuttal.

The deep voice again: “More like burnt to a crisp. I messed up.”

The woman steps out of the house and onto the back patio. Her eyes are like Shane’s, warm and bright, with creases by the corners from laughter. “Shane, your father is throwing a fit. Please tell him you prefer your lamb chops the color of coal.”

“So you *do* think they’re burnt,” the male voice laments. “I’m talentless. We should just go to a steakhouse.”

Yuna Hollander shakes her head, her hair falling into her eyes. “Ilya,” she says. It’s the first time she has addressed him directly, allergy form submission aside. He feels like God himself has sent for him. “It’s great to meet you, but I have to say: Hollander men are something else. I’m warning you now.”

Ilya clears his throat and begins the slow walk across the grass to greet her. He pushes the wine bottle her direction first; she accepts it politely and sets it aside to wrap him in her arms, so tightly he gasps.

“Warning received,” Ilya says into her shoulder, past the lump in his throat. Shane sidles up next to him, and Yuna takes to hugging each of them in turn like two pigeons after the same loaf of bread.

“And warning ignored,” Shane teases.

“No returns, by the way,” Yuna says, ruffling Shane’s hair fondly. She releases Ilya from the hug and pats his blushing cheek like she has known him for years instead of seconds. “You’re stuck with him now.”

Ilya smiles. He thinks he could spend the rest of his life in this moment, smiling at them. In fact, he gets the distinct feeling that the rest of his life will become, in essence, variations of this moment: different seasons, and cities, and smells, but the same boy glued to his side, like glitter after a party.

“Good,” Ilya says. “I was hoping.”

The way this story became my MOST READ Hollanov fic before I even finished it is absolutely insane. Thank you, tree-fuckers! (Said fondly)

If you enjoyed this even a smidge, please please please comment and tell me what you liked, how you felt, etc. It gets me through the day. What did you think of the confession, the first kiss, the upgrade to boyfriends, the sex (what who said that), the yearning? I have no one IRL I talk to about this shit so I need to know.

If you want to read a work where Shane and Ilya are hooking up the entire time, feel free to read the 57k behemoth I posted all at once called [Tour de Force](#). Both stories have been such wonderful exercises for me because I love the pining and yearning stage, but once my couple gets to the stable relationship portion it can be hard for me to GAF and keep writing LOL.

But these boys are just too cute to leave hanging, in any universe. ❤️

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!