

Somebody To Love

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Somebody To Love

by [shadow_lilies](#)

Summary

Shane Hollander was the number one draft pick and is now captain of the Boston Raiders. Ilya Rozanov quit hockey after his mother died and now owns a bookshop in Boston. When Shane moves into a new apartment down the street from One Good Memory, he finds more than just a convenient place to grab a new book.

Or...Shane is lonely and closeted and reads a lot; Ilya is charmed and quotes books at him.

Notes

My last fic was an AU where Ilya's story is mostly canon, but Shane never went pro, inspired by Hallelujah by Leonard Cohen: [The Minor Fall](#), [The Major Lift](#). This time Shane is [kind of] canon (no Ilya to take the first draft pick spot, so that goes differently, and he reads more than just hockey books), but Ilya never went pro, inspired by Somebody to Love by Queen.

**slight disclaimer: I don't pretend or intend to be an authority on queer lit. This is just a love letter to some of my favorite things (i.e., queer lit and books in general) and not meant to be pretentious.

Yes, it's low stakes/low angst. It's fluffy and sweet. It's a bookstore au, cozy vibes were the intent. You don't have to read it if you don't want that (I've seen the complaints, but it is accurately tagged and I'm not sure what else I can tag there, hence this extra note)

***this is part 1 of a series just for the potential to revisit them later. No immediate sequel... this is a complete fic on its own.

Chapter 1: Can anybody find me

Chapter Notes

(Cover art created by [@hollanovcentral](#) on insta 🧡🧡🧡)

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



Shane's new Boston penthouse apartment was neat. It was always neat because his cleaning service came once a week, and he rarely made a mess of anything that he didn't take care of immediately. The exception was the stacks of books. There was a stack on his end table in the living room, mostly non-fiction about hockey stats and history. There was a stack on the

nightstand in his bedroom, mostly mysteries or thrillers and occasionally something more literary. There was a smaller stack in his kitchen, only cookbooks and meal prep guides. And there was one other stack, hidden in a chest of drawers that was tucked into the back of his very large walk-in closet. Those had a common theme. Some of them were erotic romance books, mostly involving male-male relationships. Several about hockey players. He'd come to realize the sex depicted in those, while very...entertaining...was not always the most accurate. So there were also a few that were...informational. Those were more recent purchases.

He'd only been living in this building for a month, having moved from a different one because he craved something quieter, something with a more private entrance. Not entirely unrelated to the informational books he'd spent quite a lot of time with recently. He liked the new place, the neighborhood, but the fact that he had a private entrance was absolutely the biggest perk. Most of the month he'd lived here, he'd been on the road and hadn't had much time to fully explore the neighborhood beyond the little cafe a block down, where he'd stopped a few times for a black coffee or whole-grain avocado toast.

Today he was going to check out the bookstore that was just past the cafe. It was called One Good Memory, which sounded a little sad to Shane. The outside was red brick and big windows, featuring a display of recent releases in a baffling configuration. Shane's fingers were itching to straighten them, alphabetize them, stand them in a row...anything but the cluster they were currently in. There was a black cat curled up next to them, a thin purple collar with a silver tag around its neck.

Shane pushed the door open and stepped inside, greeted by a rush of air that smelled like old books and faintly something else, cigarettes maybe. The store wasn't large, but there were several wooden shelves extending from the left wall to just right of center, going from the front of the store toward the back, plus shelves lining every wall, and even a couple of comfortable looking armchairs in the back corner, a small table between them. The floor was old wood, scratched and notched, giving the place a sense of wisdom, like it had absorbed something new from every pair of feet that crossed it, holding it all in, waiting for someone to partake.

There was a man behind the counter, his nose in a book. He looked up as the door opened, and his striking blue-green eyes caught the sun for just a moment, drawing Shane's gaze like a beacon. His curly golden brown hair shone like honey in the beam of light, and the way the corners of his mouth quirked up made Shane's stomach flip.

What the fuck? He almost turned around and walked right out. Why was he reacting like that to a stranger? He also wondered if the man recognized him. Probably. Most people in Boston did after six years with the Raiders. Shane gave him a quick nod and then turned down the first aisle, trying to get the heat of that stare off of him.

He already knew what book he was buying today, but he also wanted to browse. Shane loved bookstores. The possibilities, the words, the hundreds of lives he could live that were an escape from his own. Every bookstore was unique, and Shane had been to many over the years. He'd visited pretty much every single one in each of the cities they played in, even while Cliff playfully whined that it was a waste of time and they could be doing something

more fun. He hadn't had as much time to track down each one in Boston, always busy with practice or meetings or volunteering, but now that this one was down the street, he hoped to become a regular.

He walked up and down the aisles slowly, his eyes drifting back to the man behind the counter each time he left one aisle to turn down the next. Once he caught him staring again, but after that, his nose was in his book again as he hunched over the counter.

Shane picked up the book he was there to purchase, and when he started back toward the counter, he almost tripped over the cat from the window, which was now winding its way through his legs. He stopped to bend down and pet it, letting his fingers run through its silky short coat until it was purring against him.

"Hi," he said softly. "Aren't you friendly?"

"Sorry about that," said a low, rich, lightly accented voice. The man behind the counter was leaning forward, book face down beside him. "He loves attention."

"That's okay," Shane said, still bent over. "I don't mind."

"His name is Vanya."

"Hi, Vanya." The cat was still rubbing against him, not letting him move.

The man came around the counter, walking up to Shane, not stopping until their feet were nearly touching. When Shane stood up, he was much too close. The cigarette smell was stronger, but so was something else, something warmer and woodsy that made Shane dizzy. He took a step back, careful not to step on the cat, who was promptly picked up by the man. Vanya nuzzled against him, going pliant in his arms.

"I told you not to bother the customers," the man cooed affectionately. He took the cat with him back behind the counter while Shane watched for a second too long. He made his feet move before it got too awkward, walking up to the counter and setting his book down.

The man picked it up, turning it over and reading the title.

"Interesting choice," he said, drawing the words out while Shane was internally kicking himself because this was definitely not a good look for someone who was *definitely a straight hockey player who liked women*.

"Is it better to speak or die?" the man continued.

"Sorry, what?" Shane asked, not sure what he meant, and also trying not to panic on the spot.

The man smiled, and it lit up the whole room and made Shane's knees weak. *Get a fucking grip.*

"You will see," he said, holding up the book and giving it a gentle shake. "Not what I would expect the Boston Raiders captain to be reading."

“Oh, really? I don’t even know what it’s about. A friend recommended it.” Shane could feel the heat creeping up the back of his neck, the impulse to run out of the store almost overwhelming. But that would certainly look worse.

“Is that right? Are MLH players recommending *Call Me By Your Name* to each other now? How...progressive.” The man’s voice was irritating in its calm, teasing tone.

“I have other friends,” Shane said quickly, even though it was nearly a lie.

The man nodded slowly. “Well, I hope you enjoy your *friend’s* recommendation,” he said as he rang the book up and took Shane’s proffered credit card. “If you like it, come back, and I will show you something better to read next.”

Shane was pretty sure he was never setting foot in here again. “Uh, sure.”

“Who would have thought Shane Hollander read books between getting slammed around on the ice,” the man mused. Shane ignored the way that velvety voice wrapped around the syllables of his name, making it sound both luxurious and obscene, sending a ripple of heat through him. *Jesus*.

“What, I must be stupid just because I play hockey?” He refocused on the insult, letting the heat turn to anger.

The man just smiled at him, close-lipped and infuriating, though Shane couldn’t have pinpointed why exactly.

“Appearances can be deceiving,” the man said mysteriously. “Have a nice day, Shane Hollander.”

A shiver ran through him, and he wished the floor would turn to lava and put him out of whatever misery this was. Instead, his mouth opened of its own accord and proved that he was, in fact, stupid.

“What’s your name?”

The infuriating smile again. “Ilya”

“Ilya,” Shane repeated, and it rolled around on his tongue like something sour and then sweet, giving him goosebumps and making him want more immediately. *Time to go*.
“Thanks.”

Then he turned and quickly walked out without looking back.

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He had the rest of the day off, no game, so after he went for a run, he cracked open his new book. And he didn’t put it down until he was done and the sun was long gone behind the horizon and his back was stiff from sitting in the same position on the couch for hours. His eyes were wet, and then eventually too dry, and his heart ached for Elio and Oliver and their “parallel lives.”

You are the only person I'd like to say goodbye to when I die, because only then will this thing I call my life make sense.

Would that be Shane one day? Wishing he could have loved and had someone instead of dreaming about it, wishing for it, wondering if he could live without it and knowing he had to. He thought about that line for a long time. While his head lay against his pillow fighting sleep. While he skated through practice the next morning, watching his teammates laugh and chirp, wondering what it felt like to go home to someone you loved. While he tucked the book away in the drawer in the back of his closet, the irony not at all lost on him. He was well familiar with closets.

He was still thinking about it when he pulled on his shoes and took his private stairwell down to the street, feet carrying him unerringly to One Good Memory. He took a deep breath and pushed the door open, eyes darting around, looking for Vanya. And maybe Ilya. There was no one behind the counter, and Vanya was not in the window.

Shane started walking toward the back, deciding to start at the other end today to properly browse since he didn't come in with a book in mind this time. He turned down the last aisle, this one housing used books only. He walked slowly, letting his eyes take in each one, the spines in varying states of disrepair, dragging a finger over the rough, wrinkled cracks. He liked to think the most ragged ones were the most well-loved.

"Shane Hollander, back again so soon."

Shane's whole body went taut and hot, that voice trickling down his spine like something scalding. He turned to look at the man. At Ilya. He was standing at the end of the aisle in a beam of sunlight, looking angelic and devilish all at once, the golden halo of his curls making Shane's fingers flex, the desire to run them through those locks strange and overwhelming. He his curled his hand into a fist at his side.

"Yeah, hi," Shane said stupidly, his voice wavering.

"You did not like your book? Need another already?"

"Uh, no, I liked it a lot." A risk. A risk to admit that to anyone, but something in him felt safe enough to say it, like he recognized a refuge in the broad shoulders, the annoying smirk, the too-deep eyes. A very, very stupid risk.

"Is that right? And what, you have come back to take me up on my offer to recommend something better?"

Shane swallowed. "I was just looking."

Ilya shrugged and started to turn.

"Wait," Shane said, his voice too loud in the small, intimate space. "What would you recommend?"

"Come." Ilya beckoned him with a small wave, and he disappeared past the aisle.

Shane followed him down a different aisle, almost running into him when he stopped short and then backing up awkwardly, only to trip over Vanya, who had finally decided to make an appearance. Ilya reached out and grabbed his wrist, steadying him as Vanya slipped through his legs. The point where their bodies touched, hand to wrist, skin to skin, felt like a brand, hot and bubbling, and Shane was sure it'd be red when he let go. But it wasn't, and the sudden absence of it, even though it had lasted only seconds, was disorienting. Or maybe it was the way Ilya was looking at him. Something almost hungry in his gaze. *No*. Shane was imagining things. He was horny and repressed and very stupid. He needed to go out and get laid and stop reading about other people getting laid because it was melting his brain.

The moment passed, and Ilya turned back to the shelf, plucking out a book with a cream colored cover, two men silhouetted in the center.

"Oh, um, I'm not..." he started, trying to figure out how to say he didn't read only books about queer men. Even though...he certainly did read a lot of them these days. But Ilya didn't need to know that. No one needed to know that. "I mean, I don't need books only about..."

Ilya was looking at him, an unreadable expression on his face, and Shane got the impression he was trying to decide if he was lying or not.

"So reading books about men is a problem now?" Ilya asked. "This is what, disgusting to you?"

Shane's mouth dropped open. "What? No. Of course not. I'm just not..."

Ilya squinted at him. "This is a good book. If you liked the other one, you should read this one." He handed the book over, and Shane accepted it. *Maurice* by E.M. Forster. "I think you will find much to think about here."

Shane didn't know what he meant by that, but he looked down, making sure Vanya wasn't under his feet, and then backed out of the aisle. He made it to the counter before Ilya, setting the book down and taking his wallet out.

"I don't just read...these types of books," Shane said when Ilya stepped behind the counter. "I'll read this one, but..." He trailed off, knowing this was a case of the lady protesting too much, and Ilya probably knew it too.

"Mm, so Shane Hollander has a big appetite for books? What else do you read?"

"I read a lot of non-fiction, some thrillers. Uh...sometimes romance. I even like Stephen King."

Ilya's eyebrows lifted in slight surprise. "There has been, is, and always will be every conceivable type of person," he said, his voice too soft and deep, making Shane lean in imperceptibly before he caught himself.

"What?" he asked.

Ilya smiled. “You will see.” He held up the book and waved it around, just like he had yesterday. And while he'd read *Call Me By Your Name*, he had noted the line Ilya had quoted yesterday: *Is it better to speak or die?* He'd even highlighted it. And Shane Hollander did not deface books. But Shane Hollander was not thinking rationally these days.

Shane nodded at him. “You speak in book quotes often?”

Ilya shrugged. “Yes.”

He rang the book up and took Shane's credit card. Then he handed the card back, slipped the receipt into the book, and asked, “Do you want a bag?”

“No, that's fine.” He took the book, tucked it under his arm, title hidden, and started to turn, intending to leave before this got any more...whatever it was.

“You come back here and tell me your favorite quotes from that one and I will give you another to read.”

It wasn't a question. And Shane found he liked the command a little too much. He nodded slowly. “Okay. Maybe.”

Ilya smiled, that close-lipped, irritating smirk that was already too familiar, but it softened just a little right as Shane turned and walked out the door.

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Shane started Maurice as soon as he got home. He found that much like *Call Me By Your Name*, he couldn't put it down. And Ilya had been right, it was both better and gave him a lot to think about. He found himself holding the highlighter again, committing unspeakable crimes against bound paper, but there were so many quotes he couldn't let go, including the one Ilya had thrown at him. He also knew he'd never remember them perfectly enough to repeat them the way Ilya did, so he'd have to bring this with him when he went back. Because as much as he knew he shouldn't, he would go. Not tomorrow because he had a game, but maybe the next day. He found himself experiencing a pang of disappointment that he'd have to wait even that long, and that's how he knew this was definitely a problem.

He didn't finish Maurice in one sitting, or even one day, but he managed a good chunk of it, and in between their morning skate and their game the next day, he read a little more. And when he got home after the game, worn out but still thrumming with the usual post-win adrenaline, he picked it up again and stayed up far later than he should have to finish it.

One line kept coming back to him, one that he'd been hesitant to highlight, knowing it revealed too much, flayed him open and left him raw and aching:

He knew that loneliness was poisoning him, so that he grew viler as well as more unhappy.

Shane had been lonely for a long time. He'd dated women, even enjoyed some of it. The company, at least. He'd gotten a blow job from a man once, desperation driving him to take an untenable risk during an away game, his teammates not far enough away for comfort.

He'd made out and traded hand jobs with another in Aruba, strong fruit-flavored drinks making him brave enough for an hour. And that was it. That was all he had to grasp onto. The only fulfilling sexual encounters he'd had, which was not an ideal situation for a twenty-five year old. Especially since he had no expectations for that to change until he retired at least. Which could be more than a decade away. It was already becoming harder to ignore, especially when so many of his teammates were getting married, having kids, being happy, leaving him with an ache so desperate he thought it would physically mark him, like some bizarre version of *The Scarlet Letter*. A big P for pathetic, or maybe just a G for gay, since that's what he was running from, being buried by. What he was ashamed of. He wasn't, though, not really. At least, not as strongly as before. Books made him feel normal. Like he was allowed to just exist this way. Stepping into the locker room reminded him that he wasn't.

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The next day, after he got home from practice and downed a protein shake, he took another shower for good measure, then grabbed his now highlighted copy of *Maurice* and made the walk down to One Good Memory.

There was someone else in the store today, another customer standing at the counter while Ilya rang up her books and chatted with a polite smile on his face. Shane walked past them and turned down a random aisle.

"I will call you when the new Nora Roberts is here, okay?" he heard Ilya say jovially. "Have a good afternoon, Barbara."

"Thank you as always, Mr. Rozanov," the older woman said. "Don't know what I'd do without you."

Shane smiled at the endearing conversation, the name Rozanov digging somewhere deep in his chest and holding on. Ilya Rozanov. A name fit for a novel.

"Shane Hollander," he heard from behind him, that voice carrying, sending shivers down his spine, even still. "I know you brought *Maurice* back with you."

Shane stepped out of the aisle, walking up to the counter with *Maurice* held out like an offering.

"Are you returning it?" Ilya asked.

"Oh, no. I just knew I wouldn't remember my favorite quotes perfectly."

He flipped the book open to a page with a highlighted line, showing Ilya his intention.

"Mm, you're a highlighter. Somehow I did not expect this," Ilya said, taking the book from him.

"I'm not usually," Shane said quickly, wondering if this was a kick-outtable offense. "But there were a lot of good lines."

“Yes. I told you.”

Shane watched him flip through the pages, stopping on each one that contained streaks of yellow.

“Interesting,” Ilya said. “*At times he entertained the dream. Two men can defy the world.*” He read the highlighted quote aloud, and it sounded much better in his voice than it had in Shane's head.

Shane's cheeks heated at that one. Another chess move in this risky game he was playing, this time putting his rook right next to Ilya's queen, giving up another vital piece of information without even trying to avoid it.

Ilya's eyes lifted from the page, lingering on his for a few seconds, scanning his face, the corners of his mouth lifting just a touch. Then he looked down again, flipping through the rest of the pages, going back to some, like he was analyzing each choice. Shane found himself shifting from foot to foot, the scrutiny making him feel even more under a magnifying glass than when he was on the ice. One pair of eyes taking in all his secrets, whether he knew it or not, vs. hundreds of thousands of pairs of eyes watching him knock a puck around with a stick, secrets safely tucked in the back of his closet. Only one of those things made his stomach flip so hard he thought it might burst out of him.

Ilya was lingering for a while on one page, and Shane glanced down to see that it was the one with the quote about loneliness. Whatever his stomach had been doing before, it was worse now. Why had he thought this was a good idea? He didn't know this guy. But this guy definitely knew who he was. And now he also *knew*. Knew that he wasn't just a successful hockey player, captain of the Raiders, multi-millionaire who did commercials and brand deals and had briefly dated a movie star. Knew that he was lonely and probably at least suspected he was gay. *Fuck me.*

“You have picked many good ones,” Ilya said finally, closing the book and handing it back to him. “Wait here. If someone comes in, please tell them I will be right back.”

Before Shane could do more than nod once, Ilya was walking toward the back, where he opened a door that revealed the edge of a staircase, and then closed it behind him. Shane tapped the counter nervously and looked around, hoping to find Vanya. No sign of the black cat. He paced and pulled his phone out, wondering how long Ilya expected him to wait. It had only been four minutes, so maybe he could chill a little.

A couple of minutes later, the door in the back opened again, and Ilya stepped out holding two books in his hand. He walked behind the counter and set both of the books in front of him, facing Shane. One had a blue and black cover: *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin. The other had a very pink cover, with two cartoonish men leaning against the last word of the title: *Red, White, and Royal Blue* by Casey McQuiston. Shane snorted softly, caught off guard by the second one.

“This one,” Ilya said, placing his palm over *Giovanni's Room*, “is heavy.” He flipped the pages open, revealing some lines already highlighted, not as bright as Shane's, showing its

age. “I already highlighted this one, you see. You can highlight over my lines if you find any that we agree on.”

Shane looked up at him in surprise. “What?”

“You take these and read them. Bring them back when you’re done, and I will give you more.”

“Why? I don’t mind buying my own copies.”

Shane thought he saw a flash of disappointment in those eyes, the color and depth of the sea.

“This is...a conversation. You will see what I liked here while you read. Like we are talking.”

Shane’s chest fluttered. “Oh. Yeah, I guess. But you want me to highlight your books?”

“Yes, that’s why I brought them out here.” He paused and then put his hand on the pink book. “This one is not heavy. It will be a good chaser. Very fluffy, rom-com. Cute. But I think you will maybe find some things to think about there, too. This is an advanced copy...not out yet. You can read it early.”

“Oh,” Shane said, his brain taking longer to catch up than usual. “That’s cool. Thank you.”

Ilya smiled at him. Not a smirk this time...a satisfied grin, like this was exciting for him. It was for Shane, too, if he was being honest.

“Read them. Come back when you’re done.”

Shane nodded. “Okay, thanks. Um, do you want me to buy something else while I’m here? I feel bad—”

Ilya waved a hand at him. “No, no. Not this time.”

“Alright then. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Shane Hollander. Good luck tomorrow night.”

“Do you watch?” he asked before he could stop himself. Tomorrow they would play Nashville here at home.

Ilya rocked his head back and forth. “Sometimes.” Then, before Shane could say anything else or turn to go, he added, “I will be watching tomorrow.” And then he winked and short-circuited Shane’s brain.

“Oh. Thanks,” he said awkwardly. “Well...I’ll see you in a few days then. After I read these.”

He held up the books, then turned before anything too embarrassing could come out of his mouth, and pushed out into the sunny Boston afternoon feeling, for the first time in a long time, like someone who had something other than hockey going on in his life. The books were heavy in his hand, comforting and full of possibilities. The thought of reading a book

Ilya had marked up, highlighted, was like a secret little thrill, a peek into his head. The head of this stranger who was quickly becoming the highlight of his days. Shane shook his head, trying to dislodge the dumb smile stuck there, and had the disarming thought that these books weren't going to end up in the drawer at the back of his closet, which was both exciting and terrifying.

Chapter End Notes

Okay I had a note here about the name of the bookstore and some other related info, but it gets revealed later in the story, so I went ahead and removed it from here.

Also, yes I know RWRB by Casey McQuiston wouldn't have been out yet if we're sticking to the canon timeline (not even an arc)...but welp, I don't care...sometimes we must pretend. :)

Books mentioned in this chapter:

Call Me By Your Name by André Aciman

Maurice by E.M. Forster

Giovanni's Room by James Baldwin

Red, White and Royal Blue by Casey McQuiston

Also: [Loose inspo for Shane's apartment](#)

His building would be nicer and have more floors, and everything in the apartment would be bigger/nicer because ya boy is rich rich. But I wanted something to start with and this was it (hopefully this listing doesn't disappear).

Chapter 2: Take a look at yourself in the mirror and cry

Chapter Notes

Mild spoilers for The Song of Achilles (which are also spoilers for a 1000+ year old myth so...). Also mild spoilers for Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda.

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

He started Giovanni's Room that night. Ilya was right of course, it was heavy. It took him four days to read, partially because he had practices and a game, but also because his eyes didn't move through the words as quickly. They were sticky, clawing, like they were fighting him on the way in and then lodging themselves somewhere uncomfortable. He highlighted several lines and passages, most of them quite long, most of them already highlighted in pale yellow, but none that weighed on his mind as much as the one that had made him set the book down for several minutes when he first read it:

'Love him,' said Jacques, with vehemence, 'love him and let him love you. Do you think anything else under heaven really matters? And how long, at the best, can it last, since you are both men and still have everywhere to go? Only five minutes, I assure you, only five minutes, and most of that, hélas! in the dark. And if you think of them as dirty, then they will be dirty—they will be dirty because you will be giving nothing, you will be despising your flesh and his. But you can make your time together anything but dirty, you can give each other something which will make both of you better—forever—if you will not be ashamed, if you will only not play it safe.' He paused, watching me, and then looked down to his cognac. *'You play it safe long enough,' he said, in a different tone, 'and you'll end up trapped in your own dirty body, forever and forever and forever—like me.'*

The last bit especially had torn something inside of him, left him bleeding and exposed for quite a while.

You play it safe long enough and you'll end up trapped in your own dirty body, forever and forever and forever.

He'd thought about it while he played Nashville. He'd thought about Ilya too, watching him on his TV. Would he really be watching? Maybe he was just being polite. But if he was, then he'd seen Shane score and then celebrate because it was a good goal and he was proud of it. He busted his body every day, the least he could do was appreciate when it worked the way it was supposed to.

Another line he'd highlighted, one that hadn't hurt him, was, *I often wonder what I'd do if there weren't any books in the world.* Maybe Shane would survive without them, but he would be a lot more confused. More lonely.

When he finally finished Giovanni's Room, he'd never been so grateful to pick up a bright pink book in his life. Those two cartoon men on the front looked charming, and this book was clearly a romance, meaning a nice happily ever after. Or at least a happy for now. After the gut punch that was the end of Giovanni's Room, he'd take whatever these cute little illustrated guys were offering.

Shane read that one in one day. He was in fact charmed by Alex Claremont-Diaz and Prince Henry. He also appreciated that there was at least some on-page sex, though it was a bit lacking in detail. He was still a twenty-five year old who desperately needed to get laid, so sue him. But Ilya had been right, there was much to think about even in this light rom-com. He could relate to being in the spotlight and trying to hide your sexuality, knowing the consequences would be steep if not. He was jealous of these fictional boys and their ability to make it work while being adorable and relatable and all the things Shane could never be. He was awkward and boring and definitely not brave like them.

He highlighted a few lines in that one too, especially the charming: *History, huh? Bet we could make some.* He also highlighted: *Take anything you want and know you deserve to have it.* That one felt foreign and unreachable to him. Not relatable so much as desirable. Slightly more relatable: *He wants to set himself on fire, but he can't afford for anyone to see him burn.* Because surely everything he wanted, he couldn't afford to let anyone see him have.

He still thoroughly enjoyed Red, White, and Royal Blue and would definitely buy a copy as soon as it was out. He'd been smiling almost the whole time he read it. Maybe this would be a nice new reading routine...one heavy, one light. One that abraded his insides and one that soothed them. Ilya Rozanov smirking at him drifted through his head, and he hated the way that was also soothing. He was a nice guy who wanted to sell books. And Shane was a nice guy who wanted to buy books. Of course they would talk about books. He probably let his regulars borrow books all the time. But Shane couldn't deny...he was excited to go back to One Good Memory tomorrow.

-

"What's up with you today?" Cliff Marlow asked from a few feet down the bench. They had just finished with practice for the day, and Shane was pulling off his sweaty gear and clothes, his mind already between the stacks of One Good Memory.

"Nothing. What do you mean?"

"I don't know, man. You look happy. But like...weird."

Shane made a face at him. "Asshole. I'm not allowed to be happy?"

"I mean, you are, but it's kinda freaking me out."

Shane snapped his clean towel at Cliff, making him laugh and dodge and almost fall off the bench.

"So, are you going to tell me?" Cliff asked. "Is it a girl?"

Cliff had mostly left him alone about that since he broke up with Rose Landry a few months ago. He and Rose were still friends, good friends even, but she had been kind of the straw that broke the camel's back. He couldn't keep pretending. And Rose had clocked him in two weeks flat. Would have been even sooner if they'd been together more often, he was pretty sure. They'd met by chance at a club in Montreal, where Cliff had dragged him after a game there. She'd been filming nearby and partying with a couple of castmates. Then she'd come to Boston for a few days just to spend time with him, and he'd gone to LA for a few days a week after that. And that had been it. Enough time for it to be obvious that his body didn't respond the way it should to an incredibly beautiful woman whom he liked so much. She had really been perfect, except for that one tiny issue on his part.

He sighed. "No, it's nothing. Practice was good, that's all."

"Alright. You wanna play basketball with me and Connors and Carmichael in a little while?"

"Can't today. I've got an appointment."

Shane figured that wouldn't invite too many questions, and the thought of doing anything other than going to One Good Memory filled him with...something unpleasant. He escaped to the showers before Cliff could ask or notice anything else.

When he got home, he went straight to his bedroom and put on nicer clothes, fussed with his hair in the mirror, grabbed the two books, and headed out. The fact that it was only a ten minute walk was pretty nice. Also probably problematic. He didn't need any more excuses to be in that store more than he already was.

He pushed the door open to find Ilya at the counter, his face in a book once again. His eyes darted up, and the book went down immediately.

"I was wondering if you stole my books," Ilya said, his voice teasing. "Never to return."

"Sorry, it's been a busy week. And this one wasn't as quick a read," he said, holding Giovanni's Room up.

Ilya nodded slowly. "Yes, I thought so. But important, yes?"

"Yeah. I'm glad I read it. Thanks."

"And the other?"

Shane smiled before he could stop it. "It was fun."

Ilya returned the smile. "Yes. Very cute, huh?"

Shane realized grinning over the gay rom-com was maybe a lot. Maybe he didn't need to be so obvious, even if he'd already given himself away multiple times now. Oh well, the smile wasn't budging.

Ilya held out a hand, and Shane stepped up to the counter to hand him the books. He opened Giovanni's Room first, stopping to look at the pages with the brighter yellow highlighter. For

the lines that had already been highlighted, he only ran the fine point of the highlighter through the middle of it, leaving paler stripes above and below it, so he didn't entirely erase Ilya's own highlights. Now he could easily see where the two converged.

"I bet this passage was a big one," Ilya said softly, stopping on the page where *the* passage was. The one Shane had kept turning over in his head over and over. *Forever and forever and forever.*

He nodded. "Yeah...I had to put it down for a while. After."

Ilya looked up at him, something like sympathy in his eyes, just briefly before they dropped back to the pages. He hummed and nodded to himself, like he was judging each one. Shane felt like a student standing in front of his teacher while his assignment was graded in front of him. It made him want to fidget. He was twisting the watch on his wrist around and around and around, even though it was fastened too tightly to do that comfortably. and the links caught the hairs on his arm, each little pinch pulling his attention away, just enough to keep him from pacing.

Finally, Ilya set Giovanni's Room down and picked up Red, White and Royal Blue. He didn't comment on any of those highlights, but he did smile the entire time he flipped through.

"So...you like this rom-com. Maybe I'll give you something light again. A little break?"

Shane shrugged one shoulder, nonchalant. *Right.* "That would be okay."

"You will have to buy this one. I don't have a copy anymore. Gave it to a nice kid who needed it. This one is written for a younger audience. Is that okay?"

"Oh, like YA? Yeah, I don't mind. I read Perks of Being a Wallflower recently."

Ilya looked at him, his gaze always too intense, like he had X-ray vision into every one of Shane's neurotic thoughts. Like he could probably tell that one of his shoes was currently tied tighter than the other one and it was driving him crazy and as soon as he stepped out of here he was going to fix it. Hopefully he couldn't see that deep.

Ilya stepped out from behind the counter and disappeared down an aisle. Before Shane could decide whether to follow, he was back, carrying a red paperback. He held it up in front of him, showing Shane the cover. Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda. *Sure...why not.*

"This is cute, coming of age. Not as heavy as Perks."

"Okay," Shane said. "Sounds good."

"Do your teammates know you read all these fun books?" Ilya asked as he scanned the barcode.

"Uh...no, only the non-fiction and thrillers. There are...a few things they don't know about me." Shane's cheeks were hot. He was stupid. So very stupid. This man made his filter exceptionally bad.

“Is that so?” Ilya said quietly, not looking up from where he was swiping Shane’s card.

“I mean...my life is pretty public. Everyone knows everything about me. More than I do most of the time. Sometimes it’s nice to keep one little thing to myself.”

“Sometimes it seems like everyone knows who I am except me,” Ilya said, looking up at him now. He must have seen the question on Shane’s face because he held the book up and wiggled it, apparently code for *this is a quote you’ll read soon*.

Shane smiled and took the red book. He wanted to say something else. Maybe to ask if Ilya wanted him to highlight this one and come back. But he wasn’t going to ask, so he nodded once and turned to leave.

“Next time maybe I will have something a little different for you,” Ilya said, cocking his head, like he too was wondering if Shane planned to come back.

Shane bit his bottom lip, trying and failing to suppress the grin pulling at his lips. “Okay. I look forward to seeing what it is.”

Ilya nodded, his own mouth curved up, his eyes still squinting at him a little, like he was trying to figure something out. But he didn’t say anything else, so Shane gave an awkward little wave and walked out the door.

-

Shane went straight home and started reading. He had planned to run some errands today, but he could get groceries delivered, and the rest could wait. He found Simon to be endearing and relatable. He also spent a lot of time thinking about how nice it would have been to have read a book like this at Simon’s age. Maybe he would have figured things out sooner. Maybe he would have experimented before he became too famous for it to be an option. At the very least, he would have felt less lonely a lot sooner.

He decided he would keep up this thing they were doing, whether Ilya had asked or not, so he highlighted a few lines, most of them funny or touching, none of them quite so gutting.

Why is straight the default? Everyone should have to declare one way or another, and it shouldn't be this big awkward thing whether you're straight, gay, bi, or whatever.

Why indeed, he mused.

The way I feel about him is like a heartbeat — soft and persistent, underlying everything.

That one hit him a little oddly, like an ache in his chest, and he wasn’t even sure why... *Because I know it, or because I want?* He let the thought float away, not needing to examine that right now.

There were a few lines in the section where Simon talked about Blue’s post, about loneliness, that Shane found deeply relatable, something he hadn’t known there were words for.

*Like the way you can memorize someone's gestures but never know their thoughts.
And the feeling that people are like houses with vast rooms and tiny windows.
The way you can feel so exposed anyway.*

Shane felt like a collection of vast, empty rooms sometimes, the windows tiny and purposefully barred.

He talked about the ocean between people. And how the whole point of everything is to find a shore worth swimming to.

He'd laid the book on his chest for a moment after that one. The whole point of everything. Was it? He did want a shore worth swimming to. He just needed to not drown before he found it.

Another one he'd highlighted wasn't even something he could relate to directly. But he could relate to the fear of it. The anger.

And you know what? You don't get to say it's not a big thing. This is a big fucking thing, okay? This was supposed to be—this is mine. I'm supposed to decide when and where and who knows and how I want to say it.

To be outed. That was his biggest fear, wasn't it? If he was going to do it, he wanted it on his own terms. But he couldn't even do that, so it was moot. It had still moved him, this anger on behalf of Simon. And so, Ilya had once again given him the right book. Because even amongst the myriad of silly things these teenagers in high school were getting up to, he found so many things that made him feel seen and heard and real.

-

The next morning after practice, he changed clothes and made the familiar walk to One Good Memory, only to be met with a well of disappointment. It was closed on Mondays. He'd never stopped to look at the business hours on the door. He hadn't even really noticed that it was Monday, relying more on dates than days, the calendar in his head always ticking in numbers, game dates. Now he stopped to carefully read the plaque displaying their hours.

Monday Closed

Tuesday-Friday 9am-8pm

Saturday-Sunday 10am-8pm

Shane wondered if Ilya was the owner or just a bookseller. Would he walk in one day to find someone else behind the counter? Surely even if he owned it, he had employees. Shane had been so preoccupied with...the books. He hadn't thought about much else.

He'd come back tomorrow. No big deal. He went back home and pulled out one of his other books he hadn't read yet. One from the drawer in his closet. It was an MM romance about a jock football player and a history major nerd, and it was adorable and hot and Shane could dream. He wasn't sure if he was the jock or the nerd in this scenario, if he were to imagine

himself in it. It didn't really matter. Had he taken a break after one of the sex scenes to jerk off? Maybe. Did he think about golden brown curls and blue-green eyes flecked with gold? Also maybe. He was grateful this one would not be highlighted and picked apart. Which lines did you highlight, Shane? Ah yes, the one where the jock gets his asshole licked...a classic.

He started feeling slightly weird about it and decided to read a few pages of Salem's Lot before bed. He contained multitudes.

-

The next morning, he repeated the same routine. Practice, home to change, walk to One Good Memory. This time the door opened, and he stepped in, his feet quiet against the worn wooden floor, his eyes already on the man behind the counter. Ilya looked up from his phone today, slipping it into his pocket as soon as he saw Shane.

"Well? How do we feel about Simon and Blue?" Ilya asked, leaning against the counter on his elbows.

Shane smiled before he could stop it. "They were great. Really endearing."

Ilya nodded slowly, one side of his mouth pulled in like he was biting the inside of his cheek, the other side curving up. "Thought you might enjoy that."

Yes, of course he thought Shane would enjoy a book about gay teenagers having an adorable romance. Because Shane had done the world's worst job of pretending not to be gay in his presence. If he was being honest though, it felt nice, not having to hide. Even if it was only here, between these walls, in front of this one man and his cat, who was winding its way through Shane's legs.

"Hi, Vanya," he said, leaning down to pet him. "I missed you last time."

Shane set the book on the counter so he could give Vanya a proper greeting. When he stood up, Ilya was flipping through it, a small smile on his face as he looked at the highlighted lines. Shane felt strangely more exposed with this one than he had with most of the others. Maybe it was the language...it was simpler, more direct. He thought about the passages he'd highlighted about loneliness and suddenly wanted to snatch it back. But Ilya's face didn't change. It stayed soft and understanding, not judgmental or pitying.

"So. This kind of book, for younger audiences. Still good, yes?"

Shane nodded. "I enjoyed it. It would have—" He stopped and recalibrated. "It's nice to know these types of books exist. For that age group. Seems important."

"Yes. That it is."

Shane looked away from those too-piercing eyes. Why were they always peeling back the layers of him, seeing too much.

"I thought maybe you would like something a little different today," Ilya said. "You have somewhere to be?"

Shane's eyes went wide. "What...like right now?"

"Yes. Do you need to leave right away?"

"No," he said too quickly. He really didn't, even if he had been planning to hit the gym. "Not right away."

"Good. Come," Ilya said, walking out from behind the counter and toward the back. Shane followed. "Sit." He'd stopped next to one of the armchairs in the back right corner, one hand held out toward it.

Shane didn't even hesitate, he just sat in the chair, staring up at Ilya like an absolute idiot.

"Here. Read the first chapter, or however many you like, and let me know if you want to finish it." Ilya handed him a book Shane hadn't even realized was in his hand. "It is more historical fiction. You did not list it in your big appetite for books list, so I do not know how you'll like it."

The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller.

"Okay," Shane said, flipping the book over, looking at the front, then the back. He opened it to the first page and then glanced up at Ilya, still towering over him.

"Vanya will keep you company," he said before turning and walking away. Shane watched him go, eyes lingering on the unfairly perfect ass encased in tight, worn jeans. *Fuck.*

He turned his attention back to the book and started reading. Not even two pages in, and Vanya was in his lap, rolling around on his back for a moment before curling up and providing a warm, comfortable weight that somehow relaxed him. In fact, being in this armchair, in this store, in proximity to this man...was having a decidedly supernatural effect on his autonomic nervous system. He rarely felt so settled in public places that weren't covered in a layer of ice.

He was already done with chapter 3 by the time he looked up and realized he wasn't sure how much time had passed. He looked at the watch on his wrist...about 30 minutes. He glanced up at Ilya across the store, leaning on the counter, a book open in front of him now. He was reluctant to get up with Vanya still snoozing in his lap and the rest of him feeling comfortably at ease. Maybe he could read just one more.

Right as he was finishing up chapter 4, Ilya walked over and sat in the other armchair.

"You are very quiet," he said, voice low. "I don't know if this means you hate it and are bored or if you are so absorbed you forget where you are."

Shane swallowed. Too perceptive. "The latter."

Ilya nodded, looking at him. "Would you like to take my copy? Or you can buy your own if you'd rather."

Shane licked his lips, wondering if there was a right answer. “What if I do both? So I can see your highlights but still have a copy for myself?”

“But you will bring me your copy to look at, too, yes? I need to see what you think. Then I can recommend more.”

“Sure,” Shane said. Did Ilya *need* to see his highlights? Maybe he did. His recommendations were all hits so far...why challenge the methods?

“Good. Stay as long as you like.”

Ilya got up and went back behind the counter just as a woman walked in. Shane stayed where he was, petting Vanya and enjoying the quiet, comfortable space where he didn't feel exposed, but nor did he feel entirely alone.

He watched as the woman walked up to the counter holding a stack of three books.

“Do you know if these would be appropriate for a 14 year old? My daughter wants a new series to read, something with magic.” She set the books on the counter, where Ilya looked at the spines.

“Ah, maybe 14 is too young for Maas. There is graphic sex. Up to you, of course.”

The woman sighed. “I knew it. I should have looked these up before I got here, sorry about that. Do you maybe have any other recommendations?”

“Of course,” Ilya said, already moving from behind the counter and down an aisle. He came back out with two more sets of books, one a stack of three, one of four. “These are the Graceling books. Some magic, action, romance, not too much graphic content but maybe some mentions of sex. Not explicit like Maas.” He set the stack of three down. “But these... these are classics. Song of the Lioness. They might read a little younger. Fantasy, very good writing, also not too much graphic content. If your daughter likes more mature writing but still for teenagers, these,” he said, hand on the stack of three. “If she likes more classic fantasy, these.” He set his hand on the stack of four.

“You know what, I'll take them all. She reads faster than I can buy them and the library can stock them.”

Shane watched the whole interaction with a small smile on his face. Ilya really knew his shit. And he seemed to genuinely love helping people find the right books. It had also left a pit in his stomach because now he knew he was right...he wasn't special. Ilya was just friendly about books.

When the woman had paid and left, Shane gently lifted Vanya and stood up. He'd expected the cat to wiggle and jump out of his arms, but he just snuggled into his stomach, content to be carried around like a tiny prince.

He had Ilya's book under one arm as he awkwardly walked up to the counter, cradling the cat. Ilya laughed when he walked up, and the sound rocketed through Shane like a firework,

lighting up every dark corner.

“You can put him down,” Ilya said. “He is very dramatic.”

“He’s sweet. I don’t mind.”

“I will go grab you a copy of *The Song of Achilles* if you still want it?” Ilya asked hesitantly.

“Yeah, I still want it. Thanks.”

Ilya disappeared for a minute and then came back and scanned the book. Shane finally had to put Vanya down so he could get to his wallet. The cat happily trotted off behind the counter.

“What else does Shane Hollander do when he is not skating or reading?” Ilya asked casually.

Shane’s brain went unhelpfully blank. Or maybe it didn’t, and he really just couldn’t answer because the answer did not exist.

“I work out. Go for runs.” That was all he could come up with.

Ilya narrowed his eyes at him. “So you play hockey, work out, and read?”

Shane scoffed. “What’s wrong with that? I don’t have time for anything else.” He paused. “I like movies too.”

“Hm.” Ilya nodded slowly, too slowly, like he was taking in some kind of monumental information and not just confirmation that Shane was...lame. “You like coffee?”

“Uh...yeah.”

“Next time you come, if you don’t have to leave right away, I will make you coffee.”

“You will?” Shane was having a moment. The first thing he thought was *but this store doesn’t have a cafe*. And then he thought *maybe he makes everyone coffee*. And then he shook himself because his mouth was open, and he probably looked like an idiot.

“While we talk about the book,” Ilya said, nodding at the two copies of *The Song of Achilles* sitting on the counter.

“Oh. I’m not sure when I’ll finish it.”

“That’s okay. Offer is good anytime.”

Shane nodded. “I’ll be on the road next week. I’ll try to be back before that.”

“I look forward to it,” Ilya said, leaning forward on the counter as Shane walked away.

“Me too,” he said before he could stop himself. “See you.”

Shane picked up where he left off in *The Song of Achilles* as soon as he got home. He had to stop in the afternoon so he could get on a call about some fundraiser he'd agreed to. But as soon as he was done, he was back on the couch, his copy held open in front of him, Ilya's sitting in his lap so he could look through each chapter as he finished, trying to see where their highlighted lines overlapped. Several did.

The book was beautifully written, and it made Shane sad. Different kinds of sad. The sad longing for the kind of love depicted in these pages, that inspired quotes so beautiful, Shane could hardly wrap his mind around that feeling. There was also grief, a sadness Shane was lucky not to have experienced much of, but he felt it nonetheless. Mostly he'd come out of that book feeling even more weighed down with loneliness. Loneliness and longing, the heaviest bedfellows.

I could recognize him by touch alone, by smell; I would know him blind, by the way his breaths came and his feet struck the earth. I would know him in death, at the end of the world.

To know that kind of love... what he wouldn't give. That thought had drawn a laugh from him, because the answer was that he wouldn't give anything apparently. Not his reputation or his image or his career or even the lie he held up to his parents and Cliff and everyone but Rose Landry. And maybe now Ilya Rozanov.

He stayed up late to finish the book. He found that having Ilya's copy made him read more and faster because he was so impatient to see what Ilya thought of every chapter. He'd even found a few notes written the margins. Some were funny: *that was a very poor choice*. Others were just *yes* or *no*, and one *time will tell* after *You can use a spear as a walking stick, but that will not change its nature*.

Will I? scribbled beside *I would know him in death, at the end of the world*. That one made his chest tight, even if he couldn't have said why. It also wasn't lost on him that this quote specifically mentioned a "him" and that also made his chest tight, but in an entirely different way.

He found a passage that he and Ilya had both highlighted and wished there was a note scribbled in the margin beside it. Because Shane wanted to know why it had struck Ilya enough to soak it in yellow ink.

It was almost like fear, in the way it filled me, rising in my chest. It was almost like tears, in how swiftly it came.

But it was neither of those, buoyant where they were heavy, bright where they were dull.

But the highlighted line in Ilya's book that had struck him the hardest was a simple one: *I am made of memories*. It reminded Shane of the bookshop's name. And in the margin beside it was scribbled in the neatest handwriting Shane had ever seen: *So am I*.

When he'd closed the book late that night, he thought maybe that wasn't the kind of book that should be read all in one day. It was a lot to take in, and it had left him feeling small in his giant bed, lost among the comforter and sheets, wishing he could reach out and feel

someone beside him, someone to hold onto. But loneliness and longing were still the only ones there.

-

The next day, he was back at One Good Memory. Ilya's brows had gone up in surprise when he walked in, both books in his hand.

"That was fast," he said, voice just as effective as ever at undoing Shane immediately.

"Yeah, well... I had time yesterday. And I couldn't put it down."

"Coffee?" Ilya asked, already making his way out from behind the counter.

"Sure."

"Come. Sit," Ilya said, gesturing at the armchairs in the back. "I will bring it down."

And then he disappeared through the door that led to the staircase. Shane sat and flipped through Ilya's copy of the book once more, memorizing those neat little scribbles in the margins. He'd consider taking pictures of them, so he could look at them anytime he wanted, but that felt wrong, invasive. Those were someone's very private thoughts. *And he trusted me with them.*

Thankfully the door opened just then, and Ilya was back with two mugs of coffee and a small container of cream.

"I did not ask you how you take it, but I have cream and sugar," he said, pulling little white packets out of his pocket.

"Black is fine, but since you brought it..." he said, nodding at the cream and sugar.

"Help yourself." Ilya set them on the table between the two armchairs and then sat in the other one before pouring a generous serving of cream into his mug, followed by far too many packets of sugar.

Shane added a dash of cream and one packet of sugar to his. Ilya was eying him warily, like he had just committed a faux pas. Or a crime. Shane ignored it and took a sip. Perfect.

"So," Ilya said eventually. "Did you like the book?"

"Yeah, I liked it a lot. It was... beautiful. Kind of tragic."

Ilya nodded. "Yes. Let me see." He held a hand out, and Shane picked up his copy, putting it into Ilya's waiting palm. Ilya's fingers curled around the spine, touching his, and he held them there just a little too long before he pulled back. The tingly warmth where their skin touched was one thing, but the heat in Ilya's eyes... was he imagining it again? He had to be.

He sat back in the armchair and tried not to watch Ilya study every highlight in the book, but he couldn't help but glance over, catching the flash of something here and there. Sometimes

Ilya looked impressed, sometimes maybe sad, and Shane thought it was probably pity. Ilya was obviously very smart; he could add up all these clues of Shane Hollander, the famous hockey player who spent too many hours reading books about queer men and highlighting all the things that he felt or wished he could feel. It all added up to one thing, not just the gay thing, and Ilya had certainly arrived there already.

Shane found he wasn't as ashamed of it as he might have been before. It was almost a relief for someone to know him this way. Like a confirmation that he could exist as himself somewhere, even if it was only here in this oversized armchair in this charming bookstore beside this alluring man. Even if his existence amounted to wanting a life he couldn't have. At least someone besides himself knew that he wanted that. He didn't know why that was comforting when it should probably be the opposite.

He looked up again to find Ilya staring at him.

"Did it move you the way the others have?" Ilya asked finally.

Shane thought about that for a moment. "Yes and no. There was more here, and less. I guess, beyond the obvious, I could relate to something in the way they were forced to grow up and be adults so quickly. To give up everything for a cause they didn't ask to be part of, but then couldn't resist anyway. Achilles destined for glory..."

Shane stopped and huffed a quiet laugh. Was he about to compare himself to a demigod? *Absolutely not*. Even though he sometimes wondered if his own spot of vulnerability might one day kill him when it was exposed. He shook his head. *No need to be melodramatic*.

Ilya was just watching him, nodding very slowly.

"I'm glad I read it. I don't know if I would have picked that up on my own," Shane said finally. He lifted the mug to take a sip of coffee...anything to avoid that intense stare for just a moment.

"I have found that many people are disappointed by this one, expecting something more..." Ilya tilted his head and shrugged one shoulder, like he was looking for the right word. "Profound maybe. But people who can relate to the longing and sacrifices...maybe they like it a little more."

Shane nodded. "I can see that. What did you relate to?" Bold.

"I thought you looked at my copy?"

"I did. I looked at it a lot. While I was reading and then again after," he admitted.

Ilya's lips were curved almost imperceptibly, the smallest smile, his eyes scanning Shane's face. He felt lost in them, adrift at sea.

"Patroclus...he is very relatable. His father rejected him, exiled him. He is no longer the person he was meant to be, never enough for anyone," Ilya said.

"Except Achilles?"

“Do you think Achilles loved him the way he loved Achilles?”

Shane thought about that. “I guess it depends on whether Patroclus was a reliable narrator.”

Ilya’s smile widened then, as if Shane had done something impressive.

“And do you think he was?”

“I don’t know. Does anyone ever see themselves as they truly are? He thought he was nothing without Achilles, but that wasn’t true.” Shane’s knee was bouncing now, even as he spoke. He knew it and couldn’t stop it.

“Perhaps a good lesson in the dangers of codependency,” Ilya said, lightening his tone.

Shane smiled. “Sure. But...”

“But what?”

Shane shrugged. “Maybe it was a little toxic. But don’t you ever wonder if that kind of love even exists?”

He turned his head quickly, not wanting to meet those sea-deep eyes. He wasn’t sure if he’d meant to say that out loud. Maybe he had, because it was weighing on him. Maybe he hadn’t, because surely he’d exposed enough of himself to Ilya. He’d put his softest flesh under a sword and hoped to stay the hand.

“Yes,” Ilya said simply, his voice quiet and maybe a little sad.

“Sorry,” Shane said quickly. “Anyway, thanks for recommending it.” He started to shift, planning to get up and get out of this store before he could say anything truly damning.

“What do you feel like reading next?” Ilya asked before he could stand up.

“Oh, um, I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Would you like me to pick for you?” The question was simple. Yes or no. But it felt like more. “Or are you tired of my recommendations?”

Shane shook his head. “Not tired. I’d like you to pick.”

Ilya nodded once. “Stay.” He stood up and then disappeared down an aisle.

Shane leaned back in the armchair, already feeling better. Calmer. His knee had stopped bouncing. Ilya came back with a thin paperback. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

“A classic. Have you read it?” he asked, holding the book out to Shane.

“Uh, no. I’m familiar with it, of course, but no, I haven’t read it.”

“Worth reading. I can give you something fun next time, if you decide to come back again,” Ilya said, sitting back down.

“I will. I leave Friday night for a week, but I’ll try to be back again before that.”

“Do you read while you are traveling?”

“Sometimes. If the plane or bus ride is long, I can usually get some reading in.” He paused. “Publicly acceptable books only.”

Ilya grinned. “Of course.”

“But,” Shane said before he could stop himself, “sometimes I read before bed. I don’t usually have to share a room anymore, so...”

Ilya’s grin widened. “Mm, I see. So maybe one publicly acceptable book and one...less so.”

Shane drew his lips in, trying to stop whatever dumb smile was forming. “Maybe.”

“Okay. Come back before you leave, and I will have something for you.”

“Thanks. I should probably get going.” He stood up, the copy of Dorian Gray in his left hand. “Thank you for the coffee.”

“You’re welcome, Shane Hollander.”

Shane realized Ilya never called him just his first or last name. Always his full name. He wasn’t sure what that meant, but the way it rolled off his tongue made him shiver every time. He followed Ilya to the register and paid for the book.

“Is there anything you don’t like to read?” Ilya asked casually. “So I will know your limits when I pick books.”

Shane thought about that. “Not really. I mean...I’m not exactly a scholar, so probably nothing too dense. I don’t think I want to tackle Ayn Rand or...you know, anything like that. I just want...” he trailed off for a moment, thinking. “I like an escape. Or to feel something. I don’t think I’m too picky.”

Ilya nodded. “I am tired of myself tonight. I should like to be somebody else.” He cocked his head and held up *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a small smile curving his lips while he gave the book a little shake.

“Do you know every book word for word?” Shane asked, impressed as ever.

Ilya’s eyes were on his, more hazel today under the dim sunlight sneaking out of a cloudy sky. “No. But some things just stick with you.”

Shane nodded, still lost in those eyes. They certainly did.

Just want to mention...there will be Ilya POV eventually. When it's time.

Books mentioned in this chapter:

Giovanni's Room by James Baldwin

Red, White and Royal Blue by Casey McQuiston

Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda by Becky Albertalli

The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller

The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde

P.S. The movie adaptation of Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda is called Love, Simon, and it's super cute.

(Mentioned but not for Shane were the Graceling Realm books by Kristin Cashore and the Song of the Lioness books by Tamora Pierce. Also a brief mention of The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky and Salem's Lot by Stephen King.)

Chapter 3: Lord, what you're doing to me?

Chapter Notes

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

Shane had gone straight home to read. He was determined to be back at One Good Memory the next day to pick up whatever books Ilya recommended for his week away. The idea that he might right now be picking books for Shane was...intoxicating. Should he be paying for this service? He'd worry about that later.

Dorian Gray was one of those books he appreciated, enjoyed even, but it certainly didn't leave him feeling warm and fuzzy or itching for a reread. As always, he found plenty to think about between its pages.

The passage he'd highlighted and come back to several times was probably predictable. Ilya could probably guess without even flipping through the pages. He doused it in yellow ink, knowing that there was no coming back from these confessions spilled using the words of others.

The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful.

He should probably walk around with a sign saying *your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself*. Did he really need to sit around and analyze that? He already knew. The only comfort was knowing this was clearly part of the human condition, else why did it keep showing up. *Or maybe just the closeted gay condition.*

He highlighted another that he thought Ilya might also appreciate, even if he wasn't entirely sure *why* he thought that:

Life is a question of nerves, and fibres, and slowly built-up cells in which thought hides itself and passion has its dreams. You may fancy yourself safe and think yourself strong. But a chance tone of colour in a room or a morning sky, a particular perfume that you had once loved and that brings subtle memories with it, a line from a forgotten poem that you had come across again, a cadence from a piece of music that you had ceased to play—I tell you, Dorian, that it is on things like these that our lives depend.

There were others he noted and did not highlight, the discomfort of them too much to make permanent in this book that would end up in the drawer at the back of his closet anyway.

Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed.

Who got to decide what counted anyway? It's not as though Shane had a portrait concealed in the back of his closet to bear his sins. He snorted. It's not as if he was doing anything even the most devout considered sinful...other than reading about it. But he hoped that might change soon. The private entrance to his penthouse was starting to mock him. He also didn't

believe any of the things he thought about, read about, were quote-unquote sinful, but that was neither here nor there.

Another line that he read and reread and tucked away at the back of his mind like a keepsake: *People are very fond of giving away what they need most themselves.*

That one felt important to remember.

-

“Movie night in my room when we land tomorrow,” Connors said after practice the next day.

“Which movie?” Shane asked. Usually he was down for movie night. Much preferable to the other things his teammates wanted to get up to while they were traveling. But the night before a game sometimes led to better choices.

“Okay,” Connors said, taking out his phone. “I have Central Intelligence, Sausage Party, and Hell or High Water.”

“Hell or High Water,” Shane said immediately.

“Whoa,” Cliff sat next to him. “Speak for yourself, Hollz. I vote Sausage Party.”

“Of course you do.”

“Carmichael!” Connors shouted, catching him before he disappeared into the showers.

“What’s your vote?”

“I’m not coming to your gay ass movie night,” Carmichael said, but he was grinning and clearly joking. It didn’t stop Shane’s stomach from sinking. “I’m with Hollz...Hell or High Water.” Then he was gone.

“Well, fuck.” Cliff didn’t actually look like he cared though. “I’m watching the stupid cartoon food movie eventually.”

“Relax, Marly. The food porn will be next.”

“You haven’t even asked everyone. Ham will vote with me.”

Shane left them to it and hit the showers, his mind already drifting to One Good Memory. He was eager to get there. And maybe just eager to get out of here.

At home, he changed into jeans and a sweatshirt. It was cool but sunny out, and the walk was pleasant. He stepped into the store and was immediately greeted by Vanya, Ilya nowhere to be found.

“Hey, buddy,” he said, bending to pet the cat. Vanya stood up on his back legs, front paws tracking up Shane’s leg. “Oh, you want me to hold you, huh? We’ve started that habit, haven’t we?”

Shane indulged the demanding Vanya and lifted him, cradling him against his chest like a baby. It was absurd and adorable.

“Spoiled little thing,” he said, shifting Dorian Gray under his arm so he could pet him.

“Vanya.” That rich sound brushed its way through Shane like velvet on bare skin. “Are you being a nuisance to our customers again?” Ilya stepped out from one of the back aisles.

“He’s fine,” Shane said. “I’m not complaining.”

Ilya just smiled at him and walked behind the counter, leaning forward on his elbows.

“Well? Did you find Mr. Gray likable?”

“No...not particularly.”

Ilya nodded. “I think that is maybe the point. Let’s see.” He held out a hand, and Shane passed the book to him, Vanya not budging in his arms.

He watched as Ilya flipped through the pages, stopping to read each highlight as always, his expression shifting subtly each time, a slow nod here, a quirk of his lips there.

“You will always be fond of me. I represent to you all the sins you never had the courage to commit.” Ilya read that one out loud. “Interesting choice...I like this one too.”

Shane’s cheeks warmed, and he looked down at Vanya, who was nearly asleep in his arms.

“Hm,” Ilya hummed. *“I don’t want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them.”* He looked up, and Shane let his eyes drop again. “Does the famous Shane Hollander get to enjoy his emotions?”

Shane was glad he could tell this was a rhetorical question because the urge to answer was there, the filter he relied on so heavily getting thinner and thinner every time he walked in this store, every time those eyes like a river landed on his, dragging him into their current.

Ilya had gone back to skimming through the pages. When he was done, he set the book on the counter in front of Shane, whose arms were still occupied with 10 pounds of utterly relaxed cat.

“So...do you want my picks for your road trip?” Ilya asked, still leaning on his elbows.

“Yes, please.”

Ilya stood upright and reached beneath the counter, pulling out a small stack of books.

“Publicly acceptable first. I do not know your taste that well yet, so I will give you some choices. You say you like Stephen King and thrillers, yes?”

Shane nodded. “I do.”

“First option, Dark Matter by Blake Crouch. This is more sci-fi thriller, but very...it will make you think. Not high literature but entertaining. Maybe thought-provoking. Good for public reading. Next option, Pretty Girls by Karin Slaughter. Karin is solid for thrillers. This is very dark, but good mystery. If neither of these sounds good, I will pick more.”

“No, these are good.” He had no reason to doubt Ilya.

“You have a preference?”

Shane shook his head. “I’ll take both.”

The way Ilya smiled when he said that was...Shane closed his eyes briefly, trying to regain control of himself. Vanya's warm weight was helping.

“So...you still want a not-publicly-acceptable one too?” Ilya asked, leaning on the counter again.

Shane bit his bottom lip, then realized what he was doing and stopped. “I mean...if you have one, yes.”

Ilya smiled. “I do.” He reached under the counter again and pulled out a paperback. “I also do not know your tastes in this...ah...realm. But, maybe you would find this entertaining.”

Shane snorted softly, his cheeks warming again. The cover showed the torso of a man, white t-shirt pulled up to expose well-defined abs, a hockey stick on the side, the title “Him” and two authors’ names.

“No?” Ilya asked.

“Uh, it’s not that. I’ve just already read it.” He was practically mumbling. His stupid cheeks were so warm they had to be bright red.

Ilya’s brows went up. “You’ve been holding out on me, Shane Hollander.”

Shane let out a loud breath and turned his head away. “Fuck.”

“No, no. I like it. I will have to dig further.” He tapped his fingers on the counter, looking thoughtful. “I might have something. Come.”

He walked out from behind the counter and headed toward the back. Shane followed. This time, Ilya opened the door to the left, revealing a small storeroom with wire shelves filled with boxes and books. He bent to retrieve a book from the bottom shelf.

“Here. Trade.” Ilya held the book out, and Shane shifted Vanya into his arms, trying to ignore where their arms touched. Vanya, for his part, was entirely unbothered and snuggled right into Ilya.

Shane took the book, noting the cover and willing his face to cool down. He was very familiar with these types of covers, had purchased a few indie-published MM romances on an anonymous kindle account that he signed out of every time he closed the app, and even a

handful of paperbacks through the same anonymous email address, delivered to his PO Box. And even that made him nervous. This book had two men with bare torsos from the back, with trees and two bicycles beneath them. Promises by Marie Sexton. He opened it to a random page, just to buy himself a few moments to settle his nerves and whatever else was surging through him.

Then he quickly closed the book and dropped his hand to his side, the book smacking against his thigh loudly. The first line his eyes had landed on was, "...and his hands gripped my head hard, holding me in place for a second, his cock almost gagging me.."

Yep, definitely the kind of book he thought it was.

"Oh my god," he muttered. Why was he standing in front of this man holding this book, all of his secrets in neon lights above his head?

"Someone asked me to order that series and then never came back to get them," Ilya said, his voice perfectly normal, like talking about erotic gay romance was an everyday occurrence, no shame needed. "If you're not interested, that's okay."

Shane inhaled deeply, trying and failing to meet Ilya's gaze.

"If it makes you feel better, I have read it. Not bad. Not particularly good either, but maybe ah...scratches an itch?" Ilya held his free hand palm up, as if to say *no big deal*.

Now Shane did look up. "You've read this?"

Ilya nodded. "It was sitting around for a while. I was curious."

Ilya read erotic MM romance. That was...wow.

Just then, a group of people approached the store. Shane could see through the window that at least two of them were wearing Raiders shirts.

"Oh fuck," he sighed, not wanting to be bothered at all, but especially not while he was holding this book. He was ready to shove it under his shirt, maybe chuck it down an aisle...literally anything but what he was currently doing.

Ilya looked up, his gaze following Shane's. "Here," he said, walking over to open the other door. "Go upstairs. Door is open. I'll let you know when they're gone." Then he handed Vanya back to him, closing the door behind them.

Shane made his way up the stairs, which turned right at the landing halfway up, and ended at a small hallway and what was clearly an apartment's front door. He switched the book to the arm cradling the sleepy cat and opened the door, revealing a tastefully furnished living room. A comfortable looking brown leather couch, big flat screen TV, a few paintings on the walls, and least surprising, overcrowded bookshelves lining one wall, books spilling out of them in ways that seemed to defy physics. Through a wide doorway off to the side, he could see a kitchen with a small wooden table and chrome appliances. It smelled like leather and wood

and books and slightly of cigarettes. It smelled like Ilya, and Shane was sure he shouldn't know that kind of information.

He walked over to the bookshelves, eyes scanning the titles. Ilya had a little of everything. Classics ranging from Frankenstein to The Great Gatsby, a few Stephen King titles, including It and Pet Semetary, both ones Shane had enjoyed...though maybe enjoyed wasn't the right word for either of those. He also noted several of the ones Ilya had recommended to him, including Maurice and the copy of The Song of Achilles he'd borrowed and returned. His fingers itched to pull it out and look at those little scribbles in the margin again. In fact, he longed to pull each of these hundreds of books out and see what secrets Ilya kept in them. Instead, he tightened his hold on Vanya and kept moving, taking another step, letting his eyes sweep over the titles, noting which ones had broken spines and signs of repeated handling.

There was an especially worn copy of Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoevsky, and several books next to it with Cyrillic writing. Most of those also had worn spines. He was near the end of the shelves, eyes flitting over Interview with the Vampire and The Vampire Lestat, when he heard footsteps, and then the door opened.

"All clear," Ilya said, closing the door behind him. His eyes landed on Vanya, still dozing in Shane's arms. "You can put that lazy freeloader down. Now that he knows you will do his bidding, he will never leave you alone."

Shane laughed. "I really don't mind. I don't have any pets, so...kind of nice."

"See anything of interest?" Ilya asked, nodding toward the shelves.

"I've never read Interview with the Vampire. How is it?"

Ilya shrugged. "Worth a read, I think. Take it if you want."

"Really? I'll bring it back."

"I know."

Shane picked up the book, settling it next to Promises in his hand.

"Did you decide if you want the other one?" Ilya asked.

"Oh," Shane said, holding up the books. "Right. I mean...sure, why not?"

Ilya just smiled at him, and Shane willed himself not to react. Not while he was in this man's living room holding a book containing gay sex.

"Now you will have two books you can read in front of your teammates, and two others. Interview with the Vampire might be publicly acceptable, but I'm thinking maybe not for Shane Hollander?"

"Uh, yeah. I don't think I'd read that in front of anyone. They'd probably give me shit for it."

Ilya nodded. "Hockey players. Must be very stimulating conversation."

Shane laughed. "Occasionally, they surprise you."

"Yes...they certainly do."

Shane was withering under that intense gaze; the sparkle in Ilya's eyes and the small smile on his chiseled face were making Shane sweat.

"I should probably go," he said, finally putting Vanya down. The cat looked up at him, as if offended, then wandered off down a hallway and out of sight.

"Okay." Ilya opened the front door and stepped into the small hallway. Shane walked past him, the inches between them shrinking slowly, until Shane's shoulder brushed his. It was like a little shock of static electricity running through his insides. He heard an intake of breath, and it hadn't come from him. His eyes darted up, meeting the lighter ones across from him, not letting himself linger. He got to the bottom of the stairs and quickly made his way back through the shop to the counter, Ilya right behind him.

Ilya unlocked the front door before he stepped back behind the counter and scanned Dark Matter and Pretty Girls. Shane tried to hand him Promises.

"Just take it. I already read it, so...not a new book, and I don't feel like getting the used price."

"Okay. Thanks."

"I assume you want a bag today," Ilya said, pulling a paper bag out and setting those three books, plus Interview with the Vampire, inside.

Shane huffed a quiet laugh. "Yeah, definitely a bag today."

"Good luck in Detroit on Saturday."

Shane's chest fluttered. Had Ilya looked up his schedule?

"Uh, thanks. I, um...I appreciate the books. And for...you know, earlier. Letting me escape upstairs."

"That must get very annoying. Being recognized everywhere."

"Yeah, sometimes. I don't mind usually, but it's nice to have a break. And..." He trailed off and held up the paper bag. Ilya seemed to understand.

"Your secret is safe here."

Hearing those words out loud made him dizzy for a moment. His eyes stung, and he swallowed hard. He felt like maybe he needed to sit down. But he also needed to get out of here.

"Thank you." His voice was too thick, and Ilya could probably hear it. He was looking at Shane with his usual intense gaze, but his face was soft and Shane was going to come

undone. "I'll see you when I get back."

He turned to leave before Ilya could say anything else and break the tiny thread of composure holding him together.

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Shane didn't have time to read much when he got home. He had tape to review before their next game, then he had a call with his agent, and after that, he worked out, made dinner, and watched a movie instead. He was too keyed up to focus on written words. Every time he tried, they started swimming on the page, his eyes chasing them, but his mind elsewhere. Why did Ilya saying that out loud change anything? Why did it make him feel both more exposed and more safe?

When he packed his backpack the next afternoon, he slipped Dark Matter in with his empty water bottle and the other things he carried on the plane. He stuck Promises in his suitcase, wrapped tightly in several t-shirts and shoved deep beneath everything else. This was why it was easier to read ebooks on an app he could sign out of as soon as he was done. If his luggage ever got thoroughly searched... *fuck me*. He started to unwrap the shirts and take the book out. He could read it at home. But then he stopped himself. He'd been traveling with the team for years, and no one had ever gone through his luggage. It was fine. It was just a book.

He started Dark Matter on the plane. He wasn't the only person reading. More of the guys watched movies or listened to music though, and Shane did that too sometimes. But certainly not today, when books picked specifically for him by Ilya Rozanov were calling to him like a sirensong.

They got to their Detroit hotel around 6pm. An hour later, half the team was crammed into room 208, sprawled on beds and the floor, plates of food in front of some of them. Shane had already eaten his grilled chicken, quinoa, and vegetables that were ready and waiting when they'd arrived. Now he was leaning against one bed, Cliff next to him, while Hell or High Water played on the TV. He had his knees up in front of him, one of them bouncing obnoxiously because all he really wanted to do was go back to his room and read. Peace and quiet. But the movie was good, and he did enjoy listening to his teammates' running commentary, even though it meant he'd have to rewatch this later on his own.

"Halloween is in three days, we should be watching a horror movie," someone said.

"Fuck that shit." Carmichael was always adamantly against horror movies.

"The rest of us aren't pussies. You can go watch Mickey Mouse in your own room."

Shane tuned them out. When the movie was over, and he could politely excuse himself back to his room, he gave Cliff a shoulder bump and made his way down the hall. He took a shower and put on sweatpants, took Promises out of his bag, and got comfortable on the bed.

He opened the book, and a card fell out. A business card. On the front, in elegant, readable font: *One Good Memory*. Then beneath it, a small stack of books and a phone number. Shane turned the card over and let out a little whoosh of air. An almost gasp. In the same neat

handwriting he'd been allowed to glimpse in the margins of *The Song of Achilles* was written "*In case you want to have a conversation, even when you're not highlighting.*" Then a phone number with a Boston area code, different from the one on the front.

Shane put the card back in the book. Then he took it out again and read the note over and over until the words blurred. Then he put it back. He did that at least four more times. He couldn't put Ilya's number in his phone. Or text him. Could he? He took it out again and this time added a new contact in his phone, typed the number in, and stared at the blank contact name line. He decided to put him in as I.R. No one would know who that was if they happened to see it.

But now that the contact was there, shiny and new and unused, he wanted to use it. Was that kind of pathetic? Ilya had given it to him. That meant he wanted him to text, otherwise, he wouldn't have. Shane went over this for a long time before he finally opened a new text. His thumb hovered over the screen for several minutes while he thought about what he could possibly say and came up with nothing. Which was probably a sign that he didn't need to text him at all. He put his phone away and read the first few chapters of *Promises*, which were, unfortunately, free of sex, and then he went to sleep, still composing text messages in his head.

-

They won the game against Detroit, and the locker room was just as raucous as usual. Shane did his part as captain, congratulating everyone, handing out praise, giving gentle notes where needed. He had a beer with everyone at the hotel bar, then he escaped back to his room for another shower before crawling into bed. He'd read more of *Dark Matter* when he had some downtime, putting him just over 75%. It was kind of addictive, like a good Nolan movie, maybe.

After reading for a little while, he knew he should go to sleep. It was too late to text anyone. But he pulled his phone out and opened a new message. Most people kept their volume off anyway.

Shane: *Dark Matter* was a good choice.

There. He'd know it was Shane without him even having to awkwardly text "Hi this is Shane Hollander", and it was a perfectly polite, innocuous thing to say. Now he would know Shane got the card and hadn't ignored it. That's all he was doing...being polite. He put his phone down and turned off the lamp, intending to go to sleep. But his phone buzzed before he could even lay down.

I.R.: finished already?

Shane: No. Almost though.

I.R.: and? any standouts?

Shane thought about it. He hadn't highlighted, but he had dog-eared a few pages. Another crime against books. He flipped to a recent one. As usual, it felt like he was giving away too

much, but he typed and sent it anyway.

Shane: “There’s something horribly lonely about a place that’s almost home.”

The typing bubble appeared and disappeared a couple of times before a text popped up.

I.R.: that is the one I remember most too

Shane swallowed hard. In his dark hotel room, quiet but for the distant sounds of footsteps in the hall, he felt a tug deep in his chest. One that reached up and stung his eyes from behind.

Shane: I should probably get some sleep. Thanks again for the recommendation.

I.R.: I would like to hear about whichever one you read next

I.R.: goodnight, Shane Hollander

Thank god no one was around to see the huge, embarrassing grin on his face.

Shane: Goodnight.

He wanted to type Ilya’s name, but that defeated the purpose of not saving it in his contacts. Hopefully he wouldn’t even notice. Shane put his phone away, but it took him a lot longer than usual to fall asleep, and the stupid grin remained until he did.

-

The next night, they were in Florida, just a travel day, no game until tomorrow. He’d gone to dinner with Cliff and Connors and a few others, and then he’d slipped back to the hotel unimpeded.

Shane: Finished Dark Matter. I’d watch a movie of that.

No immediate response, so he pulled out Promises again, figuring it couldn’t hurt to read some of that while he was alone. About ten minutes in, his phone buzzed.

I.R.: it would be a good movie

I.R.: maybe Nolan

Shane smiled.

Shane: That’s who I thought of too.

I.R.: and which book are you reading next, Shane Hollander?

Shane shook his head. He still wasn’t sure if the full name was a good or bad thing.

Shane: Not Pretty Girls. Saving that for the flight home.

I.R.: so the other one

Shane: Yeah. It’s not terrible.

I.R.: some people don't like that trope

Oh right. Gay for you. One of the main characters was "straight" until he met the other main character. And was maybe only gay for him. Shane hadn't thought about it too hard, if he was being honest. Wasn't that just bi? He was not particularly well-versed in queer terminology. He was working on it. And he hadn't finished the book yet, so maybe they discussed it more later.

Shane: Well, it's just fiction, right? All of these are basically fantasy.

At least to him.

I.R.: right

I.R.: so... "not terrible" huh?

Shane had his bottom lip sucked in, otherwise he'd be smiling like a moron. What the fuck was he doing?

Shane: I think I kind of like it.

I.R.: I have good news then

I.R.: there are six more in the series

I.R.: and I have them all here

Shane: Have you read them all?

I.R.: only three

I.R.: maybe I will read the rest if you want to talk about them

I.R.: or...if you tell me what tropes you like in that genre, I can suggest something better

Shane dragged a hand down his face, feeling the curve of his lips on the way down. What was happening? Ilya was offering to read more gay romance books just so they could talk about them. Shane was going to implode.

Shane: Only if you want to. Do you even like those kinds of books?

I.R.: I like almost all kinds of books

I.R.: but yes, sometimes I do

I.R.: can't read classics all the time

Shane: Okay. I'll let you know what I decide when I finish this one.

I.R.: I look forward to it

He didn't want the conversation to be over, but he didn't know what else to say. He chose a surefire good topic.

Shane: How's Vanya?

I.R.: spoiled rotten and demanding servitude

Shane: Better give it to him.

I.R.: he's already turned you, I see

Shane: Guilty.

Shane: I should go. Thanks again for the Dark Matter rec.

I.R.: you're welcome

I.R.: feel free to send me any memorable quotes from any of the other books you read

I.R.: goodnight

Shane: Maybe. Goodnight.

He was still grinning. His cock was hard, and they weren't even talking about anything exciting. Maybe he should have been reading books about flirting instead of sex. He'd flirted with women. Kind of. But this was...different, and he had no idea if it was flirting or wishful thinking. Maybe he just needed to get laid. He'd thought getting the penthouse with the private entrance, one that only he had a key to, that wasn't in the front of the building, would be enough. That the universe would reveal to him a way to get a man into his home that would be discreet. But everyone in Boston knew who he was. And he wasn't going to pay for it. That getting out would be so much worse than just him being gay. That thought alone was enough to deflate his cock and let him go to sleep.

-

They lost to Florida the next night. It wasn't entirely unexpected, Florida had a good team this year, and Boston wasn't infallible. It still didn't feel great, and Shane had been beyond ready to retreat to his room, take a scalding hot shower, and get lost in a book before he fell asleep. Anything to take his mind off it.

Before he even cracked Promises open again, he pulled out his phone and opened his texts with Ilya, just scrolling through them, rereading. He started and erased a new text several times before he landed on one and pressed send.

Shane: I'm not sure this book is very quotable.

The stupid thrill that went through him when the typing bubble popped up only 30 seconds later...

I.R.: no? nothing?

Shane: Maybe one. But it's going to make me sound insufferable.

I.R.: let's see it

Shane: "Everybody wants something, and everybody expects something. They never ask how I'm doing or if I'm happy. They don't ask what I want."

I.R.: I think that is a good one

I.R.: especially if you relate to it

Shane: Sometimes.

I.R.: yes, makes sense

I.R.: how is the rest of the book?

Shane: Not bad. Kind of sweet.

I.R.: is that all?

Shane squeezed his forehead. His cheeks were hot even though no one was there to see.

Shane: I've only just gotten to the less sweet parts.

I.R.: don't let me keep you then

His mouth fell open.

Shane: I'm not reading it right now.

I.R.: that's too bad

He put the phone facedown on his bed. This was flirting. Shane knew he wasn't the most socially adept human being, but surely this was flirting. Okay, maybe he still wasn't actually sure.

Shane: You can send me quotes too. From whatever you're reading.

Back to safer territory. His phone was quiet for a couple of minutes, but before he gave up and set it down, a new one popped up.

I.R.: "How tremendous the agony of unmade decisions."

Shane let that settle. Let it sink in deep, roll around, curl up. It felt deeply familiar, and he didn't want to examine that too closely.

Shane: Oh. I like that.

I.R.: it's from another advanced copy of a book that isn't out yet

I.R.: maybe I will give it to you when you get back

I.R.: if I decide it's good enough

Shane: Good enough?

I.R.: for you

Not safe territory. Not safe at all. His chest went all warm and tingly.

Shane: Thanks. I'll be looking forward to it then.

I.R.: one more

I.R.: "Secrets carry weight, like lead."

If he had doubted before that Ilya saw him clearly, the doubt was gone, and in its place was something unnameable. Something that scared him and comforted him. To be known this way, by someone who was effectively still a stranger, was still the most intimate thing Shane had ever felt in his life.

Shane: Sounds right up my alley.

I.R.: it's actually about mostly terrible people

I.R.: and you are not that

Shane: Thanks, I think.

I.R.: that was a compliment, Shane Hollander

The name. The full name again. Why did that make him feel so...cracked open. This insightful man with his adorable cat and his unfairly beautiful face and body and his perfect memory of book quotes that made Shane feel seen and understood. Ilya kept cracking him open, letting all of Shane's secrets and desires seep out of him. Dangerous. That's what it was. And why did that just make it all so much more enticing.

Shane: Thank you, then.

Shane: I have to go.

Before I say something stupid.

Shane: Let me know if the book ends up being good enough. Night.

I.R.: and you let me know how your "kind of sweet" book turns out

I.R.: goodnight

Shane rolled his eyes, mostly at himself for the big dumb smile on his face that was becoming all too common, at least when he had a certain text thread open. He picked up Promises and read until the end. He thought his "kind of sweet" review was accurate, and it honestly didn't have that much sex in it. Which didn't mean he didn't jerk off before he went to bed. He just wasn't thinking about Matt and Jared while he did it.

-

The next day was technically a travel day, but they were only going from Sunrise to Tampa. Shane ended up spending most of the day at practice and then with Cliff, Carmichael, and Connors. They went to a few places in town, including Mojo Books & Records, which Cliff suggested, and Shane appreciated. He'd been before, but it had been a couple of years. He enjoyed the visit, but every bookshop paled in comparison to One Good Memory now. The floors were too shiny, the guy behind the counter glared at them—and Shane couldn't blame him because the four of them together took up a lot of space and probably didn't look like the types to be in his store—and there was a disappointing lack of cats.

After dinner, Shane declined an invite to play cards and went back to his room. He'd barely sat down fully on the bed, hair still damp from the shower, before he had his texts open.

Shane: I finished the kind of sweet book.

The speed at which Ilya responded would never fail to make Shane giddy.

I.R.: and? how was it?

Shane: Kind of sweet.

I.R.: I think we established that, Shane Hollander

I.R.: are we reading the rest of the series?

Shane laughed. Even his own fucking name was making him giddy. And so was the word "we."

Shane: Maybe. It was a bit lacking in some areas.

I.R.: maybe I can guess which ones

I.R.: maybe I can recommend some that are not so lacking

He rubbed his overly warm cheeks.

Shane: I'd be willing to consider those recommendations.

Shane: What about the book you were reading? Was it good?

I.R.: undecided

I.R.: but I will give it to you to read

I.R.: maybe we can discuss it...will help me decide how I feel

Shane looked away from his phone in surprise, as if someone else was there to confirm whether he was reading that right. Ilya wanted to discuss a book with him to...help him decide how he felt about it? Like his opinion mattered. His opinion on something that wasn't related to hockey. What an odd feeling.

Shane: I'm not sure I'm the best person to have an informed book discussion with, but I'd love to try.

I.R.: you underestimate yourself, Shane Hollander

Shane: Sometimes I think it's the opposite.

I.R.: no

Shane waited for more, but clearly Ilya wasn't going to explain. And why did that feel even more complimentary? *He's just being polite.*

Shane: I'll be back in two days.

I.R.: come by whenever you can and pick it up

I.R.: we can discuss it over dinner after you read it

I.R.: if you want to

He had to get off the bed and pace the length of his room. The amount of nervous energy zipping through him could have launched him into orbit. He was still smiling though. Dopey and huge, and he kept reaching up to run his hand down his face and pull at his eyelashes. Was discussing a book with someone over dinner a date? Shane couldn't date. But he could discuss a book over dinner. He could do that.

Shane: I want to. Sounds fun.

I.R.: good

I.R.: I will cook

I.R.: Vanya will be very happy about this

Shane: I'll be happy to see him.

I.R.: good because he will not let you forget he's there

Shane: That's okay. I think we're friends now.

I.R.: Vanya only has subjects, not friends

Shane: Then I shall bend the knee.

I.R.: was that a song of ice and fire reference?

Shane: Maybe. Depends if you're going to judge me for it.

I.R.: I will need to know your favorite character first

I.R.: don't tell me now

I.R.: you can tell me at dinner where I can judge properly

Shane let out a quiet laugh. He knew Ilya was mostly joking, but now he was going to spend the next however many days thinking very hard about his answer.

Shane: Will I get to hear yours?

I.R.: yes, only fair

Shane: Book or show?

I.R.: both

Shane: That's a lot of pressure.

I.R.: I think Shane Hollander can handle some pressure

Shane flopped back onto his bed.

Shane: Sometimes.

Shane: I should go. I'll let you know how Pretty Girls goes.

Shane: Goodnight.

I.R.: please do
I.R.: goodnight

He lay awake for hours longer than he intended to, thinking about so many things, none of which had anything to do with the game they were playing in less than 24 hours. Maybe it was time to text Rose.

Chapter End Notes

Does anyone know what book Ilya is reading without looking up the quotes? Just curious if there are any stans of that book over in these parts.

Books mentioned in this chapter:

The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde

Dark Matter by Blake Crouch

Pretty Girls by Karin Slaughter*

Him by Sarina Bowen & Elle Kennedy**

Promises by Marie Sexton***

Interview with the Vampire by Anne Rice

A Song of Ice and Fire series by George R.R. Martin

(Not putting the ones mentioned more casually)

*Pretty Girls is very dark (but good)...just heed the warning if you go looking for it.

**Elle Kennedy has been problematic, and I don't fuck with that, so just know this is not an endorsement or anything...nor am I telling you not to read it. I haven't read Him (or any of her books tbh), so I can't even give an opinion on the book itself...it just seemed like a timeline appropriate choice for Shane if he was exploring the available gay hockey books.

***I haven't read Promises in >10 years. I reread only some sections for these purposes, so I cannot say with full confidence that it holds up. Hopefully though! I remember liking the series back then.

Chapter 4: I got no common sense

Chapter Notes

Heavy spoilers for If We Were Villains by M.L. Rio.

Read at your own risk! The book has been out since 2017 though. And there is much more to it than just what is mentioned in the short conversation here.

Also very mild Game of Thrones season 6 spoilers.

The timeline of the story is currently taking place in November 2016.

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

The next day, when he had a rare moment to himself before the game, he did in fact text Rose.

Shane: Hey, hope your shoot is going well. I need your expertise on something when you have a minute.

About an hour later, on the way to the arena, his phone buzzed. Thankfully no one was sitting next to him, Cliff having wandered off to talk to someone else.

Rose: Shoot is boring. But now I'm intrigued. Hit me with it.

Shane took screenshots of parts of his texts with Ilya, mostly the ones with the dinner invitation and what followed. He sent those and then typed a question.

Shane: Am I correct in thinking this is flirting and a potential date?

About a minute later, a new message came through.

Rose: Shane, honey, platonic love of my life

Rose: YES! That is flirting and a date!!!! Who is this guy? I need all the details immediately

Shane laughed and looked around, but no one was paying attention. The pre-game chatter and restlessness were strong right then.

Shane: He owns the bookshop down the street from my new place.

Shane: He's been recommending books to me.

Rose: I'm pretty sure I've starred in that movie

Rose: This is the cutest thing I've ever seen

Rose: Unfortunately I have to go and I know you have a game but we are so talking more about this later

Shane: Yes, fine. Thanks, Rose. Miss you!

Rose: Miss you too. I'll see you in a few weeks. But you will be telling me about this dinner ASAP!!! I mean it. Every detail. Later xo

Shane slipped his phone back in his pocket, still smiling. Talking to Rose was always nice, and he did trust her. That was kind of a given when someone figures out that you're gay and makes you confront it. In a nice and very caring way that Shane would be grateful for until the end of time. She was the only person who knew his secret. Or at least, she had been, until Ilya Rozanov.

-

They beat Tampa. Shane was relieved because that would have been an embarrassing loss. He'd been thinking of Ilya even more than usual while he played, the giddiness of the previous night still there, driving his feet across the ice while he wondered if those eyes like the sea were watching him from Boston. If anything, he'd played better than usual, which was a relief because the thought of Ilya being a negative in his life in any way did not sit well.

He'd had a couple of beers with the guys after, and he was feeling pleasantly buzzy, from that and from the win, when he got back to his room. The confirmation from Rose had also done something to him. Now that he was pretty sure that he wasn't imagining the flirting and the date-asking, his fingers were getting a little bold on the glass keyboard.

Shane: "We are not written for one instrument alone; I am not, neither are you."

I.R.: still thinking about that one, huh?

Shane: A little.

I.R.: that quote suits you, Shane Hollander

I.R.: we didn't really discuss Call Me By Your Name

I.R.: any other quotes from dear Elio and Oliver still sticking with you?

Shane: I don't have my copy of the book with me. Had to google that one to make sure I got it right.

Shane: But there were a few others, yeah.

I.R.: maybe I can help

I.R.: "We rip out so much of ourselves to be cured of things faster than we should that we go bankrupt by the age of thirty and have less to offer each time we start with someone new. But to feel nothing so as not to feel anything - what a waste!"

Shane: That was one. What about you? Any others stick with you?

A couple of minutes went by before Ilya's reply popped up.

I.R.: "I'm not wise at all. I told you, I know nothing. I know books, and I know how to string words together—it doesn't mean I know how to speak about the things that matter most to

me.”

Shane did remember that one. It was a good quote, but he hadn’t thought about it too deeply at the time. Now, knowing what he did about Ilya, which was admittedly not much at all and maybe he would change that soon, this one did seem like something he would think about.

Shane: Relatable or just respectable?

I.R.: relatable

Shane: Interesting, since you might actually be one of the wisest people I’ve ever met.

I.R.: I’m already going to cook for you

I.R.: no need to flatter me

Shane laughed out loud. Leave it to Ilya Rozanov to flirt and self-deprecate all in one go. Maybe Shane did already know more than he thought, because somehow he knew that fit.

Shane: Unlike you, I’m not great at the stringing words together part. I wouldn’t waste them on something that’s not true.

I.R.: I think you are wrong about the first part, right about the second

I.R.: you don’t seem like the type to waste words

He didn’t know how to respond to that. Luckily he didn’t have to.

I.R.: I know you won your game tonight

I.R.: why aren’t you out celebrating

His chest fluttered just the tiniest bit. Ilya had been watching. Or he’d at least checked the score.

Shane: I was earlier.

Shane: I’ll leave you alone if you prefer.

I.R.: no, Shane Hollander

I.R.: I do not prefer

I.R.: what are you reading tonight?

Shane: Nothing yet.

Shane: I read a few pages of Pretty Girls earlier today. Good, but not the mood I want tonight. Saving it for the flight home tomorrow.

I.R.: yes, very heavy

I.R.: not for a celebratory mood

Shane: I reread a little of the kind of sweet book.

I.R.: are you going to share any of it with the class?

Shane: Probably not. I don't want to embarrass myself before you cook for me.

I.R.: judgement free zone

I.R.: give me a tiny peek

That warm buzz was still zipping through him. That was the only explanation for why he thought the next text was a good idea, even with Ilya's cajoling. He was definitely going to delete it from his phone later. It took him a couple of minutes to find the right page, and a couple more to type it because he kept trying to change his mind midway through. But he sent it. He sent it, and maybe he would regret it, but maybe he was tired of not doing things just in case he'd regret them. The other regrets were worse.

Shane: Fine. This part stuck in my head. It's actually kind of a sad though. Because of what happens after.

Shane: "Does this feel wrong to you?" ... "Because it doesn't feel wrong to me." ... "Nothing in my life has ever felt so right."

He didn't include the descriptions of Jared and Matt kissing that fell between the dialogue. His face was already burning. The longer the typing bubble didn't pop up, the more he regretted this bit of bravery. Maybe he had misread this entire thing. But Rose...she wouldn't have. He had to trust her. And Ilya already knew this about him, it wasn't new, it was just raw and put into words in a way he hadn't yet been brave enough to say.

I.R.: I think this is not a surprising or embarrassing choice

I.R.: you spend a lot of time in a world that thinks these things are wrong

I.R.: I also know that kind of place well

Shane: You do?

I.R.: maybe hockey and Russia are not so different in that way

I.R.: if you do not fit in their little boxes, you're the problem

Shane: Yeah. Anyway, that's also not a celebratory topic.

I.R.: probably not

I.R.: you played well tonight

Shane: You watched?

I.R.: yes

I.R.: your backhand could use some work

Shane huffed a surprised laugh.

Shane: Is that so?

I.R.: yes

I.R.: very weak

He was still smiling, even if he was also fighting the urge to defend his very not weak backhand.

Shane: What do you know about it?

I.R.: I will tell you a secret if you promise not to ask any follow-up questions

Shane: Fine.

I.R.: I used to play

Shane's jaw was probably on the floor. Maybe all the way in the lobby.

Shane: You're fucking with me.

I.R.: no

Shane: When?

I.R.: see previous message about follow-up questions

Shane: You can't just drop that and not explain.

I.R.: I think you will find that I can

I.R.: leave me alone and maybe I'll tell you at dinner

Shane: Okay. All the way alone?

I.R.: no

I.R.: other conversation still allowed

Shane: What are you reading tonight?

I.R.: something I'm not sure you would want to read

I.R.: new, just came out a couple months ago

I.R.: A Gentleman in Moscow by Amor Towles

Shane googled it and read the summary on Goodreads. It didn't sound bad, but Ilya was right, he probably wouldn't have picked it up on a whim.

Shane: Sounds good, but maybe not what I'd reach for.

Shane: I'd still love to hear about it from you.

Three minutes of silence.

I.R.: hold

I.R.: finding my top quotes so far

He wondered how ridiculous he looked right now, holding his phone too close to his face, smiling. He needed to remember to bring his reading glasses with him on the road.

I.R.: “No matter how much time passes, those we have loved never slip away from us entirely.”

Shane wondered who Ilya had lost. This wasn't the first quote he'd made note of that hinted at it.

I.R.: “...if one did not master one's circumstances, one was bound to be mastered by them...”

He was nodding as he read that, as if anyone could even see him. Had Ilya chosen that for his sake only? Perhaps it was universally relatable.

I.R.: there is one more but it is very long

Shane: I'd like to see if you don't mind typing it. Or send a picture.

But the typing bubble popped up immediately and stayed up for a good two minutes or more before the next message came through.

I.R.: “After all, what can a first impression tell us about someone we've just met for a minute in the lobby of a hotel? For that matter, what can a first impression tell us about anyone? Why, no more than a chord can tell us about Beethoven, or a brushstroke about Botticelli. By their very nature, human beings are so capricious, so complex, so delightfully contradictory, that they deserve not only our consideration, but our reconsideration—and our unwavering determination to withhold our opinion until we have engaged with them in every possible setting at every possible hour.”

I.R.: I like that one very much

Shane: Me too. But every possible setting at every possible hour...wow.

I.R.: wow indeed

I.R.: maybe we cannot have opinions at all then

Shane: Or we just have to accept that we'll never have a fully formed opinion?

I.R.: maybe that's the fun part

I.R.: always more to learn

Shane: As someone who is probably not good at first impressions, I hope so.

I.R.: no

I.R.: very good first impression

Shane: Really?

I.R.: yes, but I don't think you'd want me to describe it in detail to live in your phone, Shane Hollander

That gave him pause and brought him back to reality for a moment. But damn if he wasn't dying to know. And still smiling like an idiot.

Shane: Maybe in person then.

I.R.: maybe

Shane: I should go. I get back in town tomorrow afternoon, but not sure if I'll make it home in time to stop by before you close.

I.R.: special hours for you

I.R.: just text me if the door is locked

I.R.: goodnight, Shane Hollander

Shane: Thanks. Goodnight.

Shane flopped back against his pillows, lips still pulled into a small smile. *Special hours for you.* Those words made his stomach flipflop, and he wondered if Ilya had any idea of the effect he had on him. And maybe if he was having any effect on Ilya.

-

Shane had gotten home a little after 6, which left him plenty of time to get to One Good Memory before they closed at 8. He unpacked, took a shower because he'd been on an airplane too long, and then pulled on jeans and a jacket and headed out around 7:15. It was cold and a little rainy, but he walked anyway.

When he stepped into the shop, he was startled to find not Ilya behind the counter, but a younger girl, maybe 20, with purple hair and a nose ring scrolling through her phone. She briefly glanced up, mumbled something that could have been a greeting, and that was all. No flash of recognition, which was a relief. He looked around, but he could only see one other person, an older man, browsing the first shelf on the left.

Awkward human that he was, Shane wasn't sure what to do. Should he ask the aloof girl behind the counter where Ilya was? That felt weird. He could just text him. That also felt weird somehow. Thankfully he didn't have to think about it for long. The door to the stairs opened and a black blur came flying out, making a beeline right for him, stopping to wind around his legs.

"Hi Vanya," he said, bending down to pet him. "Missed me?"

The girl behind the counter was watching him now. Ilya walked up to the counter next to her.

"Mallory, you can go. I'll close up," he said.

She stood up, grabbed a backpack from under the counter, and said, "Cool, thanks. See you tomorrow."

She walked past Shane and out the door, letting in a rush of cold air behind her.

"You made it," Ilya said, settling behind the counter.

Shane looked up at him, hand still occupied by the demanding Vanya. Those blue-green, maybe hazel eyes, always so intense, were now putting off even more heat. Or maybe Shane was just seeing what he wanted after their text conversation the night before. It had seemed more intimate, even if they had stuck to mostly safe topics.

“Yeah,” Shane said, straightening up. “I’m not quite done with Pretty Girls yet. It’s good though.”

Ilya nodded. “So, do you want to finish that before I give you our discussion book?”

“No, I’ll take it now. I, uh...I have a game tomorrow night, but I think maybe I can be ready to discuss it Sunday evening. Depending on how long it is. If Sunday is good for you.”

The man who was browsing walked up then, and Shane took another step away from the counter, Vanya following him. Ilya rang up the man’s book and chatted politely with him. Vanya was not deterred by anything else going on and stood up on his hind legs. Shane bent and picked him up.

“You’re going to get me in trouble,” he whispered to the cat.

Eventually the shop door opened and closed, the man disappearing into the rain.

“I told you he’d never leave you alone now,” Ilya said, leaning on the counter again.

“You were right. Luckily I’m a willing subject.”

Ilya shook his head, smiling. “Okay. Tomorrow you have a game, but the next day, dinner?”

“I think so. I guess I can’t guarantee I’ll finish it in time, but I’ll try. Are you going to tell me what the book is?”

“So impatient.”

“Sorry,” Shane said.

“No need to be. I can handle impatient.” He reached under the counter and pulled out a dark paperback featuring a skull and fancy white font that said: *If We Were Villains* by M.L. Rio, Advance Reading Copy, April 2017, Not For Sale.

“You know much Shakespeare?” Ilya asked.

Shane’s brows went up. “Depends on your definition of much.”

“Mm, I guess we will see. This is heavy on Shakespeare. But still readable even if you don’t know every reference.”

Shane tried to shrug, but there was still a cat lying in his arms. “Okay.”

“No pressure. Just for fun.” Ilya walked around the counter, stopping in front of him. “I’ll take that.” He held out his arms, and Shane shifted Vanya to him, trying to remain unaffected

by the proximity and the muscled arms brushing against his and the stronger whiff of something clean and woodsy, just a hint of smoke.

When Ilya walked back behind the counter, Vanya jumped from his arms and sat on the wooden surface, his tail flicking back and forth. Shane reached up to give him one last pet, pulling his hand back before the heat of Ilya's body was close enough to feel.

"I should probably go before the weather gets worse," he said, picking up the book.

"Let me know about Sunday. There is no rush." Ilya was leaning on one elbow, the other arm now busy petting Vanya.

"Sure. I'll let you know," Shane said. He knew he was staring more than usual, but he couldn't make himself stop. His eyes were drawn to Ilya's mouth like a moth to a flame...the pull was beyond just passing interest now. It was like an instinctual reflex, tracing the curve of his lips. He wasn't sure if even the most talented wordsmith could give them their due. A perfect cupid's bow that was now turning up at corners, as if its owner was aware of his thoughts. Shane shook his head and stepped back.

"Goodnight." He quickly pushed the glass door open and walked out into the cold, rainy night, ignoring the way the water was already soaking through the soft mesh of his sneakers. He slipped the book into the waistband of his jeans and pulled his sweatshirt down over it, hoping that would be enough to get it home safely.

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The book stayed dry; Shane did not. After a hot shower and answering emails and texting his mom, Shane remembered to put his reading glasses on and got in bed. He opened *If We Were Villains* and immediately let out an embarrassing noise. The neat little notes in the margins were back. He looked over at the clock...only 9:30. A relief, because he had a feeling he wasn't going to want to put this down. He didn't even know what to expect from this book with its sinister cover and title, other than the Shakespeare hint Ilya had provided.

He needn't have worried. Oliver's story pulled him in from page one and didn't let go until it was almost midnight, and he finally had to concede, reluctantly. He wanted to finish the story. He wanted to see more of Ilya's private thoughts. When he started reading, Shane had wondered how many of these notes were made before he'd offered the book to him. Early on, after Oliver says, "*Seems like just yesterday my dad was shouting at me for throwing my life away*," there was something small written beside it that had been scratched out. There was a whole paragraph on the next page that wasn't annotated or even highlighted, but Ilya had drawn brackets around it. It included more about Oliver's father [*My father, even more staunchly opposed than most, refused to accept my decision to waste my university years. ... Eighteen and vulnerable, I'd felt for the first time the extraordinary dread of wanting something desperately and watching it slip through my fingers, so I took the risk of telling him I would go to Dellecher or nowhere...*]. Shane wished there was an explanation for the brackets.

The future is wide and wild and full of promise, but it is precarious, too. Seize on every opportunity that comes your way and cling to it, lest it be washed back out to sea. Part of a

convocation speech...beside it was written, “we get it.” Shane had laughed out loud. There had been several like that (“good grief” and “wow” and “who says that”), and Shane got the impression Ilya thought it was pretentious. But he once again wondered if these were written before or after he’d decided to share this book. He had his answer soon enough, after, *Actors are by nature volatile—alchemic creatures composed of incendiary elements, emotion and ego and envy. Heat them up, stir them together, and sometimes you get gold. Sometimes disaster*; was written “sound familiar?” followed by a little hockey stick doodle.

It did sound familiar. *Sometimes disaster*. That’s what Shane was avoiding...the fallout, the disaster, the consequences if his secret got out. If he decided to let it out. Because locker rooms were indeed full of emotion and ego and envy. And sometimes they were volatile. Though it was the quieter consequences he was really terrified of...the looks and the whispers and the slow rejection from the only life he’d ever known.

A bit further on, he came upon another highlighted line: *How could we explain that standing on a stage and speaking someone else’s words as if they are your own is less an act of bravery than a desperate lunge at mutual understanding? An attempt to forge that tenuous link between speaker and listen and communicate something, anything, of substance.*” And within the yellow ink, part of it was also underlined in black, “*speaking someone else’s words as if they are your own is less an act of bravery than a desperate lunge at mutual understanding*. No notes in the margin, but perhaps there didn’t need to be. A mutual understanding. A conversation using the words of others.

The last highlighted line he came across before putting the book down was: *I need language to live, like food—lexemes and morphemes and morsels of meaning nourish me with the knowledge that, yes, there is a word for this. Someone else has felt it before.* And like the previous one, within the yellow, *Someone else has felt it before*, was underlined in black. A thick, bold line. Next to it, in Ilya’s familiar handwriting, a simple “yes.”

-

The next day, they had a morning skate, all the usual game day activities, and then a game against the Admirals in the evening. Shane always liked playing New York, having admired Scott Hunter since before he’d even joined the MLH. They were still early enough in the season for Hunter to be playing at his best, giving Shane the challenge he craved on the ice. The Admirals were strong this season, and Boston barely eked out a win.

Not for the first time, Shane found himself wondering if Ilya was watching, and now he was overly aware of his backhand. His backhand that was perfectly fine, no weakness to be found. Every time he thought about it, he smiled stupidly. But he also played an excellent game, so if thinking about Ilya Rozanov and his mystery hockey background helped rather than hindered, where was the harm? *Right*.

He got home late, but he stayed up to read anyway, determined to have their dinner the next day. He also just wanted to dive back in, keep collecting little pieces of Ilya from between the pages and beneath the ink.

Highlighted with no explanation:

Imagine having all your own thoughts and feelings tangled up with all the thoughts and feelings of a whole other person. It can be hard, sometimes, to sort out which is which.

And:

The thing about Shakespeare is, he's so eloquent ... He speaks the unspeakable. He turns grief and triumph and rapture and rage into words, into something we can understand. He renders the whole mystery of humanity comprehensible.

Within the yellow ink of the latter, like so many others, was underlined *into something we can understand*.

Shane liked that one too. It was why books were important. To him, to everyone who'd ever gotten lost between pages. To be seen and understood... maybe also to escape, but those things were still inextricably tied together. He could let out a lot of things on the ice, through physical pursuits, but some things were better understood and then offered up through words.

He read later than he meant to, but he was almost done. By the next evening, he'd be ready for dinner, and maybe a discussion, though that thought still made him nervous. He'd never be able to keep up with Ilya and his encyclopedic book knowledge. But how fun it would be to try.

-

After their morning skate the next day, Shane went straight home to read. He had a few other things to do...there was always something to do as captain...but for once, he also had a social life to tend to. Kind of anyway. The first thing he did was text Ilya.

Shane: I'll be done with the book before this evening. If you still want to do dinner.

A few minutes later:

I.R.: come by at 6:30

I.R.: straight upstairs

I.R.: any food allergies or dislikes I should know?

Shane: Not really. I tend to avoid heavy dairy.

He didn't want to be annoying and give a list of all the things he tended to avoid. That seemed like a bad first impression. Well, maybe not *first* first, but first in that setting...a maybe date. Something close enough to a date to make him overthink every thought he'd ever had.

I.R.: see you tonight

I.R.: no need to bring anything

Shane wondered if Ilya knew just how many hours of agonizing he'd just saved him. Because he had been worrying about that. Wine? Beer? Dessert? He still felt like he should bring something, but he also wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Now he could just

spend his day freaking out the normal amount, about whether he'd be awkward and embarrassingly unequipped for the kind of conversation Ilya was probably expecting.

When he finished the book, he flipped back through, taking in all of Ilya's highlights and notes once more. The most surprising one was, *For someone who loved words as much as I did, it was amazing how often they failed me.* It was offered up in yellow, no explanation beside it. Shane wondered if Ilya thought it was relatable because Shane couldn't imagine words failing him often. But then again, maybe they did, for some things. Things that he'd probably never get the opportunity to find out, even though he found himself desperately wanting to. They were having dinner, though...that was a start. A scary start that felt impossible and like something Shane should be running from, but he wanted so badly to run to it, full speed ahead.

At 5:30, he had three different sweaters, two button-up shirts, and two nice t-shirts laid out on his bed. What did one wear to a dinner that was maybe not a date but also felt like a date, and that even Rose thought was a date? He was tempted to text her again and ask for outfit advice, but he really needed to just figure it out on his own. He sighed, picked up a dark green cashmere sweater, and pulled it on. Then black jeans. That would have to do. He stood in front of the mirror trying to make his hair look presentable. It was getting a little longer than he usually let it, bangs straying down near his eyes until he brushed them aside, and they finally stayed put.

He walked into One Good Memory at 6:20, book in hand. He had considered passing it up and walking for a few more minutes so he wouldn't be early, but decided against it because it was windy and ten minutes wasn't a crime against humanity. Mallory was behind the counter again, purple hair practically glowing from behind her phone. She glanced up at him, and he gave her an awkward nod and continued to the door at the back. He paused inside, one foot on the first step, took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and then continued up. Two quick knocks on Ilya's door, and then it opened. He probably hadn't needed to worry about the outfit because Ilya was wearing a tight black t-shirt, a gold chain and cross gleaming against it, and the familiar worn jeans that were tight in all the right places. His curls looked soft and a little messy, and not for the first time, Shane wanted to run his fingers through them.

"You made it," Ilya said, taking a step back and waving him in.

"Yeah. Hi."

Vanya appeared then, doing his usual enthusiastic leg rubbing.

"Hi Vanya." He bent down to pet him, but Vanya, demanding as ever, stood up on his hind legs. Shane took a half-second to consider the consequences of cat plus cashmere before deciding he didn't care. It's not like he couldn't afford to replace it. He picked up the already purring cat, who was a perfect gentleman and immediately relaxed in his arms.

Ilya shook his head, a tiny smirk on his face. "I told you. He is relentless."

"He knows I came here to visit him."

“Oh,” Ilya said, leaning his head back in feigned offense. “I see how it is. I cook for you, and this is the thanks I get.”

“Well, I haven’t even tried the food yet.”

Ilya huffed an amused laugh. “Okay, Shane Hollander. Let’s eat then.”

Shane ignored the shiver that ran through him and set Vanya back down so he could follow Ilya into the kitchen.

“I made chicken picatta and wild rice. Hopefully this is okay for famous hockey player Shane Hollander and his probably very boring diet.”

Maybe he should have been offended, but all he could do was smile. “Yeah, that’s perfect actually. You didn’t have to make anything special for me.”

Ilya shrugged. “I like this too.” He pulled one of the chairs out at the four-seater table. “Sit.”

Shane sat and put the book down on the table next to him. He watched Ilya take plates out of a cabinet and set one in front of him, one in front of the chair on his right.

“What do you want to drink? Wine, beer, soda, water?”

“Oh, water is fine.”

“Okay.”

Ilya gave him a glass of ice water, then served the chicken piccata and wild rice. It looked and smelled delicious, and it really was a thoughtful choice that made him relax, knowing he wasn’t doing anything he’d regret tomorrow when they played Buffalo.

Ilya sat beside him, and Shane was hyperaware of him, heat rippling in the space between them. He forced himself to focus on the plate and the food and Vanya, who was lurking under the table.

“Well?” Ilya asked, nodding at his plate. “I am waiting to hear if Shane Hollander approves of my cooking.”

Shane shook his head, still smiling, cheeks probably noticeably pink. He took a bite of the food and made a noise of approval he hadn’t even meant to let slip.

“I approve,” he said, glancing up at Ilya, who was still watching, a hungry look on his face. “It’s really good.”

“Good. Now, tell me about the book.”

“I really liked it, even though you were right about the Shakespeare. I’m sure tons of references went over my head. And I admittedly had to look up a few things. Like ‘sotto voce’ and a summary of King Lear.”

“Do you agree that they were all kind of terrible?”

Shane nodded, giving himself a moment to chew and swallow. “I mean, they all covered up a murder.”

“And yet poor Oliver took the fall. Do you think James is alive?”

“I don’t know. I understand the Pericles reference. And yes, I did look that up just to be sure I had the right idea. But...why would James fake his death? That’s the part I can’t find a reason for. It seems more likely that he couldn’t live with the guilt, right?” He paused, another thought occurring to him. “Although letting Oliver believe he’s still alive is a pretty fucked up thing to do if he isn’t.”

Ilya was just watching him thoughtfully, hanging on his every word, smiling like he was charmed rather than just amused. It made Shane feel simultaneously so self-conscious he wanted to get up and leave, and also so...special. He was used to people hanging on his every word when it was about hockey because he was *the* Shane Hollander. Most of the time, he was pretty sure he could say just about anything—quote the wrong stats, make stupid predictions—and they’d still eat it up because of who he was, not because they actually cared about the words. But here, in Ilya’s kitchen, talking about books, he was no one. Just Shane. And yet Ilya was looking at him like that. He had to look down at his plate again, face too warm. Whole body too warm.

“I tend to agree. That would be very fucked up. But I am not convinced he is still alive. There is one quote in there that could be foreshadowing.”

Ilya reached across the table and grabbed the book, flipping through pages until he landed on one.

“Here,” he said. “*But that is how a tragedy like ours or King Lear breaks your heart—by making you believe that the ending might still be happy, until the very last minute.*” He set the book back down. “Maybe Oliver is going to believe that the ending will be happy until the very last minute. But it is still a tragedy.”

Shane nodded slowly. He was taking in this information about the book, yes, but he also didn’t like the way that made him feel. Not one bit. *My life is not a tragedy*, he reminded himself.

“So you were right, they’re all kind of terrible.”

Ilya laughed. “Yes. This book was also very pretentious, but I like Shakespeare, so maybe it is just the right kind of pretentious for me.”

“I didn’t mind that part. Though I’m sure I missed a lot, not knowing it as well as you do.”

“I think you understood it just fine.”

Shane bit his bottom lip and took a deep breath. He was floundering under that gaze, that soft voice, and the quiet acknowledgment that what he was saying mattered. He took another bite

of food, anything to look away for a moment.

“So, you like Shakespeare?” Shane asked between bites.

“As much as any English major.”

“You went to school for that?”

“Yes. This useless degree that everyone thinks you can sleep through. I have one of those.”

“Useless? Seems like you’re using it just right.”

Ilya shrugged. “Not really necessary for running a bookshop. But maybe I am better at recommending books because of it, hm?”

Shane smiled. “You’re excellent at that. Where did you go to school?”

“BU. I moved here for school and never left.”

“From Russia?”

“Yes.”

“That must have been a big change?” Shane asked, thinking about his move from Canada that had felt so big at the time, but so small in comparison to crossing an ocean.

“It was. Maybe a very stupid choice. I spent a lot of time learning English when I was younger, and then learning it again in the form of literature here. Stupid contradictory language with all its nonsensical rules. Had to learn what all these old men mean when they say one thing and want you to believe another.”

He waved a hand in frustration, and Shane couldn’t help but laugh. “I hadn’t thought of it that way. That must have been hard.”

Ilya nodded. “For me it was. But try telling someone an English degree was hard, and you will hear nothing but derision.”

“Probably only from people who never attempted it.”

Ilya let out a quiet laugh, more of an exhale. “Yes, probably. They think I have wasted my time on this, and then at the same time assume I am uneducated because of my accent. Even though, when I want it to be, my English is almost flawless.” He shrugged again. “I cannot win.”

Shane could only nod. This seemed like a sore spot. “Your English is better than mine, probably.”

“No. I still drop articles and pronouns here and there. Not because I don’t know better. It’s just out of habit.” He paused, gaze back on Shane’s. “Maybe I let myself slip when I’m comfortable.”

Shane had noticed that a few times. Not often, but did that mean he was comfortable with him?

“So,” he said, shifting the subject before he said something stupid. “Am I allowed to ask about hockey yet?”

Ilya exhaled loudly, obviously dramatic on purpose. “Yes, Shane Hollander. Ask your questions.”

“When did you play?”

“As a kid. I stopped when I was 13.”

“Were you good? Why did you stop?”

“Yes. Because I felt like it.”

Shane scoffed. “That’s all you’re going to give me?”

“Since you ate my food without complaint, I guess I will give you a little more. Yes, I was very good. My father wanted me to go pro. Here in America. Maybe I would have, I don’t know.”

“Then why did you stop?”

Ilya leaned back in his chair. “I didn’t love it. Not like you or Scott Hunter or any of the other golden boys of the MLH. It was fun, but I could already see that it would become a job I didn’t love. And then my mother died, and I stopped caring entirely. I did one more season, as poorly as I could, and my father finally let me quit”

Shane’s stomach sank. That explained a lot of things. “I’m sorry. That’s awful.”

Ilya shrugged and stood up, picking up their empty plates. “I was young. Is fine.”

“Wait, when were you born?”

“June 1991.”

“Holy shit. We might have been drafted at the same time. I’m May 1991.”

“Yes, I know. Shane Hollander’s information is very available to anyone who wants it.”

Shane bit the inside of his cheek. “You looked me up?”

Ilya leaned against the sink, staring at him. “Hardly need to. Turn on ESPN, and you are there.”

“Right, yeah.”

As if he could sense the disappointment, Ilya said, “Fine, yes. I looked you up.”

“Find anything interesting?” Shane asked, unable to contain his smile.

“Mm, no. You are very boring. No scandals or career missteps. A perfect Canadian MLH golden boy.”

Shane might have been offended if it weren't for the affectionate, teasing tone in his voice and look on his face.

“There are worse things to be.”

Ilya nodded slowly. “Yes. But more importantly, who is your favorite Game of Thrones character? And is it different from your favorite Song of Ice and Fire character?”

Shane sighed. He knew this was coming. “Jon Snow.”

Ilya laughed so loud that Vanya darted out from under the table to see what was going on.

“What, too boring?” Shane asked, still smiling. He knew already.

“Yes. But it suits you. He is also kind of a golden boy, in some ways. Very moral.”

“And very—” Shane cut himself off. Perhaps he was a bit too comfortable here, even if Ilya did know his secret.

Ilya cocked his head. “Go on. Very what? Very hot?”

Shane looked over at him. He was still leaning against the sink, arms crossed over his chest, that tight black t-shirt doing nothing to distract from what lay under it.

“Yeah. That.”

Ilya laughed. “He is okay, if you like that scraggly look.”

“Well, who's your favorite, then?”

“Guess.”

Shane licked his lips, suddenly nervous. “Tyrion?”

Ilya pushed off the counter and walked up to the table. Too close. Much too close.

“Good guess. Come on,” Ilya said, turning toward the living room. “More comfortable in here.”

Shane followed him into the living room, his eyes automatically pulled to the bookshelves. Ilya flopped down on one side of the leather couch, so Shane sat on the other side.

“Tyrion Lannister. Yes, I would say he is my favorite in both. But...he is not the only Lannister I like.”

“Jaime?”

Ilya shook his head. “Cersei.”

Shane’s eyes went wide. “Really?”

“Mostly in the show. She’s a terrible person, but I like how ruthless she is. At least she loves her children.”

“But she’s the reason Tommen...”

“Yes, yes. Season 6 finale was very...” Ilya waved a hand vaguely. “Very brutal.”

Shane cocked his head. “Whereas the episode before that was Jon Snow being epic.”

“Oh yes? Very responsible of him, running out to battle alone. Everyone had to save his ass.”

Shane laughed. “Fine. I still like him. I like Arya too.”

“Hm,” Ilya hummed. “That one is less predictable.”

“She’s fearless. Goes for what she wants. What’s not to like?” *What's not to envy?*

“I thought maybe you would say Brienne of Tarth. She is also very good, very morally acceptable.”

“Wow...you really do think I’m boring, huh?” Shane was still smiling anyway. Ilya thinking he was boring was still Ilya thinking about him at all.

Ilya tilted his head. “Maybe a little.” He drew one knee up onto the couch and leaned his chin on it, focusing his gaze on Shane. “Maybe I like it.”

Shane swallowed hard, his whole body going taut under that look. “Oh.”

“Boring people probably don’t read the books you do. Boring people don’t read at all. You are anything but boring, Shane Hollander.”

Thank the universe for Vanya because he jumped into Shane’s lap right then, saving him from trying to figure out how to respond to that.

“Vanya,” Ilya said, voice mock stern. “You nuisance.”

“He’s not. He likes me.”

“Mhm. He smells weakness.”

Shane laughed. “That’s okay.”

“So...need more books to read?” Ilya asked.

“Oh, yeah. Well, I still have Interview with the Vampire. And the last bit of Pretty Girls.”

Ilya was still watching him. “You like fantasy too, then? Since you’ve read A Song of Ice and Fire.”

“I do, but I mostly save those types for the summer, when I have time off. Kind of a lot to keep up with during the season.”

“Okay. Good to know. If you want any more recommendations...publicly acceptable or otherwise, let me know.”

“I do. I want both.”

“And do you have any requests? I don’t want to give you another book that is...lacking, in certain areas.”

Shane’s face had to be as red as the cover of Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda. He looked down at Vanya, trying to get himself together.

“What? You don’t want that?” Ilya asked, voice slightly edged with uncertainty.

“It’s not that. This is much more embarrassing to talk about in person.”

“No. We are past that now. Your secret is safe here, remember?”

Shane nodded. “Yeah. I appreciate that.” He paused, running his fingers through Vanya’s silky black fur. “It’s still weird, though. Being able to say any of that out loud.”

“No one else knows?”

“Uh, just Rose Landry.”

Ilya laughed, surprised, amused, something high and bright. “Wow. Me and Rose Landry.” He paused. “I did see those headlines. But I did not see any about a breakup.”

“Yeah, I mean, we didn’t really announce that we were dating, so...no reason to announce that we broke up.”

“So...you were dating?”

“I guess, technically. It was short-lived.”

“Because you do not like women?”

Shane sucked in a breath. “Yeah. Because of that.”

Ilya nodded. “I like women.”

“Oh.” His stomach sank.

“But I also like men.”

“Oh,” he said again stupidly, while his body tried to light itself on fire from the inside.

“You tell me your secret, seems only fair to reciprocate.”

“Is it a secret? For you?”

“Not so much anymore. Would not be safe in Russia. My father is dying, so I might have to go back one more time. Maybe best that no one knows for now. I don’t have a green card yet. Everything here is so stupid and complicated.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. About your father.”

“We are not close.”

Shane nodded. “But the green card...I mean, is there anything that would make you have to leave?”

“Hopefully not. I have a backup plan, I think.”

“Oh. That’s good, then.” Shane hadn’t fully considered that problem. He didn’t really have to worry about it himself. Not until after he retired anyway, and he would go back to Canada then. To his cottage.

“I would like to go back to talking about your publicly unacceptable books now,” Ilya said, snapping Shane back to reality, his body reacting before he’d even fully arrived.

“Okay. What about them?”

“Do you want me to acquire them for you? Or do you have that under control?”

Shane knew this was a fork in the road. He could say no, and Ilya would probably back off, and they could stop doing whatever this was, maybe go back to friendly suggestions in the store when he stopped in. Or he could say yes, and they could keep doing this. Maybe more than this. He was still depending on Rose’s assessment partly, but this entire evening had also been...illuminating. He was pretty sure this question was more than it seemed.

“Uh, yeah, I want you to. And anything else you think I should read.”

Ilya nodded slowly, his eyes scanning Shane’s face. Maybe he was imagining it, but it seemed like they lingered on his mouth.

“Okay. So we are still going through important queer books maybe, plus stuff you can read on the plane, and then some you can read in your room. Is that right?”

Shane smiled. “Yeah. That seems...good.”

Ilya stood up and walked past him to the bookshelves, giving Shane a very good, very closeup view of his ass. He tried, admittedly not very hard, not to look. But it was right there, and Vanya jumped out of his lap to see what Ilya was doing, so his distraction was gone. What else was he supposed to do?

“Have you read Brokeback Mountain?” Ilya asked, rifling through books.

“No. I haven’t even seen the movie.”

Ilya turned to look at him. “Really? How?”

Shane shrugged. “I hadn’t really embraced any of this until recently. It was easier to pretend. But I would like to.”

“Here. Read the book, and then we can watch the movie.”

Shane took the book being held out to him, but his mind was already elsewhere.

“Only if you want to,” Ilya added. “It is very sad. But important. Big moment in queer cinema.”

“I want to.”

The thought of being back here on this comfortable couch watching a movie about gay cowboys with Ilya was having a decidedly inappropriate effect on him. This seemed... dangerous. And he had possibly never wanted anything more in his life.

“I should probably get going,” he said, needing to get out of here before his inappropriate reaction became overt. “Thank you for dinner. It was great.” He stood up, but it put him too close to Ilya again. Only feet between them.

“You’re welcome, Shane Hollander.”

Ilya stepped closer. Close enough that Shane could see every fleck of color in his eyes. Every mole on his cheeks, the perfect shape of dip in his upper lip, the angles of his jaw. He could smell the hint of cigarette smoke and the woodsy, clean smell he’d already come to associate with Ilya, as if he knew it intimately. Then Ilya brought a hand up, letting it hover next to Shane’s jaw.

“Can I?” Ilya asked, and his voice was a fraction lower than its already deep, velvety tone, dragging through Shane’s entire body.

Shane nodded. He wasn’t even sure what he was agreeing to, but he didn’t care. If Ilya didn’t touch him soon, he was probably going to spontaneously combust. There was too much heat surging through him with nowhere to go.

And then there was even more heat, an impossible amount, because Ilya’s hand landed lightly on his jaw, his thumb brushing across Shane’s cheekbone as he leaned in, and in, and in, until their lips were touching. Shane made a noise, an embarrassing, low noise that slipped from his throat before he even knew it was coming. It must have been a good noise because Ilya responded with one of his own, and then he was kissing him. Really kissing him. The kind of kissing he’d only read about in books. The all consuming kind where every nerve ending in his body was suddenly on fire. Ilya’s hand dipped down to the side of his neck, warm and solid, holding him in place while he readjusted the angle of his lips, letting the kiss deepen, his tongue sliding into Shane’s mouth. Shane could do nothing but draw him in further, hands landing on Ilya’s sides, one sliding to his abs, feeling the hard muscles beneath the thin

material of his shirt, wanting to slide under it, feel his skin. Ilya responded by snaking his other arm around Shane's lower back and pulling him in close until their bodies were pressed together, forcing Shane to do the same. Shane moaned into his mouth as their hard cocks slid against each other, and Ilya swallowed the sound down and pushed harder against him, their lips still moving together.

Before Shane could even process what was happening, there was a weight bouncing against him, and then a black blur as Vanya climbed up his pant leg, forcing him and Ilya apart.

"Vanya," Ilya nearly shouted. "Fuck off."

Shane laughed, letting Vanya climb into his arms. Cockblocked by a cat.

"It's okay. I really should go. I have a game tomorrow and an early morning skate."

Not to mention his entire body was still electrified, and if he didn't get out of here soon, he was going to do more than let Ilya kiss him. Which he definitely wanted. But he really did need to go.

"Yes. Go beat Buffalo and then read this book, and we will watch the movie."

Shane nodded, still feeling flustered and too warm. "Okay. I will. Thanks again...for everything."

"You're welcome. Give me that asshole," Ilya said, holding his arms out for Vanya. "Or else he will try to escape with you."

Shane handed the cat over, practically shuddering when their arms brushed. "See you next time, Vanya."

"Goodnight, Shane Hollander," Ilya said, that voice shooting right through him, reminding him that he was still hard, which might have been embarrassing if Ilya wasn't as well. Then Ilya leaned in to kiss him again, just a light brush of those perfect lips, and Shane had to physically restrain himself from leaning forward and chasing them when he pulled back. "You can leave the door unlocked downstairs. I'll be down to lock it soon."

Shane licked his lips and made himself turn and walk to the door. "Okay. Goodnight."

He managed to get into the hall, down the stairs, through the now dark and empty bookstore, and out into the cold Boston night before he let the biggest, dumbest smile of his life stretch across his face.

-

Ilya watched Shane hurry through the door and shut it carefully behind him. His nervous little smile and the way his tongue darted out to lick his lips after Ilya kissed him were going to be burned in his mind all night. He flopped down onto the couch carefully, still cradling Vanya in his arms. The cat looked up at him, all innocence and mischief existing together in those big yellow eyes. Ilya shook his head at him. If Vanya hadn't interrupted, would he have kept going? He thought maybe Shane needed a slower approach. He still looked like one loud

noise might spook him at any second. He was getting better, though. He met Ilya's gaze more often, and his voice was more sure, especially when they were talking about books. The layers of Shane Hollander were slowly peeling back, exposing the endlessly surprising man underneath.

"I think you and I are in very big trouble," Ilya murmured into Vanya's neck, and the cat meowed back at him, a noise that sounded like agreement.

Chapter End Notes

Books mentioned in this chapter:

Call Me By Your Name by Andre Aciman

A Gentleman in Moscow by Amor Towles

Promises by Marie Sexton (Jared & Matt/the kind of sweet book)

Pretty Girls by Karin Slaughter

If We Were Villains by M.L. Rio

Brokeback Mountain by Annie Proulx

Chapter 5: I go down (down) on my knees

Chapter Notes

Updated tags...no longer safe for work. Some spoilers for Brokeback Mountain.

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

Shane made it home, but he didn't remember a single second of the walk. His mind had been entirely focused on the kiss. Because what was that? It's not like he hadn't kissed anyone before. He'd kissed several women, and one man, and nothing had ever felt like that. It made him reconsider the sex in those MM romance books hidden in his closet. Maybe they were onto something.

He kept bringing his fingertips to his mouth, like he could somehow feel Ilya's lips still there, perfect and hungry and much too skilled. He also kept pushing one hand against his cock because that was also still remembering Ilya, pressed up against him, equally as hard. *Fuck*. How was he going to survive watching a whole movie in his presence? Or maybe that was the point? Maybe he was going to have to ask Rose if this was like a Netflix and chill thing. No...definitely not asking Rose that. He stripped and forced himself to put his clothes away before he pulled on pajama pants and got into bed. He was torn between starting the book, texting Ilya, and jerking off. He decided on option 2 to start.

Shane: Thanks again for dinner. I had a good time.

The almost immediate response had his heart rate increasing again.

I.R.: so did I

I.R.: looking forward to next time

Shane: Me too.

I.R.: you will have to let me know how you feel about the story

I.R.: and when you finish it

He thought about his schedule. Two games in a row and then a night off.

Shane: We play here tomorrow and in Montreal the next day. But I'll be free on Wednesday evening. Also Friday.

He probably shouldn't be making promises about finishing books during busy game and travel days, especially since he would absolutely not be reading Brokeback Mountain on the way to or from Montreal. But he was a little desperate to see Ilya again already, if he was being honest, and the book was a short story...he could probably read it in an afternoon.

I.R.: should we plan for Wednesday then?

I.R.: I have to close the store at 8

I.R.: Mallory will close on Friday if you'd rather have an earlier start

Shane: I don't mind starting after 8. It'll give me extra time after I get back from Montreal.

At this point, he didn't really care if the desperation was coming through.

I.R.: okay, Shane Hollander

I.R.: I will see you on Wednesday then

Shane: Sounds good.

He didn't want the conversation to end, but he really did need to go to sleep.

I.R.: are you going to read before bed?

Such an innocent question. His fluttery chest and still hard cock disagreed.

Shane: Probably a little.

I.R.: I hope it's the fun kind

Shane: Might be.

Shane: Hope yours is too. Goodnight.

I.R.: perhaps

I.R.: goodnight, Shane Hollander

He put his phone on his nightstand and dragged both hands down his face. That was definitely flirting. And maybe he was hoping it meant Ilya was also in this predicament. The one Shane took care of by jerking off, not even pretending he was thinking about anything other than Ilya's lips and body against his. And then he fell asleep turning over every word of their dinner conversation, still smiling.

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Ilya spent the next two days working like usual, but also waiting for text notifications and watching fucking hockey. He was watching hockey *regularly* again for the first time in his adult life. He'd never truly stopped liking it, but he hadn't been a die-hard fan by any means. Occasionally he'd catch a game, and if Boston went to the playoffs, he'd hang out in a bar with friends and cheer them on until he found someone to go home with. Maybe he'd even noticed Shane Hollander a time or two or ten. Now he was going to watch Boston play Buffalo and Montreal. He didn't give a fuck about Boston vs. Buffalo or Montreal. Except he did, because Shane Hollander was going to be skating around the ice like he owned it. He basically did. Almost no one in the league could measure up to him. Ilya didn't need to be a die-hard to know that. You just had to have eyes and ears and occasionally turn on ESPN.

So he watched Shane. Watched him skate, watched him score, watched him win against Buffalo and Montreal, though the latter was closer than it should have been. A couple hours

after the Buffalo game, he was lying on the couch with Vanya by his feet and a copy of Scythe by Neal Schusterman held open in front of him. It was a new one, releasing in a couple of weeks. He liked the premise and wanted to be able to properly recommend it or not to his customers. There were always requests for good YA books. Even still, it was a welcome interruption when his phone buzzed.

Shane: So this story is even sadder than I thought.

Ilya smiled down at his phone.

Ilya: sorry, figured you knew

Shane: I guess I did. Is the movie just as sad?

Ilya: it's a very faithful adaptation

Ilya: I won't force you to watch

Ilya: you can say no

Perhaps Brokeback Mountain for their second time hanging out together—because surely Shane Hollander would not want to label it a date—was a bold choice. Ilya had simply seen an opportunity and run with it. He just wanted Shane back in his apartment, alone. He glanced at Vanya. Almost alone.

Shane: No, I want to watch it.

Ilya: still on for Wednesday?

Shane: Yeah, definitely.

Someone should issue him a citation for the way he was still smiling at his phone like an idiot. It was indecent.

Ilya: any memorable lines?

He watched the screen, waiting for those three little dots to appear.

Shane: Maybe. I was looking back through it.

Shane: She manages to convey a lot without using a lot of words.

Ilya: yes

Ilya: are you going to share any of those words?

Shane: I'm sure this is the part everyone would choose.

And then he sent a picture of a passage instead of typing it. Ilya had read it before, many times over, but rereading it now, with thoughts of Shane Hollander and what it might mean through his eyes, was a wholly different experience.

'Try this one,' said Jack, 'and I'll say it just one time. Tell you what, we could a had a good life together, a fuckin real good life. You wouldn't do it, Ennis, so what we got now is

Brokeback Mountain. Everything built on that. It's all we got, boy, fuckin all, so I hope you know that if you don't never know the rest. Count the damn few times we been together in twenty years. Measure the fuckin short leash you keep me on, then ask me about Mexico and then tell me you'll kill me for needin it and not hardly never gettin it. You got no fuckin idea how bad it gets. I'm not you. I can't make it on a couple a high-altitude fucks once or twice a year. You're too much for me, Ennis, you son of a whoreson bitch. I wish I knew how to quit you.'

He'd been thinking a lot about Shane Hollander and his need to hide himself. He even understood it, from Shane's perspective of someone so famous in a sport dominated by people who sneered at such things, but also from a place of vulnerability and not being what people expect you to be. Ilya knew both, at least in some ways. He wasn't famous, his life wasn't under a microscope, so he could fuck men whenever he wanted. His family and the ominous collective of Russia...nothing would get back to them as long as he wasn't flaunting it on social media. It was always there in the back of his mind, just not an immediate threat. But Shane Hollander could hardly breathe without it making headlines.

Ilya: yes, that is probably the part most people would choose

Ilya: but I think I can see why you specifically would

Ilya: we can talk more about that if you want

Ilya wanted to ask so many things. Prying, intimate things that he didn't have any right to.

Shane: Yeah, maybe eventually. Still excited to watch the movie.

Ilya: good, me too

Ilya: been a few years since I've seen it

Shane: Should I bring anything?

Ilya paused. Was this a surface level question? Was Shane asking if he should bring popcorn? Or was he asked if he should bring an overnight bag? The possibilities. Best stick to safer territory for now.

Ilya: just yourself

Ilya: wear something comfortable

Ilya: long movie

There was an uncomfortably long stretch with no reply, and Ilya started picking apart those texts, trying to decide if he'd said something to spook him.

Shane: Sounds good. Are you reading anything?

He breathed a sigh of relief.

Ilya: yes, new YA book coming out soon

Ilya: very good premise

Ilya: I think it will be one I recommend to customers a lot

Shane: Tell me about it?

Ilya: dystopia/scifi future, humanity has cured death

Ilya: they can bring you back from anything

Ilya: to control the population, they have scythes who have to cull people

Ilya: that probably sounds kind of ridiculous, but I like it so far

Shane: No, it sounds good. Cool concept.

Ilya: yes

Ilya: “Hope in the shadow of fear is the world's most powerful motivator.”

Shane: Interesting. Any others?

Ilya flipped through the pages, looking for others that stood out. He wondered if Shane knew how elated he was by this trust and interest in his opinion. He certainly wasn't planning to tell him.

Ilya: “Everyone is guilty of something, and everyone still harbors a memory of childhood innocence, no matter how many layers of life wrap around it. Humanity is innocent; humanity is guilty, and both states are undeniably true.”

Ilya: “I think about religion and how, once we became our own saviors, our own gods, most faiths became irrelevant. What must it have been like to believe in something greater than oneself? To accept imperfection and look to a rising vision of all we could never be? It must have been comforting. It must have lifted people from the mundane, but also justified all sorts of evil. I often wonder if the bright benefit of belief outweighed the darkness its abuse could bring.”

Ilya: it does a good job with complex topics for YA readers

Shane: I wouldn't mind reading that.

Shane: Are you religious? I noticed your cross.

Ilya automatically reached up and traced a finger along the gold chain around his neck.

Ilya: no, the cross was my mother's

Ilya: but perhaps I like when someone has something interesting to say about religion and humanity

Shane: Me too, I guess. Not something I think about often.

Shane: I should go. Early travel morning.

Ilya: sleep well, Shane Hollander

Shane: You too. Goodnight.

He was still smiling like an idiot. What was it about this guy? Sure, he was one of the most famous hockey players in the world, and he was very hot, and he liked to read...at least one of those things should be enough to outweigh the other two, and yet...

And yet Ilya couldn't stop thinking about that kiss. It started hesitant on Shane's end, but by the time he leaned into it, Ilya's knees had been weak. Which was a big problem because Ilya had kissed many, many people, and he had never had weak knees about it before. That was fucking romance book fiction, right between quivering members and throbbing mounds. Maybe not quite that far-fetched, but still. And then the way Shane had looked at him after. *"He smiled, and his face was like the sun."* Ilya had never been so fucked in his life.

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He hadn't expected Shane to text the next day. He had traveled to Montreal, played an evening game, won the game, and would likely be celebrating before he had to sleep and travel the following morning. Had Ilya considered all of this very carefully while he sat behind the counter at One Good Memory, watching a couple of his regulars browse the shelves? No. But when his phone buzzed several hours later, while he was lying in bed trying to read a new nonfiction book so boring his eyes kept closing midsentence, he was startled.

Shane: I'm excited about tomorrow.

Ilya smiled at his phone again. This reaction to simple texts was becoming pathetic.

Ilya: I think you said that yesterday, Shane Hollander

Shane: Oh, right. Sorry. That's probably weird, huh? You can ignore that. I mean, don't. Because it's true.

Ilya laughed. Maybe this was going to be fun.

Ilya: have you been drinking, Shane Hollander?

Ilya: celebrating your win?

Shane: Yeah, but only two beers. And one shot of something. Against my will.

Shane: Wait, not really against my will.

Ilya laughed again and considered under what circumstances he might get Shane Hollander drunk, just to hear him talk too much, shove those filters out of the way for a while. Or apparently he just needed to get him buzzed if his alcohol calculations were accurate.

Ilya: are you still out with your teammates?

Shane: No, I just got back.

Ilya: I hope you won't be too tired for our movie date tomorrow

Date, Shane Hollander. Let it be known.

Shane: I won't be.

Shane: I'm looking forward to it.

Ilya: yes, I think we've already been over that

Shane: I should probably go before I embarrass myself further.

Ilya: I'm enjoying it

Shane: You are?

Ilya: you're excited to see me

Ilya: what's not to enjoy?

Ilya licked his lips in anticipation. This peek at uninhibited—or at least slightly less inhibited—Shane Hollander was a treat.

Shane: Maybe I'm just excited to see the movie. And Vanya.

Touché.

Ilya: maybe, but I don't think so

He could picture Shane's shy smile, his nervous gulp, the way his eyes would flicker to Ilya's lips. It took an unnervingly long time for Shane's reply to pop up.

Shane: I was going to quote something about you being too smart or perceptive or something like that, but unfortunately, I can't think of any. So that was lame.

Ilya laughed. Again.

Ilya: that's okay

Ilya: just know that you are right

Shane: Very humble of you.

Ilya: I don't think you want me to be humble

Shane: No. I like you the way you are.

Shane: "Anybody could be smart. It took a special somebody to be clever."

Shane: Best I got. I had to find it. But it made me think of you.

Ilya took a deep breath through his nose and rubbed a hand over his eyes. Big, big trouble.

Ilya: so you finished *Pretty Girls* finally?

Shane: Yeah. You were right. Dark but really good.

Ilya: I will have to find you some more publicly acceptable books soon

Shane: I would like that.

Ilya: what else has made you think of me?

A very long pause this time. Maybe Ilya had pushed his luck too far. But then, after several minutes, those three little dots appeared, and Ilya was gripping his phone so tight it hurt.

Shane: “I don't know, it's like I look at you and suddenly the sonnets make sense. The good ones, anyway.”

Shane: I saved that one in my phone from the Shakespeare book. And I'm going to bed now because I was never planning to send that. Plus I have an early flight. So...goodnight.

Ilya's heart stuttered in his chest, and he bit his lip and then grinned at his phone and wished he could see what Shane Hollander's face was doing right that moment.

Ilya: that one made me think of you too

Ilya: sweet dreams, Shane Hollander

Ilya set his phone down and let out a long breath. *Huge* trouble.

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The next morning, Shane scrolled through his messages, shaking his head at himself. He didn't really regret it, though. It's not like Ilya didn't know...he was the one who kissed Shane. Clearly he was interested.

“You're smiling at your phone,” Cliff said, plopping into the seat next to him on the plane.

“I'm watching game highlights.”

“Fuck, that was a good game. I thought Pike might cry.”

Shane laughed. “He's a nice guy. But yeah...maybe next time.”

“You want to hit the courts with us later? Two on two?”

“I can't today. I have a meeting later,” Shane said. Not even a lie, technically.

“You haven't played with us in weeks, Hollz. What's the deal?”

“It hasn't been that long.”

“Yeah, buddy, it has.”

Maybe it had. He hadn't touched a basketball since before he walked into One Good Memory for the first time.

“Next time. I promise.”

“I'm holding you to it. I need some real competition. Connors is too fucking short to get anything past me.”

“I heard that!” Connors shouted from a couple rows behind them.

Shane laughed. “You're asking for it now.” Connors would take that personally.

“So, who's the girl for real?” Cliff asked.

“What?”

“Smiling at your phone, rememberr? I know you weren't looking at game highlights because you've been smiling like that at your phone for days now.”

“I was probably texting my mom last time.”

“Hollz,” Cliff laughed. “You never smile like that when you’re talking to your mom. You usually look like you’re ready to jump from a plane.”

“Only when she’s being Yuna the manager,” Shane said, which was true. He loved his mom, but sometimes he needed a break.

“Alright. If you say so. But if there is a girl, you should introduce us. We can double date.”

“Double date with who? Since when are you dating anyone?” Shane knew he hadn’t missed something that big.

“I can always find a date.”

That was true. Cliff was both a nice guy and attractive enough to pick up someone almost anywhere they went. And he wasn’t the least bit socially awkward, unlike Shane. He’d been the perfect wingman plenty of times, even when Shane didn’t want him to be, and still would be if it weren’t for Shane’s one, tiny problem.

“There is no girl. I’ll join you guys on the court next time you play though, promise.”

That had been enough to change the subject. Shane wanted to pull his phone out and read those messages again, but Cliff decided to stay and chat. At least he’d be seeing Ilya in person later anyway. Even if that thought made his whole body feel equal parts too tight and too pleasantly warm.

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When he got home, Shane took care of everything he needed to do for the rest of the day, including signing something his mom sent via email, scheduling a meeting with his publicist, and making sure everything was good to go for their game against Columbus the next night. He tried to take a nap, but he only managed a few minutes of sleep, his mind already too excited about later.

Around 6:00, he went for a long run, then took a long shower. He remembered Ilya’s suggestion of comfortable clothes because it was a long movie and spent much too long trying to figure out what exactly that meant. He eventually settled on black track pants and a Raiders t-shirt, then pulled a gray sweatshirt on for the walk over.

He got to One Good Memory a few minutes before 8 and was happy to find the store empty except for Ilya and Vanya. Ilya was behind the counter, writing something on a piece of paper, and Vanya was sitting beside him, upright, tail flicking, like he was surveying his kingdom.

“Hey,” Shane said, stepping up to the counter to pet Vanya, who immediately leaned into his hand and followed it when he pulled back. He ended up picking him up, while Ilya watched, shaking his head, a small smile on his face.

“You really did come to see him,” Ilya said.

“Told you.”

Shane set the copy of *Brokeback Mountain* on the counter so he could hold Vanya properly.

“Does he make everyone hold him?” Shane asked.

Ilya glanced up. “No.”

No further explanation was offered, and Shane felt pretty damn special. There was just something about being chosen by an animal, gifted with affection and trust, that made your whole day.

“I knew we were friends,” Shane told Vanya, who was looking up at him with his big yellow eyes, content as could be.

“He’s going to get his ass locked out of the apartment tonight if he doesn’t behave,” Ilya said, not looking up from what he was doing.

“What’d he do?” Vanya’s head turned to Ilya as if he knew what he was saying.

“Don’t you remember?” Ilya asked, and Shane thought his voice had dropped a notch lower.

Shane did remember. Their interrupted kiss that had felt like it was going to turn into more because his body had no hesitation, even if his mind had still been catching up. Even if it had caught up, he absolutely would have let it turn into more.

“Yeah,” Shane said, trying to keep his voice steady. “I definitely remember.”

Ilya wasn’t looking at him, but his mouth was still curved into a soft smirk. Between that and the implications of why he’d want to lock Vanya out...Shane was barely holding it together. How was he going to get through a 134 minute movie?

Ilya straightened up and put the pen down. “Ready?”

Shane nodded and watched him come around the counter and lock the front door. Then he picked up the book off the counter and led the way to the back, through the door, and up the stairs. Shane followed, Vanya still in his arms.

Inside Ilya’s apartment, he neatly kicked his shoes off and set Vanya down.

“Give me a couple of minutes,” Ilya said. “Then we will watch our sad cowboys.”

“Sure,” Shane said. He sat on the same end of the couch as the last time and watched Ilya disappear down the hallway off the living room. *Relax*, he told himself, leaning forward,

elbows on his knees. They were just watching a movie. Nothing to be nervous about. He pulled his sweatshirt off, giving himself something to do and making sure he didn't overheat before they even started the film.

"Okay," Ilya said, walking back into the room, now wearing gray sweatpants and a white t-shirt that said Boston University in red. He turned the overhead light off, leaving just a dim lamp on. "Need anything? Water? Snacks?"

Shane shook his head. "I'm okay, thanks."

Ilya sat on the other end of the couch and grabbed a remote. Once he had *Brokeback Mountain* pulled up, he settled back against the cushions and hit play. Shane leaned back too, trying to get comfortable, even though he was still overly aware of Ilya only a few feet away, despite the movie being excellent and pulling him in immediately. He had his arms crossed, legs spread in front of him, doing everything in his power not to bounce his knee. Ilya was relaxed on his corner of the couch, one arm draped over the armrest, one leg drawn up, totally at ease. They were both quiet, neither of them speaking since the movie had started.

When Ennis and Jack finally gave in and had sex for the first time, Shane's knee bounced anyway. It was hot, these two very masculine men trying to resist each other and failing. Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal were almost as easy on the eyes as the man next to him. He was only fucking human after all. He glanced over at Ilya briefly, which was a mistake because Ilya's eyes flicked over to him at the same time.

"What? Not enjoying the movie?" Ilya asked.

Shane swallowed before saying, "No, I am."

Ilya grabbed the remote and paused it. "You are bouncing your knee so hard it's shaking the whole couch."

"Oh," Shane said, immediately stilling. "Sorry about that."

"It's okay. Are you uncomfortable?"

"No," he said, and his heart was beating so loudly Ilya could probably hear it. "Not uncomfortable."

Ilya stared at him, eyes scanning Shane's face, like he was trying to decide something. Then he shifted and leaned across the couch, face getting closer and closer to Shane's. But he moved slowly, like he was trying not to startle him.

"Are you still thinking about this?" Ilya whispered, so close now his breath ghosted over Shane's lips.

Shane swallowed again, his throat suddenly too dry. But he didn't need words right now, he just nodded. Then Ilya closed the distance between them, tipping Shane's head back slightly, lips sliding together slowly, drawing a soft moan from him. Because yes, he was still thinking about it, but his memory had not done it justice. Ilya's lips were soft and warm against his,

and they slotted into place perfectly, like a missing puzzle piece. Ilya shifted even closer, making the angle easier, the kiss deeper, his tongue pushing into Shane's mouth. His whole body was melting, skin so hot and oversensitive, from just a kiss.

Ilya pulled back to look at him again. "Is this okay?"

Still lost for words, Shane only nodded again. Ilya smiled. "Should we keep doing this, or do you want to watch the movie?"

"This," Shane said with no hesitation.

Ilya's eyes moved rapidly across his face once more, then he leaned in and kissed him again. This time it wasn't slow or tentative. One of Ilya's hands was on the side of his jaw, the other on his chest, moving down, sliding across his stomach to grip his side, leaving a trail of heat. Shane's own hands didn't know where to go first, but as soon as they found hard muscle and warm skin, something else took over. He slid one under the back of Ilya's t-shirt, the other across his shoulder, up the back of his neck, letting his fingers finally thread through those golden brown curls that had been calling to him since the moment he first walked into One Good Memory. They were soft, and as soon as he gently tugged on them, Ilya made a low sound in his throat and kissed him harder.

Ilya's hand moved from his side, down and over until he reached his lap, palm sliding over his hard cock, making Shane's hips rock up against him. Ilya once again pulled back from the kiss; this time, his lips were parted and so fucking perfect, and Shane had to force himself to loosen his grip on his hair, else he'd pull him back in immediately.

"Is this okay?" Ilya asked again, this time moving his hand deliberately along the length of Shane's cock through the soft material of his track pants.

"Yes," Shane breathed, his voice barely there.

His fingers were still in Ilya's hair, and when Ilya lowered his head, Shane's hand went with him. And when Ilya gripped the waistband of pants and boxer briefs and pulled them down just enough to free his cock, Shane's fingers tightened again. He was paying attention enough to see Ilya's eyes flutter when he did it, and then he could see them no longer because he dipped his head lower, mouth landing on the head of Shane's cock, drawing a needy, almost embarrassing sound from him.

Ilya's mouth was warm and wet and moving with some kind of otherworldly precision that had Shane on the edge almost immediately.

"Wait, wait, stop," he stammered, pulling more insistently on Ilya's curls.

Ilya sat up immediately. "What?" he said, looking at Shane with concern. "Not okay?"

"No, no, sorry. Don't stop. It's okay. I just..." Shane sucked in a breath, trying to settle himself. "It's been a while. I'm not going to last."

Ilya smiled, his face relaxing. "That's okay. Kind of the point really."

Shane snorted and looked away. “Yeah. Sorry.”

Ilya bent again, taking Shane back into his mouth, one hand reaching up to run along his chest. Shane let his head tip back against the couch, heat once again spreading through his body like wildfire. This was certainly not the first blowjob he’d ever had, but somehow, it was entirely unlike anything else, as if Ilya’s mouth was uniquely made to undo him. The silky curls under his fingers and the hand squeezing his pec and the soft noises Ilya was making were fanning the flames, pushing him closer and closer to the edge he was trying to hold off from, if only because Ilya’s tongue swirling around the head of his cock on each upstroke and the way he hollowed his cheeks felt so good he never wanted it to end.

“Fuck,” he whimpered, tugging harder on Ilya’s hair, which made Ilya speed up, which made Shane’s fingers tighten again, stuck in a feedback loop that was only driving him toward orgasm faster.

“Ilya,” he said in warning, this time letting Ilya’s curls go so he could push him off. But Ilya didn’t let him, he just kept bobbing his head, pressing his tongue against him at just the right time, until Shane could no longer stave off the warm, tingly sensation that was spreading through his core. The hand that had been in Ilya’s hair earlier was now pressing against Ilya’s hand on his chest, and Ilya twisted his so their fingers were entwined, palm to palm, giving Shane something to hold onto while his body came apart and his cock pulsed and he spilled himself in Ilya’s mouth and made noises of pleasure that were lost to him in the moment. Ilya swallowed around him, drawing his orgasm out, making his hips buck up, muscles taut, and then all at once loose and heavy.

“Fuck,” he said again, voice breathless as Ilya gently pulled off and tucked him back into his pants.

His chest was still rising and falling rapidly, head back against the buttery leather of the couch. Ilya ran a hand through Shane’s hair, drawing his attention to him.

“Okay?” Ilya asked.

Shane huffed a quiet laugh because wow, what a question. Ilya’s lips were red and puffy, from the earlier kissing maybe, but also from *that*, and Shane couldn’t help but wrap a hand around the back of Ilya’s neck and pull him in for a kiss, letting his tongue brush along and then past that perfect cupid’s bow. He could taste himself on Ilya’s tongue, and something about that just made him want more. Ilya moaned into his mouth, and Shane remembered that he was the only one here who had been sated.

He dropped one hand to Ilya’s lap without breaking the kiss, feeling his hard cock under his sweatpants, thumb brushing against a wet spot. Now he pulled back and looked down, the small dark spot against the lighter gray material making his cock twitch, like it longed for a second round already. But mostly it made him want to return the favor, desperately. He started to reach for Ilya’s waistband, then stopped and looked up at him. Ilya’s eyes were dark with desire, lips still parted, and Shane was entranced. Ilya was beautiful all the time, but this...he wondered if there were even words, and if so, who had put them to paper in the right order to do him justice.

Ilya was watching him again, even with his heavy-lidded eyes, like he was trying to read him. "Only if you want to," he said finally.

"I do," Shane said. He pulled the waistband of Ilya's sweatpants out of the way, finding no underwear. Even this part of Ilya was beautiful. Also big. Shane had not done this before, and the sight of Ilya's cock made him swallow hard in anticipation, both because he wanted it and wanted to be good at this. He used his hand first, stroking up and down the hard length of him, such a contrast to the softness of his skin. Shane started to bend down and then paused, letting his hand keep moving, thumb brushing against the tip.

Ilya must have noticed his hesitation because he asked, "Have you done this before?"

Shane shook his head. The only time he'd received a blowjob from a man, he had only returned the favor with his hand. He'd been too nervous. Worried he'd be recognized on his knees in the dark corner of a backroom, worried his teammates would find him even though they were at a different bar down the street. Maybe also worried that he'd embarrass himself, but now he wished he'd done that with a stranger he'd never see again rather than Ilya. But Ilya was looking at him with no judgment whatsoever.

"This is good," Ilya said, nodding his chin down at Shane's hand, still stroking him.

But Shane would not be deterred. He bent down again, this time not stopping until his tongue was dragging beneath the head of Ilya's cock, drawing a low noise from him, one of his hands settling on the back of Shane's head. Shane sank down, taking him as far in as he could, letting up when Ilya bumped the back of his throat. It took a few messy bobs of his head before he found his rhythm, but Ilya's little noises of approval gave him the confidence he needed, not letting the newness of it overwhelm him. Instead he focused on how it felt to have a cock in his mouth, against his tongue, the saltiness gathering at the tip washing over him as he swirled his tongue, mimicking what Ilya had done that had felt so good to him.

"Fuck. Yes, like that." Ilya's fingers were still tangled in his hair, not pushing or pulling, but the extra pressure felt good, kept Shane focused, the praise spurring him on. If he wasn't so recently spent, he would have been hard again. Ilya's cock and his moans and the clean, woodsy scent of him mixed with something slightly musky were intoxicating, and Shane realized at least some of those noises of pleasure were coming from himself. He brought one hand up to wrap around the base of Ilya's cock, holding him in place and letting him suck him off more efficiently. He let his other hand run up Ilya's stomach to his chest, appreciating the hard muscles and light dusting of hair. He wanted to see all of that, and he let himself hope that he would next time. That there would be a next time.

When Ilya's breathing got faster and his low, breathy moans got louder, he tightened his fingers in Shane's hair and eased him off, letting his own hand take over. Shane stayed close, transfixed, watching Ilya stroke himself off, still slick with Shane's spit. He came with a low groan, body curling forward, ropes of cum spurting over his hand, the angle causing one to land on Shane's t-shirt.

When he was spent, Ilya leaned back against the couch and let out a long breath.

"Fuck. You are good at that, Shane Hollander," he said.

Shane wasn't sure if he was telling the truth or just being nice. Probably the latter. "So are you."

Ilya gave a quiet laugh and then stood up. "Sorry about your shirt. Give it to me, and I'll get you a clean one."

Shane looked down. It wasn't a big deal, but he pulled it up over his head anyway. Ilya's eyes lingered on his bare chest, sending a little shiver through him. Ilya took the shirt and wiped his hand on it, then disappeared down the hallway. Shane heard water running and a minute later, Ilya was back with a gray t-shirt that said BU in faded red letters. He tossed it to Shane and then sat back down on the other end of the couch. Shane pulled the shirt on, noting that it smelled a little like Ilya, and the fabric was soft, like it had been washed many times.

Ilya watched him for a moment before he grabbed the remote. "You ready to finish the movie?"

Shane couldn't help the quiet, startled laugh that jumped out of him. He'd just had his world thoroughly rocked, and Ilya was already back to normal.

"Sure," he said, leaning back in the cushions again.

"Hey," Ilya said, drawing his eyes back to him. "What's wrong? We don't have to watch the rest if you don't want."

"No, I do. I like it."

"Okay. Maybe your knee will not bounce now that we've taken the edge off, hm?"

Shane smiled and looked away. "Yeah."

"Come here," Ilya said, holding one arm out.

Shane scooted down the couch until they were sitting pressed against each other, and Ilya's arm dropped around his shoulders, pulling him in even closer. Then he pressed play, and Shane settled in, letting the warmth of Ilya's body against his lull him into the most relaxed state he'd experienced in a long time. They both seemed to be more relaxed because where it had been silent between them at first, now they chatted about the movie, commenting on Ennis and Jack and lamenting them being seen and then the fight where they both ended up bloodied.

"Do you think they actually like women, or are they just doing it because they feel like they have to?" Shane braved. A question that had been on his mind as he'd read it too. "It seemed like Ennis loved Alma at first."

Ilya nodded. "Hard to say. Ennis was maybe bi. But it didn't matter, he loved Jack. I guess he could not love them both at the same time. Not the same way at least."

Ilya ran his fingers through Shane's hair, making him a little sleepy and maybe also a little too loose.

“They wasted so much time when they could have been together and happy. But then they probably would have ended up like the two old ranchers Ennis talked about.”

“Mm, yes. It’s very tragic.”

Shane let out a breath, the weight of it too real.

“Would it be melodramatic to say I keep thinking about them and hoping my life doesn’t turn out that way?” He said it quietly, like that might make it easier to put this deep, if not quite realistic, fear into being.

“Are you planning to marry a woman and only fuck a man once or twice a year?” Ilya asked, practical and nonjudgmental.

“No, of course not. But…” he trailed off, wanting to find the words for his fear that he’d never be allowed to just love somebody, not without ruining his career. And what else did he have besides that?

Ilya didn’t say anything. He just kept running his fingers through Shane’s hair, gently massaging, comforting.

“Like I said…melodramatic.”

“It’s not,” Ilya said. “Your situation is difficult. But I think you will figure it out. When you’re ready.”

Shane nodded, wondering what that tone was in Ilya’s voice. He couldn’t quite place it, but it made his chest squeeze. Instead, he leaned in further, letting his head rest more firmly against Ilya. This position probably wasn’t the best for watching a 2+ hour movie, but he’d also never been more comfortable in his life. He wanted to stay like that forever, in those warm, safe arms, on that comfortable leather couch, in Ilya’s cozy apartment full of books.

When the movie ended, Shane’s eyes were not quite dry, but they hadn’t spilled over at least.

“Well?” Ilya asked as he turned it off. “Worth watching?”

Shane nodded. “Yeah, definitely. It was really good. Maybe even more sad though, seeing it all like that.”

“Yes.”

Then he tugged Shane closer and kissed him, and Shane leaned into it, wanting nothing more than to let himself be consumed by this man and his perfect lips. Right on cue, Vanya wandered into the room and jumped on the couch next to Shane, then walked over his lap toward Ilya.

“You pest,” Ilya said, pulling back. “I thought maybe you were being polite tonight.”

Shane laughed. “He was for a while.”

“Lucky for him or he’d be down in the store by himself,” Ilya said, but his voice had gone soft and affectionate as he pulled Vanya onto his lap.

“I should go anyway. It’s late, and I have a game tomorrow.”

Ilya nodded. “Okay.”

“Thanks...for inviting me over.”

Ilya smiled at him, and there was heat in it. “Do you want me to invite you over again?”

“If you want to, yeah.”

“Oh, I do, Shane Hollander. I do. You mentioned Friday?”

“Yeah, no game.”

“Mallory will close the store on Friday. You want to come for dinner?”

“Sure.”

“Maybe we can watch another movie,” Ilya said. His tone was neutral, but Shane wondered if that was code for *do what we did in the middle of this movie*. And he also wondered if that meant *do more* than what they’d done in the middle of this movie. Either way, he wanted to.

“Yeah, that would be fun.”

“Okay. Come over on Friday. I will have more books for you then too.”

“Oh, right. Thanks.” Shane was feeling awkward now for absolutely no reason. He stood up, petting Vanya’s head once. He pulled his sweatshirt back on and walked toward the door so he could slip his shoes on.

When he was done, Ilya was standing right beside him. Shane straightened up and his eyes dropped automatically to Ilya’s lips. Now that he knew even more accurately what they felt like, and in new places, he couldn’t help but linger there.

“Goodnight, Shane Hollander,” Ilya said softly, leaning in slowly.

“Goodnight.” Shane leaned in too, meeting him halfway, putting one hand on the back of Ilya’s neck without even thinking.

The kiss got deeper very quickly, neither of them wanting to stop it seemed. By the time Shane pulled back to suck in some air, he was breathing hard. He very much wanted to stay and see that through, but he really did need to sleep before his much too early alarm arrived in the morning. He stepped back, hand going to the doorknob.

“See you Friday,” he said, pulling the door open and stepping into the hall.

“I will walk you down so I can lock up behind you,” Ilya said, following him out. Vanya shot between their legs and waited at the door at the bottom of the stairs.

“Pest,” Ilya said affectionately.

Shane made his way down. Vanya put his paws on his leg when he got there, so he scooped him up.

“You are kind of demanding,” Shane told the cat. “You’re lucky I’m so accommodating.”

Ilya snorted and opened the door, letting them both out into the store.

Shane stopped by the glass door at the front and let Vanya back down.

“See you next time.” Then to Ilya, “I’ll text you Friday.”

“I hope you will also text me tomorrow,” Ilya said, voice like velvet, his eyes shining dangerously in the yellow light coming from the streetlamps.

“I will.” Shane knew he was smiling his silly little shy smile that always crept onto his face without permission. “Night”

Then he turned and walked out before he could embarrass himself. The smile stuck the whole way home. He’d never admit to anyone that trading blowjobs with Ilya Rozanov while they watched Brokeback Mountain was probably in the top 5 nights of his life, alongside winning the Stanley Cup and being the number one draft pick. Thoughts of what Friday might bring had him reenacting part of the evening as soon as he made it up the stairs into his own apartment. He came with Ilya’s name on his lips and his BU t-shirt fistfisted in his hand.

Chapter End Notes

Books mentioned in this chapter:

Brokeback Mountain by Annie Proulx (there may be places where you can read this short story online for free! It was published in the New Yorker)

Scythe by Neal Schusterman (this one isn't super relevant, but I wanted to show Ilya reading all kinds of books because he is a *good* bookseller who likes being able to give his customers his best recs- also, I just love Scythe and the rest of that series)

Pretty Girls by Karin Slaughter (brief mention)

This one was light on books because brokeback was a big one for Shane, and both the short story and film are so important in general. But not to worry...more to come. Just because they are now canoodling does not mean book quote flirting and confessions will stop.

And there will be even more of Ilya's pov coming up as well.

Chapter 6: I'm OK, I'm alright (he's alright, he's alright)

Chapter Notes

Just a quick note for stuff going forward. When quotes are inserted (italics) in the text when they are not directly reading it or talking about it, I don't necessarily mean Ilya (or Shane) is thinking them word for word. It's more like...he's feeling that vibe, it resonates at that time. Maybe he's thinking of it directly or maybe just a subconscious thing. Basically, I'll leave it up to you to decide what fits (I know some people think the "thinking in quotes" of it all is cringe or unrealistic, but in some cases, it's more just... contextually relevant).

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

Ilya watched the Columbus game. He watched Boston lose, but only by a respectable amount. He wondered if Shane was bummed and if he took losses hard. Ilya suspected he might. He thought about texting him, but Shane was still *the* Shane Hollander, captain of the Boston Raiders. He was probably busy and exhausted, and *maybe* he would text Ilya like he said he would. No need to text him first.

He was lying in bed when his phone buzzed, and his mouth curved up before he even picked up his phone.

Shane: I started Interview with the Vampire.

Ilya: and?

Shane: I'm liking it. Not exactly what I expected though. More subtext.

Ilya: oh I see

Ilya: you were expecting Louis and Lestat to be fucking

Shane: Well. Maybe.

Ilya laughed quietly.

Ilya: sorry to give you a disappointing book

Shane: I'm not disappointed. I promise that's not the only reason I read.

Ilya imagined Shane blushing, the pink of his cheeks making his freckles stand out more.

Ilya: I have noticed

Ilya: any food or movie requests for tomorrow?

Shane: Not really. I trust you.

Ilya rubbed his chest. No pressure.

Ilya: what time do you want to get here?

Shane: Whenever is good for you. I'll be free by late afternoon.

Ilya: 6?

Shane: That works for me.

Ilya: sorry about your game

Shane: It's fine. Can't win them all.

Ilya: that last goal was very impressive

Shane: You were watching?

Ilya rolled his eyes. Why couldn't he keep his mouth shut? Or his fingers still, in any case.

Ilya: maybe

There was a slight pause before the next message popped up.

Shane: I like knowing you're watching.

His stomach gave a pleasant little dip. A very unnecessary thing for it to be doing just because Shane Hollander, who was watched by hundreds of thousands of people every time he played, liked that he specifically was watching.

Ilya: thinking of me while you're busy being the best player in the league?

Shane: Sometimes, yeah.

Ilya: are you in bed right now?

Shane: Yes.

Ilya: I'd rather be watching you there

Shane: Just watching?

Ilya pressed his hand to his dick. Embarrassing how hard he was just from this.

Ilya: no, Shane Hollander

Ilya: not just watching

Ilya: is that the answer you were hoping for?

Shane: Maybe.

Shane: Yes.

Ilya spent about 10 seconds deciding if the next message was a good idea, but since Shane started it with his little *Just watching?*...

Ilya: are you thinking of me there, too?

Five seconds. Ten. Fifteen. Then the typing bubble appeared.

Shane: I am, yeah.

Shane: Are you?

Ilya slipped a hand under the waistband of his shorts.

Ilya: am I what?

Might as well make this more fun. The pause was longer this time, but eventually a message popped up.

Shane: Are you in bed?

Ilya: yes

Shane: Thinking about anyone?

Ilya laughed quietly, stroking himself lazily with his left hand now.

Ilya: someone, yes

Shane: Tell me about them?

Ilya: hmm

Ilya: kind of boring

Ilya: very pretty freckles

Ilya: very, very hot body

Shane: Freckles?

Ilya pictured them, sprinkled across Shane's cheeks, almost like foxing on a book, but much cuter and more lickable.

Ilya: yes, perfect little spots

Ilya: I would like to see them close up again

Shane: Hopefully they'll let you. Anything else?

Ilya: soft lips

Ilya: very good for kissing

Ilya: and other things

Ilya moved his hand faster, picturing Shane doing the same.

Shane: Were they any good?

Shane: At the other things?

His hips pushed up into his fist as he thought about those lips wrapped around him.

Ilya: hm...yes, very good

Ilya: but I'd be a willing subject if they wanted to practice more

Shane: What if they wanted to do more than that?

Ilya bit his lip, his hand moving too fast now.

Ilya: what do you think they want to do?

Ilya watched the typing bubble appear and disappear several times. He slowed his hand, wanting this to last a little longer, hoping Shane wasn't going to quit now.

Shane: They're probably hoping you might help them figure that out.

That made the wrong part of him go tight, and he fought the urge to rub his chest again, keeping his hand where it was.

Ilya: I can do that

Shane: I'm sure they'd be happy to hear it.

Ilya: I hope they're very happily thinking about it right now

Shane: Probably.

Ilya: good because I am

Shane: You are?

Ilya: mhm...I'm thinking about it

Ilya: very hard

He figured the double entendre wouldn't be lost on Shane.

Shane: I'm sure they're thinking very hard too.

Ilya: I'm almost done thinking

Not a lie. He was getting close, his cock leaking precome, though not as much as Shane Hollander's probably was. And that thought just pushed him closer.

Shane: I bet they're probably about to be done thinking too.

Ilya closed his eyes, thought about what Shane was doing, then about his lips and his sweet, needy little moans. He thought about what else Shane wanted from him, and that mental image was enough to send him over the edge, cock spurting over his fist, a small groan slipping from his throat. He reached over and grabbed a tissue from the nightstand and cleaned up before he texted again.

Ilya: well, I had fun thinking about it

Ilya: can't wait to think some more tomorrow

Ilya: maybe you can join me

Shane: Looking forward to it.

Ilya: goodnight, Shane Hollander

Ilya: don't think too hard

Shane: I'll try. Goodnight.

Ilya put his phone down on the bed next to him and let out a long sigh. He was in so much trouble. He was desperately looking forward to the next day, especially to finally getting Shane naked beneath him, the glimpse he'd gotten not nearly enough. But it was more than just that. He was starting to look forward to just talking to him, about books, hockey, whatever. He was starting to think about what Shane might say about a book he ordered, or a customer's selection, or a movie he watched. *I want to talk about everything with at least one person as I talk about things with myself.* He sighed again and buried his face in the pillow, because whatever this was, it was worth at least a sigh and a half.

-

Ilya woke up the next morning with his mind already on Shane Hollander. No surprise there. He got up, fed Vanya, made coffee, and then went to the grocery store before he had to open the shop. He had an idea of what Shane's diet might be like as a professional athlete, and then dialed it up a notch because Shane seemed like the type to be extra dedicated. Salmon it was.

He opened the bookshop on time and settled behind the counter to go over online orders that needed to be packed. Sometimes he left that for Mallory to do, but if it was a slow day, he'd at least make a dent. The shop did decent business. Not particularly lucrative, but enough to stay open. Ilya enjoyed his regulars. Mr. Walters came in every Friday at 11am on the dot. He walked up and down every aisle, picked a random book, read it, and came back the next week to do it again.

"How did you like *The Martian*?" Ilya asked him as he rang up this week's book: *The Shining*.

"I felt like I was watching a movie," Mr. Walters said. He had close-cut curly white and gray hair and gold-rimmed glasses, a wide smile, and dark, age-lined skin. He looked like a wise, old scholar, because he was. "Of course, I would have liked a closer look at the technology, but what can you do?"

Mr. Walters had told Ilya about his long career in R&D for a government contractor that worked with space programs. He most often chose a sci-fi book and filled Ilya in on all the nonsensical but entertaining details within. Today, he got to hear about what The Martian got right, and what it got at least theoretically plausible if not quite right.

“The Martian to The Shining? You need a break from your usual?”

“My granddaughter has been making me watch all kinds of horror movies lately. Got me thinking,” he said. “I figured I’d start with a classic.”

“I will be looking forward to hearing about it next week,” Ilya told him as he stuck the receipt in the book and handed it over. “Have a good weekend, Mr. Walters.”

Ilya spent the next hour looking through books to order, trying to account for the upcoming holidays, which were always good for business. Mallory arrived a few minutes before noon.

“How’s it going?” Ilya asked her, moving out from behind the counter so she could take his place.

“Great. Aced my essay on The Yellow Wallpaper.”

“Congrats. What do they have you reading next?”

“A Good Man is Hard to Find and then The Lottery. But I’ve already read both. I think we’re doing a whole section on Poe after that.”

Mallory was taking courses online for an English degree, and Ilya had been enjoying hearing about her Intro to Short Fiction class, a little nostalgic for his own not-too-long-ago days of being a student who got to sit around and discuss literature with his friends and pretend they were better than everyone else. Maybe he still thought so, a little anyway.

“There are used copies of Poe’s collections,” Ilya said, nodding toward the used shelves in the back. “If you need one.”

“Yeah, thanks. I looked at the library, but they’re all checked out.”

“Take what you need and mark it in the system. I’m going to finish packing orders. Yell if you need me.”

Ilya retreated to his little storeroom in the back. Vanya slipped in with him.

“What do you want?” Ilya asked the cat as he wound his way through his legs, giving an impatient little meow. “I’m busy.” Then he bent down and picked up the needy cat and scratched behind his ears for a minute. “You better behave tonight. I haven’t been out in weeks, and I’m planning to have a *very* good night.”

He set Vanya down and got back to what he’d come in here to do, now distracted by thoughts of Shane Hollander. It was true, though. He hadn’t been going out lately, and that meant he hadn’t been going home with anyone lately, which meant he wasn’t getting laid lately. And he really needed to. But there was only one person he wanted, and he wanted him here, upstairs

in his own bed. Ilya did not invite people here. He loved living above the shop, loved his cozy apartment, but he did not love sharing it with strangers. It felt intrusive. He'd never cared before, when he had a regular apartment or dorm room, but after he moved in here, there was only one person he'd let share his own bed. Now there would be two, if he had his way.

By a little after 5pm, Ilya was restless. He'd tidied up the apartment, checked again to make sure he had everything he needed for dinner, checked on Mallory more times than she appreciated, and was about to start prepping the food when his phone buzzed. The annoying continued buzz of a call rather than a text.

Alexei.

"What?" he answered in Russian.

"That is how you answer when your beloved brother calls?"

Ilya rolled his eyes. *"What do you want, Alexei? I'm busy."*

"Our father is dying, you ungrateful disgrace."

Ilya breathed out slowly through his nose and leaned against the counter in his kitchen. *"I'm aware of that. What the fuck do you want me to do? I've given you what money I can. I am not a doctor. I cannot cure him."*

"He's getting worse. They're moving him to end of life care. Thought you might want to know."

He rubbed a hand across his forehead hard enough to leave a mark. *"Okay. Now I know. What else do you want?"*

"What do I want? How about some fucking help, Ilya? You left and didn't look back and now he's going to die while you're off galavanting in America. Mama would be so disappointed."

Ilya slammed his hand down on the counter hard enough to make Vanya jump off the kitchen chair he'd been sitting on.

"Do not speak to me about her. Do not speak about her in the same breath as him. Fuck off, Alexei."

Ilya hung up and put his phone down. Then he went to scoop Vanya up from where he'd settled on the floor. He held the soft, warm cat against him, comforting Vanya and himself. "Sorry," he said quietly.

Eventually he set Vanya back down, but he wanted out, meowing at the door. He let him back down into the store with Mallory and returned to prepping the food for dinner, letting it take his mind off of Alexei and his father and Russia. He sliced up sweet potatoes, then drizzled them in olive oil and tossed them in salt, pepper, and a little rosemary before laying them flat on a sheet pan. He let those bake in the preheated oven for 15 minutes while he prepped a salad and wondered if Shane would drink anything besides water. After he took the pan out

of the oven, he laid the salmon fillets on top of the sliced sweet potatoes and brushed them with a mix of softened butter, honey, rosemary, garlic, salt, and pepper. He looked at his phone: 5:45. Shane would probably arrive exactly on time, so he went ahead and put the pan back in the oven.

At 5:58, there was a knock. He made sure the salmon wasn't overcooking and then went to open the door. Shane was standing there wearing jeans and a navy blue jacket, his hair slightly windswept across his forehead, cheeks pink from the cold, holding a paper bag.

"Hi," he said, his voice a little high.

"Hi," Ilya said back. "Come in."

Shane stepped in, and his eyes dropped to Ilya's shirt, which of course was not his shirt at all. It was the black and yellow Raiders shirt he'd taken from Shane last time and washed, with no intentions of giving it back. Shane was smiling his little crooked half-smile that probably meant he was biting the inside of his cheek. Then he unzipped his jacket to reveal Ilya's BU shirt. That was all it took. Ilya pushed him back up against the now closed door and kissed him, and Shane's arms came up around him immediately. They were like two magnets whose magnetic fields were finally close enough to snap together again. It was absurd how right it felt, how easily their lips slid together, locking into place. Ilya pushed his tongue into Shane's mouth, just enough to draw out a little moan that had him cursing the salmon he needed to check on. He pulled back, pleased to see Shane looked out of sorts already, eyes slightly unfocused, breath coming a little too fast.

"I need to check on the food," Ilya said. "Come on."

Shane followed him into the kitchen. "I uh...I brought dessert." He held up the paper bag. "It should go in the freezer if you have room."

"You didn't have to bring anything," Ilya said, bending to take the pan out of the oven. "Should be room." He nodded to the freezer. He heard it open and close. "Ready to eat?"

"Yeah. Smells good, whatever it is."

Ilya moved aside so Shane could see the pan. "Honey, garlic, rosemary, whatever salmon and sweet potatoes. And salad."

Shane's brows went up. "Do you always eat this way? Or is it for my benefit?"

Ilya rocked his head side to side. "Sometimes, yes. Also for your benefit."

"Thank you. I really do appreciate it. But you don't have to go out of your way for me."

Ilya stepped up close to him, and Shane's little intake of breath when he got close was its own magnetic pull. He couldn't help but lean in and press their lips together again, just briefly. "I don't mind. Sit."

Shane sat, and Ilya fixed plates for both of them. "What can I get you to drink?" he asked.

“Water is fine.”

“Do you ever drink anything besides water?”

Shane gave him a look. “Yes.”

“Relax,” Ilya laughed. “I just meant, is there anything else I can get for you next time you’re here?”

Shane shrugged. “You don’t have to, but sometimes I drink ginger ale. And beer occasionally. I try not to drink too much during the season.”

Ilya nodded. Ginger ale. Noted.

They ate and chatted, Ilya listening to Shane talk about his game against Arizona the next day, then telling him about his own day and Mr. Walters and some of his other favorite regulars.

“Did you always want to own a bookstore?” Shane asked him.

“Mm, no. Never even thought about it until it happened, really. It was one of those right place, right time kind of things. I had some financial help and decided to go for it. It was like...once the idea was there, I couldn’t let it go.”

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t.”

“And why did the famous Shane Hollander suddenly start showing up in my store? I’ve been here almost three years, and you’ve never been in before.” He would have remembered.

“I moved into a new place a few months ago. Just a few blocks away.”

Ilya’s mouth dropped open. “You live a few blocks away? You have not mentioned that.” That explained the pink cheeks, though. He must have walked.

“Oh, sorry. Yeah, um, it’s about four blocks past the coffee shop. The big red brick building that has green window frames on the ground floor?”

Ilya knew it. He occasionally ran by it when he actually forced himself to go for a run. “That is very close.” The possibilities. “So convenient. If I had known, maybe no one would have had to think by themselves last night, hm?”

He watched Shane’s cheeks go slightly pink again, his eyes dropped to Ilya’s lips, and his tongue darted out to wet his own. “Maybe.”

“That’s okay. I think we can fix that tonight.” He stood up and took their empty plates to the sink, considering his options. Movie first was probably best. And whether they finished it... well, who would really care.

“So, you brought dessert?”

“Oh yeah. It’s fruit sorbet from a place that does like...healthier versions of things. Which, now that I’m saying it out loud, sounds really boring. Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. Sounds good to me. Shall we?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Ilya took the paper bag out of the freezer and pulled a pint-sized container out. “Lemon Blueberry,” said the label on the side, handwritten...always a good sign. He opened the container to reveal a pale yellow sorbet, swirled with blue.

“This looks good.”

“I really like it,” Shane said. “I don’t indulge too often, but I figured tonight was a good excuse.”

“Oh, is it? Is this a special occasion?”

Shane huffed a quiet laugh and looked away. “No. I just wanted to bring something.”

“Thank you. Should we eat it out of the container? Or do you want to be civilized?”

Shane shrugged. “It’s yours now. However you want.”

“Mm, you should not let me decide, Shane Hollander.”

Ilya took out one spoon and then made his way to the couch with the container. Shane followed, looking at him questioningly before he sat down. Not all the way on the other side, but there was too much space for Ilya’s liking. He scooped out a spoonful of the slightly soft sorbet and put it into his mouth slowly, eyes never leaving Shane’s face.

“Mmm,” he hummed. “This is good.”

“Told you.”

“Here,” Ilya said, holding a spoonful out toward Shane.

Shane shook his head slightly, but he had a smile on his face and leaned forward, letting Ilya slide the spoon into his mouth. Ilya watched it disappear between those plump lips, then slowly slide out as Shane backed off. *Fuck it.* Ilya put the container down on the coffee table and leaned forward to wrap a hand around the back of Shane’s neck and drag him in for a kiss. His mouth was cold and sweet from the sorbet, and Ilya took his time licking every last bit of it he could reach, until Shane was sagging into his lap, eager little noises slipping from his throat. Ilya was no quieter.

“I thought we could watch a movie first, but maybe not,” he whispered against Shane’s lips. “Lie back.”

Shane blinked at him for a second, then he lay back until his head was against the other armrest. Ilya climbed on top of it, pressing their bodies together, and leaned down to kiss him

again, this time rubbing their hard cocks together through the layers of denim while he properly devoured Shane's mouth.

"Were you thinking about this last night?" he murmured, moving lower to kiss Shane's neck.

He could feel Shane swallow before he said, "Yes."

"Mm, what else were you thinking about?"

Ilya lifted his head so he could look at Shane's face. He looked...perfect. Lips a little red and swollen already, half parted. His eyes were hooded and dark with desire. And Ilya got what he wanted...another closeup look at those perfect patches of freckles. He bent and pressed his lips to the ones under his right eye, then his left.

"You," Shane said finally, his voice low and thick.

"Good. What did you think about me doing?"

Shane licked his lips, but clearly no words were forthcoming.

"This?" Ilya asked and rolled his hips.

Shane nodded. "More."

Ilya kept moving his hips. "What else?" He decided to spare him for now and sat up to kneel between his legs so he could unbutton and unzip his jeans. "This?" He pulled the waistband of Shane's boxer briefs down and wrapped his fingers around his hard cock, smiling at the precome already smeared there.

Shane nodded again as his head tipped back. "Fuck."

Ilya pushed Shane's t-shirt up to his armpits, then he unbuttoned his own pants and freed his cock. He leaned back down and took them both in his hand, stroking them together while he found Shane's lips again. He braced himself with his other arm so he could get the right angle to kiss him how he deserved to be kissed.

"Is this what you were thinking about?" he whispered in Shane's ear, enjoying the noticeable shudder that went through him.

"Not exactly, but I'm not complaining."

"Mm, I hope not. Are you going to tell me what else you were thinking about?"

Shane moaned as Ilya twisted his hand around the heads of their cocks and moved his hips, letting them move against each other in his fist.

"Maybe."

"Okay. Keep thinking about it for now."

Shane's eyes were fluttering, and his hips were rocking up faster. Ilya kissed his neck and tightened his grip on their cocks while Shane's hands grasped at his back, one moving up to tangle in his hair as their lips met again. Ilya moaned into his mouth when he tugged on the curls at the back of his neck, which only made Shane do it again.

He could tell Shane was close. This might have only been the second time he'd had him this way, but he could tell. His breaths were coming faster, with low groans, almost whimpers, and his hips were bucking up into his fist more erratically. Ilya was close too, overly affected by this beautiful man in ways he couldn't even comprehend.

"Are you going to come for me, Shane?" he whispered in his ear, knowing full well it was the first time he'd ever called him just Shane out loud.

It seemed to do the trick because only a moment later, Shane was coming against his cock, into his hand, slicking the way for him to move faster, drawing every last bit of it out of Shane while his own orgasm hit him and he added to the warm, wet mess on Shane's stomach with a low moan and his face buried in Shane's neck.

He lifted his head, still breathing hard. Shane's eyes blinked open. His lips were still half parted, but there was a hint of a smile there. Ilya bent and kissed him until the curve of his lips faded and he was kissing back, slow and sweet in the afterglow.

"Better than thinking about it by yourself?" he asked, lips still brushing.

"Much better."

Ilya eventually got up and grabbed a tissue to wipe his hand. "Come with me," he said, nodding to the hallway. "Clean up and then we'll watch a movie."

Shane got up and followed him down the hall, the BU shirt still hiked up to keep it clean. Ilya wanted to explore that smooth expanse of stomach more, trace the outline of his abs with his tongue. *Later.*

Ilya led him into the bathroom and grabbed a washcloth, wet it in the sink, and then wiped Shane's stomach clean.

"You good?" he asked.

Shane nodded, half-smile creeping back onto his face. "Very good."

Ilya kissed him quickly and then turned the water back on to wash his hands. "Any preference for movies?"

"Not really. Whatever you want."

They went back to the living room and sat on the couch. Ilya grabbed the remote and started scrolling through streaming services. He'd considered Dead Poets Society, but that didn't seem like the right vibe for the evening.

"Where's Vanya?" Shane asked.

“He’s down in the shop. I was going to let him back up when Mallory leaves at 8, but you’re welcome to see if he wants to come up now.”

“Okay.” Shane got up and disappeared down the stairs. A minute later, the black blur of chaos came sprinting in and jumped up on the coffee table in front of Ilya. Too close to the sorbet. Ilya moved it over and then looked at the offending pest.

“You better chill, mister,” Ilya said quietly, reaching a hand out to pet him. “I still have big plans.”

Shane came back in a few seconds later and sat back down beside him. Vanya jumped into his lap and settled down immediately.

“You are some kind of cat whisperer.” Ilya glanced over at them while his chest warmed pleasantly at the sight.

“I’ve never had one before. Maybe I should have.”

“Hm, maybe. You can have this one. He’s a pest.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Shane cooed at the cat. Then to Ilya, “How long have you had him?”

“About two years now. I found him out back under the dumpster. He was so tiny he fit in the palm of my hand.”

Ilya looked over at them again, willing his heart to stop melting. So what if his cat liked Shane Hollander? So did half of Boston.

“How about this?” Ilya asked. He pulled up *The Girl on the Train*. He’d read the book and thought it was okay at best.

“Sure,” Shane said. “I read the book. An airport purchase before a long flight.”

Ilya smiled. “I wasn’t impressed with the book. We can see if the movie is any better.”

He hit play, grabbed the sorbet, and leaned back into the corner of the couch. “So no one is going to cuddle with me?” he asked. “Fine.” He ate another bite of the now even softer dessert.

“I can’t kick him off.” Vanya was curled up on Shane’s lap now.

“I can,” Ilya said, nudging Vanya with his foot. He didn’t even move.

Shane laughed. “Good luck.”

Ilya held out a spoonful of the sorbet, and Shane leaned in to eat it off the spoon again. He could get used to this. After a few more bites each, he put the rest in the freezer and sat back in his spot. They watched the movie in silence for a while, and Ilya wasn’t convinced it was going to be any better than the book. He didn’t much care because Shane Hollander was

sitting next to him on the couch after eating the dinner he had made and then coming in his hand. It was a pretty good evening already.

Vanya eventually got restless and wandered off, and Ilya did not hesitate to take advantage. He turned around on the couch so he could put his head in Shane's lap. Shane didn't say anything, he just put his hand in Ilya's hair, petting him like he had the cat, gently moving his fingers through Ilya's curls. It gave him full body tingles and made him want to rub his face on Shane like Vanya had. But he didn't. He still had a shred of self-respect.

"This movie sucks," he said after a bit. The movie was more than halfway over and had not improved.

Shane laughed. "It's not the worst. But yeah, maybe."

"Sorry," Ilya said. "We don't have to finish it."

"Oh. I don't mind."

"I still have books to give you. Don't let me forget."

"I won't. I'm looking forward to it," Shane said, his fingers still gently massaging Ilya's scalp, which was making him some strange combination of sleepy and horny.

"I do not have any, ah...bedroom reads. I ordered a few things, but they haven't come in yet."

He felt Shane's stomach move against him, maybe a laugh. "That's okay. You didn't have to order anything special."

"I don't mind. I think I will stock more of them. Very popular. Maybe you can read some of them and tell me which ones are worth ordering more of."

"Oh," Shane said, a little surprise in his voice. "Yeah, I guess so. If you trust my opinion."

"I do, Shane Hollander."

Ilya sat up to look at him, their faces too close to resist leaning in for a kiss. Shane kissed him back with enough enthusiasm for Ilya to suggest a new plan.

"Should we ditch the movie?" Ilya asked.

Shane nodded. "Fine with me."

"Maybe you want to come to the bedroom and tell me what else you were thinking about last night." Ilya stood up and held a hand out. When Shane took it, he pulled him up, their bodies bumping against each other.

Shane nodded again, smaller this time. Ilya thought maybe he was a little nervous. But he followed him into the bedroom and looked around. Ilya looked too, wondering what was of interest. His room, much like the rest of the house, contained too many books. A stack on his nightstand, a small but overflowing bookshelf on one side of the room. A few random books

on his dresser. A comfortable armchair in one corner that currently held a pile of clean but unfolded clothes. It was otherwise neat and clean. He'd even changed the sheets. But only because it was time, not because he planned to have Shane Hollander on them tonight. *Right.*

Ilya pulled Shane in for another kiss, letting his hands push up under his shirt, fingertips running along the ridges and plains of his stomach, his chest, then around to his lower back, under the waistband of his jeans, until he could squeeze the perfect swells of his ass. Shane made a surprised little noise in his mouth and pushed his hips against Ilya's.

"Tell me what you want," Ilya said against his lips. He leaned back enough to lift the hem of Shane's t-shirt and pull it over his head.

"I don't know." His voice was low and breathy, but Ilya could still hear the hint of apprehension.

Ilya nodded and stepped back to pull his own clothes off. His shirt first, then he unbuttoned his jeans and nodded to Shane's so he would do the same. Shane did, but he was clearly very distracted by Ilya's nudity, his eyes roaming up and down and back up while his hands clumsily pulled at his jeans and boxer briefs. Ilya's plans were slowly shifting.

"Have you done this before?" he asked, already knowing the answer but giving Shane a chance to tell him anyway.

Shane shook his head. "Not um..." Ilya watched his throat work, like the words were stuck, and he swallowed, trying to dislodge them.

"Not with a man?"

"Uh, yeah. Just women."

"You want to?" Ilya asked, putting his hands on Shane's waist and drawing him in closer. He was hard, and he stepped closer immediately, so Ilya didn't think there was any problem with the "want" part.

Shane nodded. Ilya kissed him and pushed him gently toward the bed and then down onto it. He covered Shane's body with his, settling between his legs, letting their cocks rub together for the second time this evening. Now he could take his time. He kissed his way down Shane's jaw, to the side of his neck, stopping to suck gently at the soft skin behind his ear. Already he knew this was a good spot for Shane. A spot that drew out delicious little moans and made him grasp at Ilya's back, pulling him closer, probably without even realizing it. When Ilya lifted his head to look at him, Shane's face was slack with pleasure already.

"You said you were hoping I might help you figure out what else you want, yes?" Ilya said, cupping his jaw, not letting those skittish brown eyes go anywhere.

"Yeah. I mean...if that's something you want too." His voice was a little shaky.

"I do. You want me to fuck you?" Might as well stop beating around the bush.

Shane nodded, a touch too fast. Ilya rolled off him and reached into the drawer of his nightstand for a bottle of lube. Then he stretched out next to Shane and ran a hand up and down his chest and stomach.

“Not tonight,” Ilya said. Shane looked at him in surprise. “You’re nervous.”

“I’m not.” It seemed more like an automatic response than an honest one, too fast, too high.

“It’s okay,” Ilya said, leaning down to kiss him. “Hang on.” Ilya got up and closed the bedroom door. He didn’t need any furry visitors right now. Then he grabbed a towel and shoved it under Shane’s hips. Once he was stretched out next to him again, he slicked his fingers, watching Shane’s eyes track his movements. “Okay?” he asked, slipping his hand between Shane’s legs.

“Yeah, but I thought you said not tonight?”

“I didn’t say we would do nothing tonight.”

Ilya pressed a finger against Shane’s hole, watching his face the entire time. “Have you done this at all?”

Shane’s eyes squeezed shut for a second.

“Hey...look at me. Nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“I have. With my fingers. And uh...a dildo,” he said, eyes not meeting Ilya’s.

“Good.” Ilya pushed his finger in, and those warm brown eyes flew to his, soft lips parting to suck in a breath. Ilya leaned down and kissed him as he pushed in far enough to crook his finger just right, swallowing the moan that slipped past Shane’s lips. Ilya massaged that spot, pressing in and out, while he did something similar but softer with his tongue in Shane’s mouth. Shane didn’t seem to have any complaints, his own tongue pushing back, his hips pushing up, his low, needy little noises coming more frequently.

“Is that okay?” Ilya asked between kisses.

“Mhm, very okay.”

One of Shane’s hands was tangled in his curls. It seemed to be a favorite place for his fingers to land, and Ilya hoped that didn’t change. He loved the little tugs that were probably unintentional, and the harder ones that definitely were, feeling them all the way down through his cock. Ilya leaned in to press his lips along the soft skin of Shane’s neck, inhaling the already familiar clean, warm scent of him, not at all what you’d expect from a hockey player. His stuttered little breaths ghosted along Ilya’s ear, sending a pleasant shudder through him.

I could recognize him by touch alone, by smell; I would know him blind, by the way his breaths came and his feet struck the earth.

Ilya shifted on the bed so he could keep kissing his way down Shane's body. First along the curve of his shoulder, then down his chest, stopping to flick his tongue across one nipple, enjoying the high, surprised noise it earned. He let his teeth scrape there, drawing out more, making Shane's fingers tighten in his hair, before he soothed it with his tongue. He moved to the other nipple, giving it the same attention and getting a similar response. Ilya's own cock was aching now, just from the attention he was giving Shane's body, from the way he responded. He kept kissing his way down, finally letting his tongue drag along the ridges of Shane's defined abs, stopping to properly kiss and suck the smooth skin stretched over hard muscles. He pushed a second finger into Shane's hole while his mouth was busy sucking the soft skin beside his navel, and Shane's body curled up slightly, writhing beneath him.

Ilya lifted his head for a beat, wanting to see what Shane's face was doing. His head was tipped back against the pillows, lips slightly parted, eyes screwed shut. There was a delicious, splotchy pink flush spreading from his chest, up his neck, to his cheeks, and his hair was a little messy. He looked nothing like the Shane Hollander on TV. Ilya wondered if anyone else got to see this Shane Hollander. He hoped not. He felt like a dragon hoarding treasure, wanting it all for himself. A stupid, nonsensical thing to want. But at least right now, in this moment, he got to have it.

"How do you feel?" Ilya asked, his voice low and thick with his own arousal.

Shane's eyes blinked open. "Good...fuck, I don't know."

"Want me to stop?"

"No, please don't." The almost panic in his eyes made Ilya smile.

"I won't. I've got you." He leaned down and licked the head of Shane's cock, tongue dragging through an impressive amount of precome. Shane moaned loudly and jerked his hips up, like he couldn't help it.

"Fuck," he breathed, his fingers still tangled in Ilya's hair, tightening and loosening reflexively as Ilya kept dragging his tongue along the head of his cock. "Oh god, I'm going to...fuck, I can't..." His hips moved more insistently, pushing down on Ilya's fingers and then up against his mouth.

"Do it," Ilya said, then took him fully into his mouth and sucked. He felt Shane's body tense up, clench around his fingers. He kept up the rhythm of his fingers, bobbed his head a few times, while Shane cried out and spilled himself down Ilya's throat. His orgasm seemed to go on forever, despite being the second in two hours, and Ilya did his best to turn his eyes up to Shane's face, though his head was still thrown back. He could see that his mouth was open on a low moan, the flush darker on his chest. The hand in Ilya's hair tightened, painful but welcome, and his other hand was grasping at Ilya's sheets. When he finally went loose, he let Ilya's curls go, hand flopping to the bed. His chest was rising and falling rapidly, mouth still open, breathing hard.

Ilya gently slipped his fingers out and wiped them on the towel, then crawled back up the bed and used his clean hand to brush the hair off Shane's forehead.

“Hey,” he said softly, watching Shane’s face. He looked exactly how Ilya wanted him to look: blissed out. His eyes were still heavy-lidded, but his mouth was curved into a small smile, cheeks still flushed. “That was okay?”

Shane nodded against the pillow. “Holy shit,” he said with a breathy laugh. “That was…”

“Mm, intense, yes?”

“Yeah. Jesus.”

Ilya leaned down to kiss him, and Shane’s hand was back in his hair, then against his neck, pulling him closer. When their lips came apart again, Shane looked down, his eyes obviously landing on Ilya’s still hard cock.

“Why didn’t you just…” Shane started and trailed off, his eyes flicking back to Ilya’s.

Ilya shrugged, guessing what he meant. “There is no rush. Plus, you have a game tomorrow. Might be sore after the first time.”

Shane nodded a little uncertainly. “Oh.”

“We can do that another time, if you still want to.”

Ilya didn’t want to think too hard about why he hesitated tonight. He’d never waited to fuck someone before. It had never really mattered how he got his dick wet. It was all good as long as they were both getting off, no method meant any more than the next. But Shane, with his shaky voice and wide eyes, his trust in Ilya even though they’d only known each other for a matter of weeks. The fact that he wanted Ilya, of all the people he could have—and he was Shane Hollander, so the pool was large and very full—and he wanted him. This frustratingly famous and talented person who liked books and words and wanted to know Ilya’s thoughts, with his big, warm brown eyes that were always looking at him like *he* was something special.

The awful thing is that beauty is mysterious as well as terrible. God and the devil are fighting there and the battlefield is the heart of man.

When was the last time he’d even wanted to touch someone just to make them feel good, not caring about his own orgasm? He was a good lover…he always made sure his partner for the evening was well and truly satisfied. But only because he was also going to be. This time, he didn’t care if he got to come again. This had been for Shane. Ilya wanted to make him feel good, show him all these new things he had probably been denying himself for reasons that would piss Ilya off if he thought about them too hard. He was well and truly so fucked.

“I do want to,” Shane said, his fingers moving idly across the back of his neck, almost tickling.

“Okay.” Ilya leaned down to kiss him again, slow and lazy, letting him come down from the orgasm. Eventually Shane angled himself toward him more and slipped one hand down to wrap around Ilya’s cock, stroking him while they kissed. Ilya moaned into his mouth because

it really was perfect, just having Shane's hand on him, his lips, his other hand dragging through his curls, gently now, but it felt good, the way having your hair played with always did.

Ilya wasn't sure how long they stayed like that, just kissing and touching, Shane stroking him lazily, like he was just enjoying the feel of him. When he finally couldn't take it anymore, he told Shane, "Faster," and his hand sped up, and Ilya leaned into him, nuzzling Shane's neck while his cock spurted over Shane's fist, onto his hip. "Fuck," he murmured before rolling onto his back.

"Was that good for you? I probably should have..." Shane asked and then trailed off, uncertainty in his voice. Ilya laughed, but he kept it light so Shane didn't take it the wrong way.

"Yes, it was good. I think the evidence of that is still on you," Ilya said, then sat up so he could use the towel under Shane's hips to clean them both up.

Shane was smiling up at him, looking sleepy. He stretched and then said, "I should probably go."

Ilya almost told him to stay. He wanted him to stay, curl up next to him, warm and soft and sated, while they both drifted off together. But he didn't because he was already in far too deep.

"Okay," he said instead. They both got up and got dressed. Shane stopped in the bathroom while Ilya went back to the living room to find the books he'd set aside for Shane to take home with him.

"Thanks for dinner," Shane said when he joined him by the bookshelf. "Again."

"You're welcome. I have your books." Only two today. "This one is YA. I thought you might like it since you liked Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda. It won some awards too... important for the genre."

Shane took the offered book: Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe.

"And this one is safe for reading in public," he said, holding up the second book. "Have you read it already?"

Shane looked at the title: 11/22/63. "No, but I've seen it around a lot. It didn't seem like King's usual stuff."

"Mm, not horror so much. More historical and sci-fi. I think maybe you will like it, but you can let me know if not. I'm still learning your tastes." He punctuated that by leaning in to kiss him, swiping his tongue across Shane's lips before pulling back.

"I will. Thanks."

"Would you like me to invite you over again, Shane Hollander?" Ilya asked, leaning in close to whisper it in his ear.

Shane nodded. “Yes. Definitely.”

“Good. What’s your schedule like after tomorrow?”

“I’ve got some volunteering stuff to do on Sunday. We play again on Monday, but then I’m off Tuesday through Thursday,” he said. “Not off. But no games until Friday.”

“Well, you know where to find me during the day. But maybe I will invite you over one of those evenings.”

“Yeah, okay. Sounds good.”

“I’ll be watching your game tomorrow,” Ilya said, and the way Shane’s face lit up was doing dangerous things to his chest.

“I’ll try to score one for you then.” He had his crooked little smile on, the one that was starting to have a Pavlovian effect on Ilya’s body, especially when he was still wearing Ilya’s t-shirt and his hair was mussed from the very good sex they’d just had.

“Only one?”

Shane lifted one shoulder. “Maybe. Should they all be for you?”

Ilya smiled and pulled him in by the waist. “You tell me.” Then he kissed him again, and he made it a good kiss. Good enough that he had to grip Shane’s chin in one hand to hold him steady.

When he pulled back, Shane’s eyes were a little unfocused again, and Ilya was tempted to drag him back to bed. But he stepped back and let Shane grab his jacket.

“I’ll walk you out,” Ilya said, slipping on his slides and opening the front door, which was apparently all Vanya needed to emerge from wherever he’d been. He ran down the stairs and paced in front of the door. When they met him on the ground level, Vanya put his annoying little feet on Shane’s leg, demanding to be picked up. Ilya shook his head as Shane gave in. “He has you wrapped around his paw.”

Shane shrugged. “Happily so on my part. How can I resist?”

How indeed? Ilya thought, as he shoved his hands in his pockets so he didn’t reach out and pull them both into his arms. Instead, he opened the door and led the way to the front of the shop. He unlocked the glass door and scooped Vanya out of Shane’s arms.

“Let me know how you like the books,” Ilya said. “And good luck tomorrow.”

“Thanks, I will.” Shane looked like he was thinking very hard for a few seconds. Then he looked out the glass quickly before turning back to lean in and kiss Ilya. With Vanya between them, it stayed soft and chaste, but the fact that Shane had initiated it made it perfect.

He pulled back and gave Ilya his cute smile again, then said, “Goodnight,” and pushed the door open and stepped out onto the street, letting in a rush of cold air that had Ilya backing

up, but not far enough to lose sight of him until he was halfway down the block. Ilya sighed and locked the door before heading back upstairs. Inside the apartment, he looked down at Vanya, who was looking at him with eyes that were far too intelligent and knowing.

“Stop looking at me like that,” Ilya said in his stupid voice that someone told him was a symptom of cuteness aggression. “He’s just a temporary friend. You better not get attached.”

Ilya set Vanya down on the floor and went into the kitchen. He grabbed a spoon and pulled the container of lemon blueberry sorbet out of the freezer. He dug the spoon in and took a big bite, letting the sweet and sour ice melt onto his tongue while he wished he was licking it out of Shane Hollander’s mouth again and cursed himself. Shane *was* temporary. He was fun and curious and a little forbidden, and Ilya had always liked something a little dangerous. Tell him he couldn’t have it, and he would prove you wrong. That’s all it was.

Above all, don't lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point that he cannot distinguish the truth within him...

Chapter End Notes

I owed you some Ilya POV, which means fewer book quotes. But I snuck a few in. More to come when it's Shane's turn again. And also more from Ilya, but this chapter was a lot of sexy time because well...it's also important for their relationship, let's be honest. Hollanov do be fucking a lot.

Books mentioned in this chapter:

Interview with the Vampire by Anne Rice

Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe by Benjamin Alire Sáenz

11/22/63 by Stephen King

Mentioned in passing:

The Martian by Andy Weir

The Shining by Stephen King

The Girl on the Train by Paula Hawkins

Short stories mentioned in passing (you should read these for real if you haven't):

The Lottery by Shirley Jackson

The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

A Good Man is Hard to Find by Flannery O'Connor

Quotes from Song of Achilles (I could recognize him by touch alone, by smell; I would know him blind, by the way his breaths came and his feet struck the earth.) and a couple of Dostoevsky novels.

“I want to talk about everything with at least one person as I talk about things with myself.” - The Idiot by Fyodor Dostoevsky

Chapter 7: I have spent all my years in believing you

Chapter Notes

I thought this was going to be an extra short chapter for some reason...and I was incorrect! Hope you're all cool with the very low stakes plot going on here. We're just reading and vibing.

[I originally fucked up the days in this chapter because I'm using the real 2016 Boston Bruins calendar as a reference, but then everything conflicted with the bookstore being closed on Mondays. I have now adjusted so that it makes sense I think (mostly- this is why Shane is randomly volunteering on Sunday with no attention given to it. Please allow it lol). Hockey really is my nemesis :(]

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

Boston played against Arizona on Saturday and Colorado on Monday, both home games, one win, one loss. Not a bad few days overall. Shane spent an inordinate amount of them thinking about Ilya. About Ilya's bed, and his mouth, and his fingers, and his voice, and even his sweet, spoiled cat.

He'd briefly texted him after the Arizona game, but he was exhausted and really needed to be ready for volunteering early the next day at an event to raise money for charity with a bunch of his teammates. Minimal flirting, but he did get confirmation that Ilya had been watching and provided confirmation that both of his goals were for Ilya. Maybe more than minimal flirting. Maybe the kind of disgustingly sappy flirting Shane had always felt awkward about with women he'd dated and was now happily engaging in with the dumbest smile on his face.

He hadn't started either of the new books, but he was counting down the minutes until Monday's game was over. He knew what that meant. He knew being excited about what came after a game and not the game itself was a bad sign...for his heart if not his career. He also knew he wasn't going to fully acknowledge that and shoved it far to the back of his mind.

Shane was finally about to head home after Monday night's game when Cliff stopped him.

"Hey, almost forgot, we're playing basketball tomorrow afternoon and then going out. You're coming," Cliff said. He had a towel around his neck, face still flushed from the shower.

"Oh, tomorrow?" Shane stalled, trying to think of anything to get him out of it.

"Yeah, you said you were in next time, Hollz. You better get your ass there."

Shane nodded, admitting defeat. "Yeah, okay. What time?"

“Three. You guys can come back to my place after to get ready.”

He really did want to hang out with his teammates. He didn't go out clubbing with them as often as they wanted him to, but they'd basically accepted that after this many years. Mostly, he tried to make up for it by doing all the other things...basketball, BBQs, house parties. As captain, he felt both obligation and desire to bond with everyone. Cliff and Connors had been his best friends since they were rookies, Carmichael not long after, so hanging out with them wasn't even an obligation. Usually he looked forward to their basketball games. Cliff might have had some height on him, but Shane was pretty fucking good and never turned down a chance to beat his teammates at something. So then why was he miserably disappointed that he'd have to spend tomorrow with them?

I.R.: will I see you tomorrow?

Right...that was why. He'd texted Ilya once he was settled at home.

Shane: Probably not. I've got plans with my teammates that I can't get out of. I wish I could.

I.R.: maybe another day then

Shane: I'm free Wednesday after practice and some stuff early in the afternoon.

I.R.: is that right?

Shane rolled his eyes and smiled.

Shane: That's me asking if you want to hang out.

I.R.: maybe I can fit you into my busy schedule

Shane knew he was joking...probably anyway. But he still didn't know how to respond. He typed a couple of different messages, deleted them, and finally settled on something simple.

Shane: Okay, well, just let me know.

I.R.: come over anytime, but I have to close the shop at 8

Shane: Can you eat while you work?

I.R.: yes, I'm very good at multitasking

Shane rolled his eyes again, still smiling.

Shane: I'll bring dinner. If that's okay?

I.R.: very okay, Shane Hollander

Shane: I haven't had time to read, but I'm going to start the YA one tonight.

He was about to get in bed with the book.

I.R.: you can highlight that one if you want

Shane hadn't even opened it yet. He picked it up off his nightstand and flipped through it, delighted to see yellow ink already marring some of the pages.

Shane: I will. You liked this one a lot?

I.R.: yes, very good for queer YA lit

Before Shane could type anything else, another message popped up.

I.R.: you took a hard hit tonight

I.R.: feeling okay?

Shane's chest warmed. Ilya had been watching again, and he had noticed when Shane got knocked into the boards. His side still ached where one of Colorado's defensemen had slammed into him. Hard enough that he'd gone down for several seconds.

Shane: Yeah, just bruised. I'm used to it.

I.R.: of course

I.R.: let me know how you like the book

That sounded like the end of the conversation. He should probably go anyway. So he could read some and go to sleep. Even though he wanted nothing more than to stay up all night and text Ilya. Maybe even invite him over. He could easily do that...

Shane: I will. Goodnight.

Not yet.

I.R.: goodnight

Shane couldn't help but flip through the book and read some of Ilya's highlights before he ever started chapter 1. The little glimpses were too enticing.

Words were different when they lived inside of you.

He didn't even know the context yet, but he knew that was true, for him at least.

Sometimes, you do things and you do them not because you're thinking but because you're feeling. Because you're feeling too much. And you can't always control the things you do when you're feeling too much.

Shane let that one sink in for a bit. *You can't always control the things you do when you're feeling too much.* Control was important to him. It was why he was so disciplined, why he didn't like to drink too much, and if he did, it was only around people he trusted. Letting his control slip...it would be a relief and a nightmare. But lately, with one person who did indeed make him feel too much, it had been only a relief.

He flipped back to chapter 1 and started reading, not stopping until his eyelids were drooping and the numbers on the clock were getting much too close to the time his alarm would go off.

-

Shane got home around noon the next day after practice and a quick meeting with someone from a magazine to set up an interview and photoshoot. He was planning to eat lunch and read and have a few minutes of peace before he had to go meet Cliff and the guys, but instead, he found himself walking to One Good Memory.

When the shop came into view, he slowed down, wondering how ridiculous it was to show up here unannounced for no reason at all. He didn't even plan to buy anything. He was very obviously just here to see Ilya. Did he care? He decided that he did not in fact care and pushed the door open to see Ilya leaning on the counter, a book open in front of him. His eyes popped up at the sound of the door, and the way his face lit up was worth every ounce of embarrassment Shane might have felt for showing up when he said he wouldn't.

"Well, well, well," Ilya said, a smirk pulling at his lips. "I thought Shane Hollander was too busy for me today."

"I only have a few minutes, but..." Shane trailed off because what was he even going to say.

"A few minutes. Okay." Ilya walked out from behind the counter. "Enough time to come see something back here."

Ilya walked toward the back, turning left behind the last shelf of books. Shane followed, and as soon as he stepped behind the tall shelf, Ilya hooked a hand around his neck and pulled him in for a kiss. Shane melted into it immediately. It was frenzied, lips mashing together hard and messy, and Ilya was making a low noise into his mouth and Shane thought maybe he was making one back. When Ilya finally pulled back enough to let him suck in a breath, he remembered that this was still technically a public place where anyone could walk in at any time, even if the store had been empty. Ilya must have deduced where his thoughts were headed.

"Don't worry, we'd hear anyone coming in," he said, pulling Shane back against him and kissing him again, gentler this time.

"Is that what you came here for?" Ilya asked when their lips parted again.

Shane swallowed and tried to compose himself. "Maybe."

He was at least telling the truth. He hadn't acknowledged that he was coming here for anything in particular, other than to see Ilya. But seeing Ilya had taken on a new meaning, now that they'd moved past just words. So maybe he had come for that.

Ilya stepped out from behind the shelf briefly, eyes tracking to the front door, then he was back, pulling Shane into another kiss, bodies pressed together this time. They were both very obviously happy to be in that position, and Shane couldn't help but grind against him,

drawing a low moan from them both. When Ilya pulled back again, Shane leaned in, not wanting to let space open up between them.

“Better stop before we do something regrettable,” Ilya said. He swiped a thumb across Shane’s cheekbone, then turned and walked back to the front, behind the counter, leaving Shane a little out of breath behind the shelf. He took a second to adjust himself, then followed.

“So.” Ilya was leaning over the counter on his elbows. “Where is the busy Shane Hollander off to today?”

“To play basketball with my teammates. And then go out with them, I guess.”

“Wow,” Ilya said, amused. “You sound very excited.”

Shane snorted. “It’s not that I don’t want to, but…” he trailed off, wondering if he wanted to reveal more of how boring he was. “I like playing basketball, but I could do without the going out part sometimes.”

Ilya nodded slowly, a small smile on his face that was making Shane want to pull him back behind the shelves.

“Basketball is fun.”

“You play?” Shane asked.

“Sometimes. I used to play often with some college friends. Harder to coordinate schedules these days.”

The glass door opened then, and Shane took a step back immediately. *Way to be subtle.* It was an older woman who gave them a polite smile and then went straight to the second wooden shelf of books.

“I should go,” Shane said. “I just wanted to say hi. Where’s Vanya?”

“Upstairs. He didn’t want to come down earlier.”

“Well, I guess I’ll see him tomorrow?” He kept his voice quiet.

Ilya grinned. “I hope so, Shane Hollander.” He was grateful that Ilya also kept it quiet, but the way his name sounded in that low voice…

Shane sucked in his bottom lip to control whatever his face was doing. “Okay…uh, see you later.”

“Enjoy your night.”

Shane somehow made it out of the store and back home to change into basketball-appropriate clothes. He set some neatly folded dark jeans and a sweater into his bag for after, looked

longingly at Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe sitting on his nightstand, and then headed out to meet the guys.

Shane pulled up to the gym 10 minutes before 3. He saw Cliff's little two-seater sports car parked a few spaces away. They had an in at a private gym, so they didn't have to worry about fans crashing their games.

Inside, Cliff, Connors, and a few other teammates were already there. Connors clasped his hand and pulled him into a shoulder bump.

"What's up, man?"

"Ready to kick everyone's ass," Shane said.

"Fuck off," Cliff shouted from across the way, where he was leaning over his bag. "Connors is on your team."

Shane laughed and slung an arm around Connors' shoulders. "We're still going to kick everyone's ass."

They ended up with an even 10 people, 8 Raiders and two guys who were friends of players. Shane's team did not kick everyone's ass and lost, but he'd scored the most individual points. He made sure Cliff remembered that.

"Whatever, Hollz. You still lost," Cliff said before he squeezed his water bottle into his mouth. "You coming to my place before we head out to the club?"

"Yeah. I'm probably not going to stay out too late, though."

They had an optional skate in the morning, but as captain, he never skipped those. Plus, Shane was itching to get home. And he hated clubs. They were too loud and crowded, and he had no interest in dancing or going home with anyone.

He walked out of the gym with Cliff, everyone else scattering to their own cars.

"You seem distracted today." Cliff was looking at him seriously now.

"Did you forget that I scored the most points?"

Cliff laughed. "Fuck, Hollz. You won't let me. But don't change the subject. You've been weird for weeks."

"Weird?"

"Distracted, like I said...not in a bad way. In fact, you've been playing like a beast. And you've still been smiling at your phone *a lot*. Are you and Rose back together?"

"No," Shane said quickly. "Just friends. Our schedules would never work together."

"Mhm, if you say so. Vaughny up in New York is making it work with Gloria Grey."

Shane had seen the pictures. He shrugged. “Rose and I are better as friends.”

“So are you seeing anyone new?”

“Nope. You know me, no dating during the season.”

“Alright, I’ll let it go for now,” Cliff said, opening the door to his car. “See you at my place.”

Connors, Carmichael, and Hammersmith were already there when he arrived at Cliff’s. Cliff had a nice condo even closer to their practice facility than where Shane lived now. Shane had thought about moving closer, but he’d really liked his current place when he took a tour. It had one brick wall in the living room with several huge floor-to-ceiling arched windows, hardwood floors throughout, and enough bedrooms to set up a home gym and guest room for his parents. Not to mention the private stairwell that was getting absolutely no use. But most importantly, he had no regrets because it was 10 minutes away from his new favorite place. And, if he was being honest, his new favorite person. And his new favorite person’s cat.

Which is why he found himself, a few hours later, sitting in a loud club, staring at his phone. They’d managed to snag a big booth in the corner, various teammates coming and going, drinks abandoned everywhere. Shane was sitting at the table, under the guise of keeping it from being taken, thumping music vibrating the sticky plastic cushion of the seats, while his thumb hovered over the glass screen of his phone. The problem was that he’d already gone to see Ilya today when he hadn’t planned to. And he’d told Ilya he was going out with his teammates, so he wasn’t expecting to hear from Shane. Texting him from the club would be desperate. Unnecessary. And yet...he’d been staring at the text thread for several minutes now, dropping his phone beneath the table when Connors stopped by to take a sip of his—or likely someone else’s—beer, before disappearing again.

Fuck it.

Shane: Reading anything tonight?

He put his phone flat on the table and tried not to regret sending that. He barely felt the buzz of his phone beneath his fingers against the bass of the music.

I.R.: not yet, but soon probably

I.R.: I thought you were out partying with your hockey friends

Shane: I am.

He imagined Ilya was laughing at him.

I.R.: must be a bad party if you’re texting me

Shane: I think everyone else is having fun.

I.R.: but not you?

Shane: It’s fine. We’re at a club, and I don’t dance much.

I.R.: that's too bad

Shane: I assure you, it's for the best.

A couple of minutes went by with no reply. While he was still staring at the screen, Cliff slipped into the booth next to him and grabbed his phone. Shane tried to grab it back, but Cliff had long arms and switched it to his opposite hand, like he was playing keep away.

"Marly," Shane said, "what the fuck are you doing?" He was trying to keep the panic out of his voice. Wishing he had locked his screen instead of staring at it like an idiot. The icy cold pit of fear in his stomach was making his voice ring too high.

"Relax, buddy. Who is I.R.?" Cliff asked. "Why are you telling her where you are and not inviting her to come out?" Cliff was practically giggling while Shane was panicking. "You're going to get laid aren't you?"

"Maybe if you give me my phone back, asshole."

Cliff handed it back to him. "Chill, I'm not cockblocking. So where did you meet her?"

At least Cliff assumed it was a woman with no question. Shane's nervous system relaxed so quickly he almost sagged against the booth. "A friend of a friend."

"You lied to my face earlier about not seeing anyone." Cliff sounded teasing, not offended.

"I didn't lie. I haven't been seeing anyone yet. And I don't really plan to. Maybe just once."

Cliff nodded and gave him a pointed look. "You should definitely go get laid. Or tell her to come here. We're not leaving anytime soon."

Shane rolled his eyes. "I'm not inviting her here. I barely know her."

For a wild half second, clearly brought on by the fluctuation of adrenaline and nothing rational, Shane thought about telling Cliff. Telling him it wasn't a woman, and that it would never be a woman. Would Cliff really care? Would he keep it to himself? Cliff was looking at him with something between worry and amusement.

"Alright, whatever. At least find someone to dance with here, huh?" Cliff gave him a shoulder bump and then messed up his hair, which from Cliff was allowed, even if Shane wanted to shove him, then he disappeared back into the throng of people on the dance floor. Shane looked at his phone, reading back through the last few messages and patting himself on the back for putting Ilya's contact as I.R. Nothing incriminating here.

Shane looked at the time. It was barely after 10. He'd stay another hour or so, and then he'd go home and go to bed. That would be the sensible thing to do. He didn't even care if his teammates gave him shit. At least he'd shown his face and had a couple of beers, and they'd be here for hours more, not paying attention to him anyway.

His phone buzzed finally.

I.R.: now I am reading

I.R.: do you need entertainment while you're at the club?

Shane's cheeks heated, and he looked around. Everyone was still very much occupied. And he wasn't sure that Ilya actually meant anything particularly...not safe for public.

Shane: Only if you want to. I can leave you alone to read.

I.R.: I don't mind

Shane: What are you reading?

I.R.: rereading a favorite

Carmichael wandered over then, sitting heavily next to Shane on the booth's bench. Shane turned his phone upside down again, this time locking the screen.

"Hollz, what are you doing over here?" he asked.

"Just hanging out."

"There's a blonde over there who wants to go home with me, and she has a friend," Carmichael said, cocking his head, eyebrows up.

"You already know what I'm going to say."

"Come on, man. She said you're hot."

In the past, Shane occasionally left with a woman. Rarely, but enough to scratch an itch and keep his teammates off his back. But he just couldn't do it anymore. Not now that he was sure about his preferences. Not now that he had Ilya. *You don't have him*. He shook his head and looked at Carmichael.

"Not tonight," he told him. "I've got to be up early."

"Alright, Hollz. Take it easy." Carmichael got up and headed for the bar, and once he was far enough away, Shane was back on his phone.

Shane: Any quotes to share?

He waited a few minutes, eyes drifting around the club, spotting Cliff, sweaty and laughing under the blue lights. Shane smiled. Cliff was usually having fun, and he really didn't give Shane too much shit when he didn't want to be in the thick of it with him.

I.R.: *"I like revisiting, at certain times, spots where I was once happy; I like to shape the present in the image of the irretrievable past."*

Shane thought about that one. He didn't relate to it so much, but he could maybe understand why Ilya did. Now that he knew his mother had died. Had noted how his voice went quieter

with grief or wistfulness, a tone that suggested he was longing for something, even if he didn't say so.

Shane: What's it from?

I.R.: White Nights

I.R.: it's a short story by Dostoevsky

Shane nodded, even though Ilya couldn't see him, and he probably looked silly, sitting at this cluttered club table under the dancing lights with a thoughtful expression, nodding at his phone. God, he wanted to leave. He stood up. He didn't need to stay. He was going. He caught Cliff's eye, gave a wave, and mouthed "Later." Clif waved back, gave him a nod and a grin, and then went back to dancing with a woman in a very short dress. Shane shook his head and left, the cold air outside filling his lungs up and making him feel suddenly more awake. He typed another text as he walked to his car.

Shane: I've never read any Dostoevsky.

I.R.: crime against humanity, Shane Hollander

I.R.: maybe we can fix that one day

I.R.: if you want

Shane smiled at his phone again. He'd read just about anything if Ilya asked him to.

Shane: I'd like that.

He got in his car and made the drive home, under 15 minutes. When he pulled into his spot in the parking garage next to his building, he checked his phone again.

I.R.: how are you doing at the club?

Shane: Just got home. I'm going to try to finish the YA book before I go to sleep. Not much left.

Shane made his way out of the garage and into his building, swiped his key card in the elevator to take him up to his apartment. Inside, he kicked his shoes off and headed straight for his bedroom.

I.R.: are you liking it?

Shane: Yeah, it's really good. A bit heavier and more introspective than Simon.

I.R.: yes

I.R.: finding anything to highlight?

Shane: Yeah, a lot. I keep thinking about this one.

He grabbed the book, flipped through until he found what he was looking for, and took a picture instead of typing.

“Do you think it will always be this way?”

“What?”

“I mean, when do we start feeling like the world belongs to us?”

*I wanted to tell him that the world would never belong to us. “I don't know,” I said.
“Tomorrow.”*

Shane shed his clothes and jumped in the shower, needing to wash the club off of him before he got into bed. He made it quick and grabbed his phone as soon as he had a towel around his waist.

I.R.: ah yes, Ari and Dante are a little heartbreaking sometimes

Shane: Yeah. Sometimes relatable too.

Shane: *“Everyone expected something from me. Something I just couldn't give.”*

I.R.: not everyone, Shane Hollander

Shane sat heavily on his bed and rubbed his chest. Those words landed hard, almost painfully, and then warmed him up fromt he inside. He was grateful when his phone buzzed again, and he didn't have to decide how to respond.

I.R.: give me one more that you highlighted

I.R.: the rest I will see for myself

Shane flipped through the book, trying to decide which one was safest to send. But something in him decided that wasn't applicable here. Ilya was always safe.

Shane: *“I decided that maybe we left each other alone too much. Leaving each other alone was killing us.”*

There was a pause, no typing bubble appeared right away. Shane wondered what Ilya was doing. What he was thinking.

I.R.: I like that one too

I.R.: I will be happy to revisit that book and see what else has struck you when you bring it back

As usual, it never failed to make him feel special that Ilya wanted to know his thoughts.

Shane: I'll have it tomorrow.

I.R.: I'm looking forward to tomorrow

Shane: Me too.

Shane: I should go so I can finish the book and get some sleep.

Shane: I'll text you tomorrow. Goodnight.

I.R.: goodnight

Shane eventually settled under the covers and propped Aristotle and Dante against his drawn up knees, highlighter resting on his chest. He didn't think he'd ever get tired of seeing Ilya's highlights in a book. This one didn't have any neat little notes in the margin, and he wished for them. More little glimpses into his life and his head and maybe his heart.

When he finished reading, he went back through the book and looked especially at the quotes where brighter highlighter overlapped paler, aged highlighter.

The problem with my life was that it was someone else's idea.

Shane knew why he had highlighted that one, even if it wasn't entirely true to himself. Sure, a lot of his life was lived according to other people's expectations of him, other people's needs and desires and best interests. But it's not like he hadn't wanted that. He'd worked hard for everything he had. Sometimes he just wanted more. Or less. He wanted to be more than just Shane Hollander, captain of the Raiders. And he wanted to not carry the weight of that title on his shoulders, at least once in a while. It was why summers at his cottage were so important to him. He could step away for a little while and just exist as himself, not the Shane Hollander everyone else needed him to be.

What Shane didn't know was why that quote spoke to Ilya. Shane was under the impression that Ilya had done what he wanted, leaving hockey and Russia behind, buying a bookstore...it had seemed almost idyllic. Maybe he would tell Shane more about it one day. About leaving and why books spoke to him. He wanted that almost as much as he wanted the other things Ilya was willingly giving him.

For the same reasons Shane had highlighted that particular quote, he'd also highlighted another that spoke to a similar feeling.

I didn't think it was my job to accept what everyone said I was and who I should be.

Only this one was not something he could claim in any meaningful way. He did accept those things. Maybe he'd finally started to push back though, if only to himself. He had to start somewhere.

To be careful with people and with words was a rare and beautiful thing.

That one had made Shane smile, because if anything applied to Ilya, it was that. He knew, just from his own interactions with him, from watching him with his customers and Vanya. Shane envied the way words seemed to come to him, just the right ones every time, the way he talked with others, so at ease in himself and his place in the world he occupied. He made Shane feel that way too, sometimes.

Maybe we just lived between hurting and healing.

That one had been highlighted only by Ilya, and it made Shane's chest ache. He closed the book and set it on his nightstand. He had, until now, let his mind be filled with Ari and Dante and their story. Now that he turned the lamp off and settled into his pillows, his mind drifted

to tomorrow. He couldn't wait to be done with practice and the few other things on his schedule in the morning. Then he'd be off to One Good Memory. And when Ilya got done with work...Shane wasn't entirely ready to think about the exact details of what they might do then. Well...he was ready, but he needed to sleep and thinking about that would definitely not help. Instead, he forced himself to go through his to-do list until he drifted off and dreamed of golden curls and kisses between book-lined shelves.

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After practice the next day, Shane had tape to review, a meeting with his financial advisor, and then he worked out. A little after 4pm, he was pacing his living room, trying to decide what time would be appropriate to bring dinner to the shop. He'd already texted Ilya to ask any particular preferences or dislikes from the Mediterranean place a few blocks away.

He decided to get in the shower. It was a long and thorough shower, and by the time he was out and dressed, it was past 5. If he ordered food, walked to pick it up, then walked to One Good Memory, it would put him there around 6, which seemed very reasonable.

Shane might have ordered too much food. He'd gotten chicken, lamb, and veggie kabobs, plus falafel, hummus, dolmas, Greek salad, and baklava. He wanted to make sure Ilya had enough things he liked. He'd been so thoughtful about the dinners he'd made for Shane. The least Shane could do was bring enough food.

It was a cold, windy November evening, but Shane didn't mind the walk. He made it to One Good Memory, bags in hand, with cold ears, but otherwise feeling good. The door jingled when he pushed it open. That was new. There was a man at the counter when he walked in, and Ilya was chatting animatedly with him, though his eyes drifted to Shane very briefly, and he winked. It made Shane's stomach swoop. He walked to the back of the store where the armchairs were to wait for Ilya to be done and watched him chat with the customer.

"Oh yes, I think you will like this one very much if you love Saving Private Ryan," Ilya said, nodding.

"I trust you then. What about this one for the wife?"

The guy was holding up a book Shane couldn't see.

"Ah, yes. I have not read it, but it comes highly recommended by some of my favorite customers."

They chatted a minute more while Ilya rang up the books, and then the man left with a cheery, "I'll report back next time."

As soon as the glass door closed, Ilya was crossing the store, stopping right in front of Shane.

"Hi," he said. Then he quickly looked over his shoulder before leaning down to kiss Shane quickly on the lips before sitting in the other armchair.

"Hi," Shane said belatedly. "How has your day been?"

“Very good. Even better now.”

Shane smiled and then said, “Where do you want to eat?”

The little table between them wasn’t big enough to hold all the containers of food. Ilya stood up again and walked over to the storeroom. “In here will work.”

Shane followed him in and set the bag on the desk up against one wall.

“I finally put a bell on the door today, so I’ll hear if anyone comes in,” Ilya said. “I’ve had that stupid thing for over a year and kept forgetting to put it up.”

Shane wondered if he was the reason for the bell, after their kiss behind the shelves yesterday. *Don’t be silly.*

“That’s useful,” Shane said while he started taking containers out of the bag. The little storeroom wasn’t very big, and Ilya was standing right next to him. The single bare bulb on the ceiling wasn’t bright. It had the warm, yellowish orange glow of an old bulb, and it made everything feel even closer somehow.

“Wow,” Ilya said. “You bought the whole restaurant.”

Shane gave a short huff of a laugh. “Sorry. I just wanted to make sure you had enough. And I love Mediterranean food. Easy to stick to my macros.”

“Hm...even dessert.” Ilya had opened the container that had two slices of baklava. “You’re spoiling me.”

“Not really,” Shane said, but he kind of liked the sound of that. Maybe he wanted to. Was he allowed to want that? Ilya wasn’t *his* to spoil.

They ate standing up, out of the same containers. It was so normal and comfortable, like something he’d do with a teammate. Only there was something electric in the air between him and Ilya that they were both apparently ignoring for now.

“I have a few books for you to look at later. You can see if you want to read any of them,” Ilya said between bites.

“Oh, thanks. Which type of books?”

“The kind you won’t want to be reading in public,” Ilya said with a grin that made Shane involuntarily lick his lips.

He nodded and bit his lip. “Got it.”

“You’re welcome to go upstairs until I close the store. They’re sitting on one of the shelves. Or you can stay down here and hang out.”

Shane very much did not want to waste any time that could be spent in Ilya’s presence.

“I’ll hang out down here. If that’s okay. I don’t want to distract you or anything.”

Ilya waved a hand. “You won’t. Wednesday evenings are pretty slow anyway. The door to the stairs is unlocked if you need to escape though.”

“Thanks.” Shane did appreciate that.

After they’d eaten their fill, Ilya opened the baklava container again. “Shall we?”

Shane nodded and took one of the triangles, the sticky syrup coating his fingertips. Ilya took the other one and took a big bite. Shane could see the shiny, sweet stuff on his lips and had the overwhelming desire to lick it off. Ilya must have noticed where his gaze was, and his own dropped to Shane’s mouth and he leaned in just a little. Enough to let Shane know he could do what he was thinking, but that he’d have to decide.

Shane decided quickly. He leaned in, letting their lips touch first, then licking along the seam of Ilya’s. He tasted sweet with the hint of something savory from the earlier food. Ilya made a low noise in his throat and deepened the kiss, pushing his tongue against Shane’s.

“Fuck,” Ilya whispered when they finally broke apart. He pulled his phone out of his pocket. It was only 7:00. “Maybe I should close the store early.”

Shane laughed. “Sorry. I’ll behave.”

Ilya shook his head, smiling. “I do not want you to behave, Shane Hollander. But I shouldn’t close early, so maybe behave a little for now.” He swiped a thumb over Shane’s bottom lip, and it nearly sent him into a full body shiver. He ate the rest of his baklava and told himself to chill.

Behaving was a good call because a minute later, they heard the jingle of the door.

“Would you mind bringing the leftovers upstairs?” Ilya asked, wiping his sticky fingers on a napkin. “While I go deal with that.”

“Yeah, no problem.”

“Vanya is up there,” Ilya said on his way out the storeroom.

Shane closed up the containers and set them back in the bag to take upstairs. He walked into Ilya’s apartment and was immediately greeted by Vanya rubbing against his legs.

“Hey buddy.” Shane leaned down to pet him. “Let me put this away real quick.”

In the kitchen, he opened Ilya’s refrigerator, allowing himself a moment to look at its contents. Not that refrigerator contents were that interesting, but it still felt like another little look behind the curtains. It was all very normal. Some fruit and vegetables, a container that looked like leftover pasta, condiments, fresh mozzarella. A few red cans of coke. And beside those, a six pack of ginger ale. The kind that came in glass bottles. Shane stared at them a few seconds longer than he needed to, feeling some kind of way about a few bottles of soda. As soon as he closed the fridge, his phone buzzed, and Shane smiled at the message.

I.R.: there is ginger ale in the fridge if you want one

I.R.: can you bring me a can of coke when you come down?

Shane: Sure. And thank you.

He probably should have thought to bring drinks with the food, but he'd been a bit preoccupied. He opened the fridge again and grabbed one of each, then stopped in the living room to kneel down and give Vanya some proper attention.

"What are you up to all by yourself in here?" Shane asked, scratching behind his ears while Vanya nuzzled into his hand. "I have to go back downstairs."

He eventually stood up, grabbed the two drinks, and opened the door. Vanya zipped past him, down the stairs. Shane figured he was allowed in the shop whenever he wanted, so he let him slip through when he got to the door at the bottom. Ilya was at the counter by himself, and Shane didn't see anyone else in the store.

"Hope it's okay that he's down here," Shane said when he walked up. Vanya was already hopping onto the counter beside Ilya.

"Yes, he's allowed, even though he's a menace," he said, petting the menace in question. Shane handed him the can of coke. "Thank you."

Shane nodded. "Thanks for getting ginger ale." He twisted the cap off and took a long pull of the cold, bubbly liquid.

"You're very welcome. Now I would like to see your Aristotle and Dante highlights."

"Oh yeah, sure. Let me grab it." He'd left the book sitting in the storeroom earlier and went to grab it.

He handed it to Ilya and leaned lightly against the counter, petting Vanya, while Ilya flipped through the pages, taking his time to read each and every highlighted section.

"I had a feeling there was something wrong with me. I guess I was a mystery even to myself." Ilya read that one out loud and then looked up. "I don't like that you highlighted that one, Shane Hollander. I hope it's because you thought it was a well-written line and not because you believe it to be true about yourself."

Without giving Shane a chance to respond, he looked back down and started flipping through pages again. Shane looked at the counter, trying to decide if he wanted to respond anyway.

"I thought that for a while. Maybe not as much anymore."

Ilya looked up again and turned the book upside down on the counter, saving his spot. He looked over at the front door and glass windows, then back at Shane. He brought one hand up to cup the side of his face, brushing a thumb across his cheek. "There is nothing wrong with you."

Shane nodded against Ilya's hand.

“I mean it, Shane Hollander. And you did say I was one of the wisest people you know, yes?”

Shane laughed. “Yeah. I did. Still true.”

“Then you must listen to me. I *am* very wise.”

Ilya dropped his hand and picked up the book again. Shane’s mind was still there, though. He thought about every time he’d been with a woman and it didn’t feel right so he told himself he just hadn’t met the right one yet...that was all it was. And every time he noticed a man in that way, he told himself it was a fluke because that would be wrong. He wasn’t gay. Couldn’t be gay. *Well, Shane Hollander; he thought in a voice with a suspiciously Russian-like accent, seems like you are very gay since you’re here, waiting around for a hot guy to take you upstairs and have very gay sex with you.*

Shane bit his lip and let out a small breathy laugh. Ilya looked up and raised his eyebrows.

“Sorry. Just thinking.”

“Want to share?” Ilya asked as he continued reading pages.

“Oh, it was nothing. Anything else in there of interest?”

Ilya kept turning pages. Then he read aloud: “*I wondered what that was like, to hold someone’s hand. I bet you could sometimes find all of the mysteries of the universe in someone’s hand.*” He looked up from the book. “I like this one too.”

Shane nodded. “It was sweet.”

“A very YA book kind of line. But effective. Everything felt so big and important at that age, hm? Little things felt like the end of the world or the best day of your life.”

“Yeah,” Shane said. He knew what Ilya meant, but he’d only really had those feelings about one person in particular back then. A teammate on a junior league team when he was 16. Not until many years later, recent years, did he acknowledge why. But he always remembered everything that teammate said to him, word for word, exactly what he was wearing every time they hung out, replaying it all in his head at night, in quiet moments, and the day he’d moved away, Shane had felt like his chest was cracked into a million pieces. He remembered his mom telling him not to be too upset, that he’d make new friends. But it had never been about that. Sometimes he wondered if his friend had felt the same way. It had seemed like it at times, now that Shane knew to look for it, but he hadn’t even realized what he was feeling then, so it’s not like he would have noticed. Maybe if he could have read Ari and Dante’s story then. Maybe then he would have known.

“Did you like the book overall?” Ilya asked, startling him out of his own thoughts.

“Yeah, I liked it a lot. Kind of sad.”

Ilya nodded. “But hopeful in the end. Do you want another book? Besides the ones upstairs, I mean.”

“Sure, if you have something.”

Ilya looked at him and rubbed a finger along his chin, like he was thinking. “There is one. I think you should read it, but it is...not the easiest read. Just take it with you, and you can decide, okay? No rush. Maybe save it for a while.”

Shane blinked at him. “Okay, sure.”

Ilya reached beneath the counter and picked up a worn book. He’d clearly been planning to give it to him if it was already there and waiting. Shane took the book. *A Single Man* by Christopher Isherwood.

“There is a movie too. Maybe one day,” Ilya said. “Like I said, no rush. Just hold onto it for however long you want.”

Shane nodded. The book felt heavy in his hand. Ilya pulled out his phone and glanced at the screen. “I’m going to start closing up.”

While Ilya did what he needed to, Shane took a seat in one of the armchairs at the back to get out of his way. Vanya wandered over and jumped in his lap, keeping him occupied until Ilya turned the lock on the front door and flipped the light switch, sending the store into near-darkness.

“Ready?” Ilya asked, opening the door to the stairs.

“Yep.” Shane stood and scooped Vanya up to carry him upstairs like the demanding little brat he was, book wedged under one arm.

Upstairs, Ilya said, “Make yourself at home.” Then he disappeared down the hall for a few minutes. Shane sat on the couch with Vanya, who rolled onto his back for a minute, looking up at Shane with his big, yellow eyes. Shane thought he remembered reading that cats didn’t show their belly unless they trusted you.

“We’re pretty good friends now, huh?” he asked the cat, gently scratching his head. Vanya purred.

Ilya walked back into the room and shook his head, a smile creeping onto his face. He sat on the couch next to Shane, not leaving much space between them, and turned on the TV.

“Want to watch something?” he asked.

“I’m good with anything,” Shane said. “I don’t even know what’s popular right now.” He hadn’t been watching much TV lately.

“There is a new season of *The Walking Dead*. You ever watch that?”

“I think I’ve seen the first three seasons.”

Ilya nodded. “I think it’s up to seven now.” He scrolled through netflix. “How about this?” He had *Stranger Things* pulled up. “It came out a few months ago.”

“I haven’t watched it yet, but a couple of the guys on my team love it.”

“Want to watch the first episode?”

“Sure,” Shane said, settling more comfortably on the couch, which put him conveniently closer to Ilya.

The show was engaging enough that Shane watched with interest and didn’t spend the entire time focused on the amount of space not between them, or the way Ilya’s arm was first draped across the back of the couch and then drifted down to his shoulders, eventually pulling him in closer. By the time the episode was over, Shane was fully leaning against Ilya’s side, Vanya still curled up on his lap. It was so cozy, he almost didn’t want to move. But Ilya didn’t play the next episode, and when he leaned forward to set the remote down, he twisted so he was facing Shane.

All at once, the air between them was thick and charged, and Shane wasn’t worried about being too cozy to move anymore. He wanted to move. Ilya leaned in slowly, letting Shane drive once again. Shane was fine with it. He leaned in and captured Ilya’s lips, welcoming the warm, familiar shape of them. Ilya pulled him closer, and Vanya was clearly very offended at this turn of events because he quickly got up, hissed, and fled. Shane pulled back to watch him go, making sure he was okay.

“He is dramatic, pay him no attention,” Ilya said. “Pay attention to me.”

Shane laughed and leaned back in, but he let his lips land on Ilya’s jaw this time, and kissed his way down his neck. He mostly wanted to see if it was something Ilya liked, and he very quickly decided that yes, Ilya did like that. He wrapped his arms around Shane and pulled him on top of him, a sweet, needy little moan escaping his throat as Shane kissed the side of his neck.

“Fuck,” Ilya breathed, making Shane want to keep going. He eventually found his lips again, and they kissed like that for a while, Ilya reclined on the couch, Shane on top of him. He enjoyed being able to let his weight drape over Ilya without worrying he was too heavy. He also enjoyed the way Ilya was grinding against him, hard cocks against thighs, but it wasn’t enough.

“You still want what we talked about last time?” Ilya asked. Shane was looking down at him, his face open and relaxed, eyes a little heavy lidded. He was mesmerizing.

“I still want it.”

“You have practice in the morning?”

“No, tomorrow’s a mandatory day off,” Shane said, thanking the hockey gods for that bit of scheduling luck.

Ilya smiled and pulled him down for another kiss, then said, “Bedroom?”

Shane nodded and stood up, then followed Ilya down the hall, into his bedroom, where he looked around, presumably for Vanya, before closing the door behind them. Before Shane could take another step, Ilya had a hand on the back of his neck, and their lips were crashing together again, more urgently now. Ilya's other hand was on his stomach, rucking his sweatshirt up, warm hand moving roughly against his skin. They broke off long enough for Ilya to pull his sweatshirt all the way off and toss it aside. He took a moment to rake his eyes up and down Shane's naked torso, eyes snagging briefly on the bruise on his side, before he said, "Off," and tugged at the waistband of his jeans. Shane didn't need to be told twice. He quickly got his jeans and underwear off, then his socks, and by the time he'd set them neatly on the floor, Ilya was already naked and dragging him onto the bed.

He was pushed down on his back, head against the pillows, Ilya's weight now draped over him, carefully not pressing into his bruised side, and his neck was being kissed, and he had no complaints. He just tipped his head back into the pillows and moaned as Ilya's lips found the soft skin behind his ear. Then he kissed his way down the side of Shane's neck, across his chest, stopping to nip at one of his pecs, making Shane laugh, and continued moving down, down, down, way further than Shane was expecting. Ilya ignored his hard cock and pushed his legs up.

"Okay?" he asked.

Shane was looking down the length of his body, where Ilya had shifted on the bed, so he was laying between Shane's legs. He was pretty sure he knew what Ilya was asking, and he was also pretty sure the answer was unequivocally yes. But he had to swallow hard, and words weren't coming out because this was new territory. He nodded instead. That was enough for Ilya because he ducked his head, and Shane felt himself being spread open, and then there was soft, wet heat pressing against his hole, and he moaned, let his head fall back against the pillows, and tried not to put Ilya's curls in a death grip when he threaded his fingers through them, wanting something to cling to.

"Oh fuck," he whispered. It felt better than he had even imagined. And he *had* imagined it. Several times. Another thing from the books he read under the cover of night and behind closed doors that was actually just as fucking great as they made it sound. Ilya licked at him like he was trying to get to the center of a fucking tootsie roll pop, and Shane was shamelessly making needy little noises and panting like he'd run a mile. His hand was curling and tightening in Ilya's hair reflexively, and he was glad Ilya seemed to like it because he couldn't stop.

Ilya's tongue alternated between quick little flicks, long flat drags, and firm pushing, and Shane was completely falling apart against him. Ilya had one hand pressed up against his left thigh, holding it up, and Shane had been holding his other leg up with just sheer strength, but even that was failing him, so he switched which hand he had in Ilya's hair and held his other leg by the back of his knee. Then he let himself fall into pure bliss for a while, the noise of Ilya's mouth against him a little obscene and a lot hot, and the warm, pulsing waves of pleasure emanating from his asshole were rolling over his oversensitive skin, pushing him closer and closer to the edge.

“Ilya,” he said finally, when he wasn’t sure how much more he could take without coming. And he did not want to come that way.

Ilya lifted his head, chin shiny with spit, lips red and a little puffier than usual, and Shane wanted nothing more than to have them against his...where they just came from be damned. Ilya seemed to read his mind because he wiped his mouth and crawled up Shane’s body, settling on top of him again. He slowly leaned down, giving Shane time to turn away, and when he didn’t, Ilya kissed him, slow and sweet, tongue sweeping into his mouth.

Ilya shifted off of him without breaking the kiss, and Shane heard him opening the nightstand drawer, then a cap clicking. Ilya finally pulled back enough to slick his fingers and drop his hand between Shane’s legs. Then he was back, kissing him while he pushed one finger against his hole. It slipped in easier today, his previous tongue workout having primed him well. Shane still moaned into his mouth when that finger curled up, sending a shockwave through him that had his whole body nearly arching off the bed.

“It’s okay?” Ilya asked, hovering close to his face.

Shane huffed a laugh. “Yes. It’s definitely okay.”

“Good,” Ilya said with a smile and then leaned down to kiss him again, pushing another finger into his hole at the same time he pushed his tongue into Shane’s mouth, swallowing down the groan and the following noise of pleasure. Ilya’s fingers were stretching him now, he could feel them moving apart along with the in and out movement that was rhythmically pressing against his prostate. Shane had to tear his lips away from Ilya’s and breathe, the sensations overwhelming.

“One more,” Ilya said, and Shane felt a third finger push into him. The stretch burned a little with that one, and the pressure was enough that he had to breathe through it. Ilya was watching his face intently, his eyes moving rapidly back and forth, his lips parted in concentration. “Okay?”

Shane nodded, the worst of it passing quickly, and then it felt mostly good again. Ilya leaned down to kiss him, this time the column of his throat, pressing soft open-mouthed kisses there, dragging his tongue against the side of his neck and drawing a soft moan from Shane’s throat. Between that and his fingers, Shane’s body was melting, his skin so hot and sensitive, every drag of Ilya’s tongue, every place their naked skin touched, felt like it had a direct line to his so far untouched cock.

Ilya finally slowly pulled his fingers out and reached behind him to grab a condom. He rolled it on and added more lube, and Shane watched, suddenly very aware of what was about to happen. And where the exceptionally large cock in front of him was about to go.

Ilya must have noticed where his thoughts had slipped because he stilled and looked at Shane, those sea-deep eyes moving rapidly again.

“You still want to? You can change your mind anytime.”

Shane definitely still wanted to. If he was being honest, he had maybe never wanted anything more. He had wanted to win games and cups and be the best, but this was a different kind of want. Deep and personal, like it was coming from somewhere he had never even known existed before meeting Ilya. And he felt a little like he might die if he didn't have Ilya Rozanov inside him soon.

He nodded, maybe a little too rapidly.

"You are thinking very hard. I can see it here," Ilya said, and he reached up to smooth his thumb between Shane's brows, pressing the furrow there and rubbing softly in small circles. "Tell me."

"I'm fine. Just...getting in my head a little. I want to, though. I really do."

Ilya moved his thumb across Shane's forehead and down his temple, then brushed it softly along his cheekbone, his eyes staying on Shane's.

"Nothing to be nervous about here. Nothing to worry about." He leaned down to press a soft, chaste kiss to his lips. "Just you and me here. You don't have to be the famous Shane Hollander, smiling for cameras. You can be just Shane." He bent down again, this time kissing the sensitive spot below his ear and leaving his lips there, voice going so low and quiet. "My Shane."

Shane shuddered, his whole body suddenly warm and tingly again, even though he was barely being touched. He let out a sharp breath, like whatever hesitations or nerves had been there before were forcefully expelled. *My Shane*. Ilya had an unreadable expression on his face, like maybe he hadn't meant to say that. Or like maybe he had.

"I know."

Ilya nodded and moved on top of him again, pushing his legs up. "Tell me if you want to stop, okay?"

"I will." But he knew he wouldn't want to.

Ilya lined himself up, and the feeling of him there, the blunt head of his cock pushing gently, was enough to make Shane close his eyes in anticipation and suck in a breath.

"Hey," Ilya whispered, almost against his lips. "Look at me."

Shane opened his eyes, and at the same time, Ilya pushed into him, making him gasp a little, head dropping back against the pillows. Ilya kissed his exposed neck, still pushing further in, giving Shane something else to focus on. He took his time, stopping to let Shane adjust, then pushing again, stopping, pushing, until he was finally fully seated.

"Is it okay?" Ilya asked, voice strained.

Shane nodded, throat not working enough to use words. Ilya pressed their foreheads together, mouths open and sharing breath but not touching. Ilya pulled out just a little, then pushed back in slowly, the overwhelming pressure starting to ease little by little. Ilya closed the space

between their lips, and Shane leaned into it, sucking on Ilya's bottom lip for a second, then letting Ilya's tongue push past them. He was starting to thrust more forcefully, and it was starting to feel good. Really good. Shane moaned into his mouth and then let go of his lips.

"Oh fuck." His voice was breathy, and his body was on fire, and Ilya was watching him with his intense gaze again, but it was soft and worried and full of desire and Shane could hardly keep his eyes there because it felt so big and Ilya's cock was brushing over that spot on every thrust and Shane felt like his body was going to fly apart. He grasped at Ilya's back, probably digging in too hard, but he couldn't stop, had to hang on to something. To Ilya.

"Still okay?"

"Yes, fuck," he gritted out, not finding anything more eloquent to say, still barely finding any words at all as Ilya increased his speed and fucked him harder. Every thrust felt better and better, and Shane wanted to pull Ilya in closer. He managed to get a hand on the back of his neck and pulled him into a kiss that neither of them could hold for long because they were panting into each other's mouths.

"You feel so good," Ilya whispered against his lips. "Fuck, Shane."

Shane.

He lost track of time. His body was nothing but nerve endings and electricity and pleasure. The room was filled with the slap of sweaty skin against sweaty skin and matching moans and loud breaths. Ilya was so careful, checking in either verbally or with those eyes that always saw too much, but he was also fucking him like he was 200 lbs of muscle who could take it, and Shane definitely wanted to take it. His orgasm hit him almost out of nowhere, cock still untouched. He felt the warm tingly pulse spreading in his groin, balls tightening, his whole body going taut, clenching and arching, and then he was coming, cock spurting between them. He barely had time to see Ilya looking between them before he screwed his eyes shut, vision going almost spotty, and then Ilya was slamming into him a few more times before his hips stuttered and stilled, and he let himself collapse heavily on top of Shane.

It took Shane a moment to come back to himself, and then he was wrapping his arms around Ilya's back, feeling the sweat-slick skin, and wishing he could stay here like this forever. Ilya was breathing hard against his neck, then picked his head up to look at Shane.

"Are you okay?"

Shane nodded, a smile stretching his lips. "Definitely okay. Fuck."

Ilya smiled back and leaned down to kiss him, and it was almost better than the hungry kisses they'd shared before. Soft and slow and sweet. When Ilya pulled back again, Shane reached up to brush a sweaty curl off his forehead.

"Do you need to leave?" Ilya asked, running a thumb lightly along his cheekbone again. "Or do you want to take a shower and watch more TV? Or read."

"I don't need to leave."

Ilya leaned down and kissed him lazily again for a while, bodies still connected. Eventually he slipped out and sat up to tie off the condom. "I don't have a big fancy shower, but we might both fit," he said, getting off the bed and holding out a hand to pull Shane up. Shane groaned, feeling the ache of what they'd just done.

"Okay?"

Shane nodded. He was used to soreness, and this was much more welcome than what he was usually dealing with. Almost as if he read his mind, Ilya ran a hand along the sickly looking bruise on his side, but he didn't say anything.

Shane followed him down the hall into the bathroom and then into the tub once Ilya had the water going. It was a normal size tub with a showerhead. They fit, but only one of them could really be under the water at a time. Ilya nudged him under the spray and then soaped up a washcloth and ran it up and down Shane's stomach, washing off the cum that had started to dry there. Shane wanted to tell him it was unnecessary and he could wash himself off, but he didn't really want to. It was nice. He'd never taken a shower with anyone before. Not like this. And he did not allow his eyes to wander in locker room showers...not that he'd want to anyway. But here, he could look his fill.

"You must work out a lot," Shane said.

"Compared to you? No. But I try to keep it up. Turn around."

Shane turned, his back to Ilya. He ran the washcloth up and down his back, then lower, pushing between his cheeks where he could still feel lube and sweat. It was very intimate, but considering where Ilya's tongue had been earlier...

"This okay?" Ilya asked.

Shane nodded. When he was done, Ilya wrapped his arms around him from the back and pulled Shane against his chest, pressing his lips to his neck. Shane tilted his head, giving him more space, and Ilya took it, kissing his way down the curve of his shoulder.

Eventually they switched positions so Ilya could wash off properly, and Shane took the washcloth from him and returned the favor, enjoying every brush of his hand against Ilya's perfect skin and hard muscles. He took his time, letting his fingers trace his abs and his pecs and the v-lines of his pelvis. He paused before he got to his cock, looking up at Ilya's face. He was watching Shane with a look that was somewhere between hungry and soft, and it made Shane's blood heat again. Ilya just gave him a small nod, and Shane continued what he was doing until they were both squeaky clean.

The shower had been almost as intimate as the sex, and Shane wondered what that meant, if anything. Ilya grabbed them each a towel to dry off, and then they went back to his bedroom. Vanya was sitting on the bed, tail flicking.

"Shoo," Ilya said, but his voice was soft and affectionate. "You weren't invited."

Vanya looked up at him and then lay down on his side, stretching out with front and back legs. Ilya shook his head.

“You want to watch TV?” Ilya grabbed a clean pair of boxer briefs while Shane picked his up off the floor. “Or we can read.”

“Reading sounds nice. I didn’t bring a book, though.”

“Maybe we can read mine.”

Ilya pulled the top cover on the bed down, hiding the wet spot and revealing neat, clean sheets underneath. Vanya stood when the covers came down too close to him, walked up to the pillows, and settled down on Ilya’s side.

“Is it the book you were reading last night?” Shane asked, climbing back into the bed beside him.

“Can be, if you want. Or maybe a different Dostoevsky.”

“Sure.”

Ilya grabbed a book off the nightstand. It was a very worn paperback, the spine so creased that the text there was no longer readable. But on the front: The Brothers Karamazov.

“This one is a favorite,” Ilya said. He put an arm around Shane, pushed it under his neck, and pulled him in closer so his head was lying on Ilya’s shoulder. He opened the book with his other hand. “Want me to read out loud?”

“Yeah. Is that weird? I’d like it.”

“Good with me.” He brought the book closer to the arm trapped under Shane’s head so he could flip the pages, then moved it back to his other side when he found what he was looking for. He started to read. *“You must know that there is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome and good for life in the future than some good memory, especially a memory of childhood, of home. People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man carries many such memories with him into life, he is safe to the end of his days, and if one has only one good memory left in one’s heart, even that may sometime be the means of saving us.”*

Shane’s head lifted automatically, turning to look up at Ilya. “One good memory. That’s where the name comes from?”

Ilya nodded. “Yes. And one of the brothers is named Ivan. Vanya is a diminutive of Ivan.”

Shane gave a soft laugh. “Wow. This book is important to you.”

“It is, yes.”

“Read more.” Then Shane added, “Please.”

Ilya flipped through the pages again until he landed on one that Shane could see had highlighted lines and writing in the margins, but it was in Cyrillic. Ilya started reading: *“Above all, avoid lies, all lies, especially the lie to yourself. Keep watch on your own lie and examine it every hour, every minute. And avoid contempt, both of others and of yourself: what seems bad to you in yourself is purified by the very fact that you have noticed it in yourself. And avoid fear, though fear is simply the consequence of every lie. Never be frightened at your own faintheartedness in attaining love, and meanwhile do not even be very frightened by your own bad acts.”*

That one hit all kinds of deep, little crevices in his brain. Shane wanted to hear it again. He especially wanted to hear it again in Ilya’s low, accented voice, but that was also having a decidedly distracting effect.

“Can I read that one again?”

Ilya handed him the book. Shane read the passage, letting each line settle into him, saving them to examine later. Then Ilya’s hand was running through his hair and making him simultaneously sleepy and turned on again. He handed the book back to Ilya and yawned.

“Tired?” Ilya asked.

“Just relaxed, I think.”

“Mm, good. You can stay if you want.”

“Stay?” Shane asked, his voice giving away the immediate internal conflict that had erupted

Ilya shrugged lightly. “Why not? It will only take you 10 minutes to walk home in the morning, right?”

“Yeah.” That was true. And he wanted to stay. He wanted it so bad his chest ached at the thought of getting out of this comfortable bed and going back out into the cold Boston night and returning to his empty apartment. But that also probably meant he shouldn’t stay. This was the slipperiest of slopes.

But then Ilya used one finger to tip his chin up and kissed him, and Shane’s brain went into system failure and he couldn’t conjure up any reason why he should leave. Hadn’t he denied himself the things he wanted for long enough? Hadn’t he wasted enough time?

“Okay,” he said when Ilya pulled back.

As if he heard and understood, Vanya got up from the other side of Ilya’s pillow and walked over him and stopped in the little space between their legs. He looked up at them for a moment, then lay down, curled up, and seemingly went to sleep.

“I guess he’s cool with it,” Shane said, smiling at the stamp of approval.

“Yes, he is also very wise. When he’s not being an asshole.”

“So,” Shane said, snuggling into Ilya’s side again. “Will you read more of your book?”

“As you wish.” Ilya flipped a few pages and then started to read again: *“But I always liked side-paths, little dark back-alleys behind the main road—there one finds adventures and surprises, and precious metal in the dirt.”*

Chapter End Notes

Books mentioned in this chapter:

Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe by Benjamin Alire Sáenz

A Single Man by Christopher Isherwood

The Brothers Karamazov by Fyodor Dostoevsky*

White Nights by Fyodor Dostoevsky

*If you look up any of the Dostoevsky quotes included throughout this fic, you may notice they differ a little in wording depending on where you view them. There are variations between different translations. For The Brothers Karamazov, I'm mostly using the Constance Garnett translation, but occasionally pulling from a different one (look...Ilya would be familiar with them all). Additionally, both Dostoyevsky and Dostoevsky are accepted spellings and also depend on which translation or what source you're looking at (I've tried to be consistent now and use Dostoevsky, but if you ever see me switch, just know it's fineee).

Several people asked for a list of all the books in one place, so I made a doc! I'll try to keep up with it.

[Book list doc](#)

Chapter 8: Somebody (Somebody)

Chapter Notes

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

Shane didn't say Ilya's name very often. Never while they were texting, nor even while they talked in person. He'd said it the first time they met. He'd said it a couple of times during sex now. That made perfect sense. People didn't go around addressing each other by their names after every sentence...that was reserved for books and movies. Calling Shane by his full name was a bit...one he liked very much, because it was a good name that tasted like honey on his tongue, and it also had the very desirable effect of making Shane's whole body react. But Ilya didn't need to hear his name in Shane's mouth. He didn't. And yet, for some annoying, very unnecessary reason, Ilya fell asleep curled around him, thinking about two things: the way Shane had said Ilya's name in his breathy voice full of desire earlier, and that he really needed a fucking cigarette. He woke up thinking about those things, too.

They were in nearly the same position they'd fallen asleep in, Shane on his side, back to Ilya, Ilya spooned around him, one arm draped over his waist. It was a decidedly pleasant way to wake up, and Ilya tried not to move, didn't want the moment to end. He wanted to run his fingers through the messy black hair, along the warm, smooth skin, wanted to see what Shane Hollander looked like first thing in the morning. And he cursed himself for wanting. Wanting never ended well. But maybe this would be the only time, and if it was, he would take it all in, sear it into his mind. Maybe Shane would wake up and regret everything. Maybe he wouldn't, and he'd finally go out and find someone of his own status to be with. That seemed unlikely. Ilya had a feeling the closet door was made of titanium. And yet, he couldn't help but think this thing would end sooner than later.

*I had rehearsed losing him not just to ward off suffering by taking it in small doses
beforehand, but, as all superstitious people do,
to see if my willingness to accept the very worst might not induce fate to soften its blow.*

Shane shifted and stretched, then turned over onto his back, eyes blinking slowly. The smile that landed on his face when he saw Ilya was almost too much to take in at 7am.

"Hey," Shane said, sleepy voice even more endearing than Ilya expected.

"Good morning." Ilya propped himself up on one elbow and brushed some of the stray strands of hair off Shane's forehead and nearly snatched his hand back when he realized what he was doing. "How are you feeling?"

Shane stretched again, just the hint of a wince pulling at his features. "Good. What time is it?"

"A few minutes after 7. You have to be somewhere?"

"No, not anytime soon."

“Want coffee? Breakfast?” Ilya asked. He ran his hand down Shane’s stomach, appreciating again the hard-earned definition in his abs, but not stopping there. “Or maybe this?” Shane’s cock was half-hard under the thin fabric of his boxer briefs. Ilya lightly ran his fingers along it, watching it swell beneath them. He looked up at Shane’s face, his lips already parted. He just nodded, and Ilya continued what he was doing, still lightly teasing.

Shane’s eyes were flicking between Ilya’s hand and his face, and Ilya wanted to kiss him. He leaned down, hesitated for a second, but Shane didn’t protest. He pressed their lips together, morning breath forgotten as soon as tongues were involved. Shane moaned into his mouth, and Ilya moved his hand more firmly, already feeling a wet spot forming under his thumb. He stopped long enough to free Shane’s cock from the material, figuring he might still want to be able to wear it after Ilya was done.

“So, do you want to stay for breakfast?” Ilya asked.

Shane nodded while Ilya wrapped his fingers around his cock, pulling a low groan out of him that went to Ilya’s own cock.

“What does Shane Hollander usually eat for breakfast?” He was having too much fun trying to keep Shane’s attention while he stroked him, smearing precome with his thumb and tightening his grip.

“Uh...” Shane started and then looked down at Ilya’s hand again. “Just um...anything is fine. Protein shakes or whole grain toast and uh—”

Ilya bent down to lick the tip of his cock, knowing that would probably derail the conversation. Shane’s answer devolved into a moan, and Ilya took him more fully into his mouth, sinking down to meet his hand. When Shane’s hand landed on the back of his head, threaded through his curls, tightened enough to pinch, Ilya moaned too. It didn’t take long before Shane was coming in his mouth, and it didn’t escape Ilya’s notice that he said Ilya’s name while he did it. If his mouth hadn’t been full, he would have smiled, and he was glad he couldn’t.

When he was done, Ilya leaned in to kiss him again. Shane’s hand made its way into Ilya’s boxer briefs, but before he could do much, Vanya jumped onto the bed and started meowing at an alarming volume.

“Ugh.” Ilya let his head drop back dramatically. “You are ruining my life, cat.”

Shane laughed. “Is he always this loud?”

“In the morning, yes. Until I feed him.”

Ilya reluctantly got up, and Shane followed.

“While you do that, I’m gonna...” Shane pointed to the bathroom.

Ilya went in the kitchen, trying not to trip over the black blur spinning through his legs and still meowing his annoying little head off.

“Here,” he said, pouring the measured out food into Vanya’s bowl. “Now please leave me alone so I can get my dick sucked.” Ilya washed his hands and then went back down the hallway, nearly running into Shane coming out the bathroom.

“You want breakfast now?” Ilya asked, figuring he could at least be a polite host.

“Yeah, but after,” Shane said, dropping a hand to Ilya’s still half-hard cock.

“Well, who am I to argue.” Ilya walked back into his bedroom and flopped down on the bed. He even pulled his boxer briefs off while Shane climbed on after him.

Shane wrapped a hand around him and started stroking slowly, and Ilya’s cock was back to fully hard immediately. Why did it even feel that good? Then Shane leaned down and took him into his mouth, and once again, Ilya wondered why it felt so good. He hadn’t been lying when he told Shane he was good at it that first time. But only because he was very enthusiastic, and he figured out the teeth thing pretty quick. It wasn’t the best head Ilya had ever had *skill-wise*, but it was definitely, for some reason he really didn’t want to examine, still the best head he’d ever had.

He watched the perfect red lips move up and down his length, the brown eyes disappearing under long lashes, the impressive back muscles shifting under an expanse of golden skin. He let his fingers run through Shane’s soft hair and then drift down to wrap lightly around the stretch of neck exposed to him. It was, in a word, perfect. Ilya sighed and leaned against the headboard, his body surrendering to Shane Hollander’s mouth.

“Fuck,” he breathed as one of Shane’s hands landed on his chest, thumb rubbing against his nipple. Shane’s fingers kept moving, exploring, and Ilya was happy to let him. He figured Shane had not allowed himself to touch many men this way, and he was enjoying the greedy way he was grasping at Ilya’s chest and then his stomach and then stroking down the trail of hair beneath his navel.

Ilya could feel his orgasm approaching, warm pleasure rippling through him. He tried to pull Shane off, but he resisted.

“Shane, I’m going to come,” he said, voice strained. Shane still didn’t move, and Ilya certainly wasn’t going to stop him if that’s what he wanted to do. Instead, he made sure he didn’t push any further down Shane’s throat when he came, spilling himself on his tongue and doing his best to keep his eyes open even while white-hot pleasure pulsed through his cock and his groin and his entire body, pushing a near-embarrassing moan from his throat. Shane swallowed around him, but some of it dripped back down his cock. Ilya didn’t care. It was fucking hot, watching Shane Hollander suck him off and then attempt to swallow, and that image would stay in his head for a long time.

When Shane finally sat up, Ilya pulled him on top of him until he could reach his mouth, mashing their lips together a little frantically, considering they’d both already come. But he could taste himself in Shane’s mouth, tongue pushing in for more.

“This is nice,” Shane said when their lips parted, and then he looked a little startled at the admission. Ilya was startled too.

“Yes.” It was true, and he didn’t want to leave Shane hanging. “Breakfast?” They needed out of this bed before Ilya said anything stupid.

“Sure.”

They both put more clothes on and made their way to the kitchen, Vanya sitting on one of the chairs by the table. Shane went over to pet him, and the irritating little dictator purred.

“I have eggs, fruit, a ripe avocado...” Ilya said, looking in the fridge and on the counter. “I have some whole grain bread in the freezer.” He turned on his coffee machine. “And I can make you coffee.”

Shane looked up at him, slight surprise on his face. “What are you having?”

“Hm, maybe avocado toast and an egg. Blueberries. And coffee. Want to split the avocado?”

“Yeah, that’d be great. I’ll have the same.”

Ilya nodded. “Can you get the bread out of the freezer?”

Shane opened the freezer and dug around for the bread while Ilya cracked a couple of eggs into a pan. It was all very domestic. They moved around each other with ease, even though Ilya’s kitchen was not very big. And Vanya kept making himself a nuisance by walking through their legs. Eventually they both had toast with avocado, an egg, fruit, and mugs of coffee, with containers of cream and sugar set in the middle of the table.

“Thank you for this,” Shane said, sipping his woefully under-creamed and under-sugared coffee.

“I would not fuck you and let you spend the night and then not make you breakfast,” Ilya said, delighting at the way Shane’s cheeks went pink.

“I appreciate it.”

“What are you up to today on your day off?” Ilya asked between bites.

“Not much. I’ll work out, review some tape. And we have an evening flight out to Minnesota.”

Ilya nodded slowly. “You play there tomorrow?”

“Yeah, and then we come back Saturday morning. Playing Winnipeg here on Sunday.”

“Ugh.” Ilya made an exaggerated noise of disgust. “Hockey schedules sound exhausting.”

“Yeah, kind of. I don’t mind usually. Playoffs is when it gets really bad.”

“And you are always in the playoffs.”

Shane smiled. “Most of the time, yeah.” He took another sip of coffee and then said, “What about you? Do you have to work all day?”

“Yes, I’ll have the store open from 9-8. Though I do close for a lunch break.”

“Is Mallory your only employee?”

Ilya nodded. “Right now. I will maybe hire someone else for the holidays, just to make it easier on us. Mallory works most Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. Occasionally Thursday if I need her or if she wants more hours.”

“That still seems like a lot for you.”

“I guess it is. But I have the mornings to myself, and I close the store early enough to go out and do anything I want.”

Shane licked his lips and nodded. “You go out a lot?”

A loaded question, Ilya was sure. “Sometimes, yes.”

“Will you be out tonight?”

“No, not tonight. Is there a reason you are asking?”

“No roommate tonight. I think we get in around 8 or 9 Boston time,” Shane said. He was looking down at his last bite of toast as he spoke.

“You want to text?”

“Sure. Or even talk on the phone. But if you’re busy, that’s okay.”

Ilya grinned. “Not too busy to talk to Shane Hollander.”

Shane smiled and turned his head to the side, away from Ilya, before he looked back again. “You said you have books to give me too, right?”

“Yep. Maybe you can read one of them to me over the phone.”

Shane huffed a quiet, breathy laugh. “I don’t know if I’m up to that. But maybe.”

“I had my tongue and my cock in your asshole last night, I think we can survive some erotic fiction, don’t you?”

Shane dropped the piece of toast he was about to eat. “Wow,” he said softly, smiling and rubbing his forehead.

Ilya gripped his chin lightly and leaned across the corner of the table to kiss him. “Nothing to be embarrassed about here, remember?” Then he kissed him once more before leaning back in his chair. “You can call me anytime.”

Shane nodded, his eyes flicking up to Ilya's and then away again. Ilya was used to that by now, and he savored the eye contact when he got it. Which did seem to be increasing still, slowly but surely.

"Any regrets?" Ilya asked, just in case. He figured it was just Shane being shy.

Shane's eyes snapped up to meet his, and Ilya relaxed. "No, not at all."

"Good." Ilya got up and took their empty plates to the sink "What time do you need to leave?"

"I'm not in a rush, but I don't want to keep you from anything. Like getting ready to open the store."

"The nice thing about being my own boss is that I can do whatever I want. But I don't usually do much before opening anyway. I'll go down a couple minutes before 9." Ilya looked at his phone. It was only 8. "Want to come look at books now?"

"Yeah." Shane got up and followed him into the living room.

"Sit." Ilya pointed at the end of the couch closest to the bookshelf. Shane sat with no argument. Ilya picked up the small stack of books he'd ordered, then sat next to Shane, leaving no space between their thighs. "I have not read any of these, but they are highly recommended by people on the internet," Ilya said with the appropriate amount of skepticism.

Shane snorted. "Well, then they must be good."

"Precisely. So...we have two that have mystery elements, which you seem to like, yes? And then one is sports." Ilya handed Shane the books and watched him take in the cover and title for each. "They're indie published. That's why the covers are so bad."

Shane nodded. "I've read a bunch. But none of these."

"For this one," Ilya said, picking up *Fatal Shadows* by Josh Lanyon, "it seems that the series gets better as it goes, and people like the hero, Adrien English, very much." Then Ilya picked up the next one, *Cut & Run* by Madeleine Urban and Abigail Roux. "This one has some mixed reviews about the writing, but people seem to enjoy the whole series." The cover was pretty plain and unappealing, white with a knife, but Ilya figured that was preferable to half naked men for Shane. "And lastly, the sports one. It has good reviews. Sounded...relevant maybe." He picked up the last one, *The Locker Room* by Amy Lane.

"Thank you," Shane said, looking at him, face very close. "For doing this, I mean. You didn't have to."

"I don't mind. I got two copies of each." Now it was Ilya's turn to look away, feeling slightly self-conscious. "So I can read them with you. If you want me to."

When he looked back, Shane was smiling at him, cute and shy and much too kissable. And luckily, Shane had the same idea because he leaned in, hand going up to cradle Ilya's jaw, and

kissed him. "I would love that," Shane said against his lips. Ilya took the books and set them on the coffee table and pulled Shane on his lap, until he was straddling Ilya.

"Which one should we start with?" Ilya asked before pulling him down into another kiss.

"One of the mysteries." More kissing, hungrier and messier, and Ilya was getting ready to ask Shane if he wanted to go back to bed for a bit when he felt something rub the back of his head, and since one of Shane's hands was on his jaw and the other palming his cock...

"Vanya," Ilya hissed, just as Vanya stepped down from the back of the couch onto his shoulder, his annoying face appearing right next to Ilya's. "We do not need a third."

Shane laughed and moved his hand from Ilya's jaw to Vanya's head. "Are you jealous?"

"Are you talking to me or the cat?"

"The cat," Shane laughed. "Maybe he doesn't like that I'm taking your attention away from him."

"Hm. Probably the opposite. He is trying to get to you."

"Oh. Well, I'm right here, buddy." Shane kept petting Vanya, whose front paws were still on Ilya's shoulder.

"Excuse me," Ilya said, wiggling his shoulder until Vanya moved. "That's enough of that."

"Now you're jealous," Shane said, grinning down at him.

"Yes. I was in the middle of something very important here."

"Which was?"

"I was going to take you back to bed and fuck you again before you leave."

Shane's mouth dropped open, then he nodded.

"Are you sore?" Ilya asked, dropping one hand to Shane's ass and massaging through the material of his pants.

"A little."

"Okay. Better not. We don't really have time for that anyway."

"Wait, uh..." Shane trailed off. Ilya wanted him to say it, whatever it was, so he waited. "I do want to go back to bed. Even if it's just for a few minutes."

Ilya looked at the clock on the wall. "I have half an hour until I need to be downstairs. Plenty of time to make you come again." Then he leaned in and kissed the half-embarrassed smile off Shane's face before standing them both up and dragging Shane to the bedroom. He closed the door behind them.

By the time they'd both come again, quickly using hands and mouths, Shane was lying naked on Ilya's bed, looking blissed out and a little too much like he belonged there. Ilya ran a hand up and down his very impressive biceps, up his shoulder, across his pecs, enjoying all that Shane Hollander, captain of the Boston Raiders, had to offer. Ilya always enjoyed men that matched him in size, but they were often overly big or disproportionate in some muscle groups, the difference between a body built to be used and one built to be shown off. Shane's was certainly built to be used, but Ilya would happily be the recipient of him showing it off too.

"I should probably go," Shane said eventually, eyes still fluttering as Ilya's hand continued its journey across his body.

Ilya nodded. "I should get downstairs."

They both got dressed, eyes lingering on each other the entire time. Back in the living room, Ilya picked up the three books from the coffee table and *A Single Man* from where Shane had set it the night before.

"I'll grab you a bag downstairs," he said, handing them to Shane.

"I need to pay for them still."

Ilya shrugged. Yes, that would be more helpful, though he would happily give Shane any books he wanted. But since Shane was a multimillionaire and Ilya sometimes wondered how much longer his store would last in the age of ebooks and Amazon, he wasn't going to argue.

Vanya followed them downstairs and went straight to his spot in the window to catch some sunlight. Ilya rang up the books and swiped Shane's card.

"So, I'll call you tonight?" There was a lilt at the end.

"Yes, call me. We already went over this."

Shane nodded. "Thanks for having me over again."

"And is Shane Hollander ever going to invite me over?" Ilya asked. He didn't actually care. Maybe a little. It was the principle of the thing more than the actual thing.

Shane swallowed and looked at him a second too long before answering. "Sure, yeah."

"Mm. You're worried someone will see."

Shane shrugged. "Maybe. I mean, I do want you to come over. I have a private stairwell up to my apartment, at the back of the building. But um...I'm on the 8th floor. If you don't mind the steps."

Ilya laughed. "I can handle some stairs." He gestured at himself. "I do work out, remember?"

"I know. The stairwell always seemed like a better idea in my head. Saying it out loud...but yeah, if you don't mind."

“I don’t. Come see.” Ilya walked down the first aisle of books and pulled Shane into a kiss, a long, deep, very satisfying kiss. “Okay, Shane Hollander. Go beat Minnesota tomorrow. Call me tonight if you have time.”

“I will. Thanks again.” Shane held up the paper bag of books. “Bye.” Ilya followed him out of the aisle and watched him stop by the front window display to give Vanya a scratch behind the ears while Ilya unlocked the glass door. Then Shane pushed it open, gave Ilya one more little wave, and disappeared down the street.

Ilya let out a long sigh and scrubbed a hand over his face. What was he even doing? What were *they* doing?

He pulled his phone out of his pocket. He had texts from friends about going out the following night, and the only thing he was worried about was whether there’d be a tv at the bar showing the Boston game. He shook his head and responded to let them know he’d be there. He ignored the fact that potentially missing one of Shane’s goals would be incredibly disappointing. Vanya was watching him from his window seat.

“Stop that. It’s nothing,” Ilya said, then got busy getting the store ready for business.

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Ilya’s phone buzzed around 9:30pm.

Shane: Free to talk?

Ilya: yes

Then his phone buzzed again.

“Hello, Shane Hollander.”

“Hi. How was your day?”

“Not bad. Sold a copy of Aristotle and Dante to a teenager who came in with his mom.”

“Oh, cool. That’s really nice.”

“Yes. How was your day?” Ilya asked as he stretched out on his couch and paused the show he’d turned on.

“Not bad. I started 11/22/63 on the flight. It’s pretty good. Not what I expected.”

“Some of Stephen King’s best books are not horror. Are you going to read anything else today?”

“I think I’ll start one of the others when we get off the phone.”

“No reading aloud?” Ilya was grinning.

“I could. I did flip through the first few chapters of Cut & Run, and there isn’t anything particularly exciting there.”

“Okay. Next time then. Let me know how far you get into it so I can read it too.”

“I’ll text you about it. But don’t feel obligated,” Shane said, but Ilya could tell he was excited.

“I don’t feel obligated. I think it will be fun.”

“Cool. Me too.”

“So. What did you call to talk about?” Ilya asked.

“Uh...nothing in particular. Just wanted to talk.”

“Miss me already?” Ilya knew he was poking something he oughtn’t be poking. He could practically hear Shane nervously swallowing through the phone.

“Would that be bad?”

Definitely shouldn’t have poked. It was like pressing on a bruise. Shouldn’t do it, knew it would hurt, did it anyway.

“No,” Ilya said honestly. “Not bad. Ready for your game tomorrow?”

“I think so. Minnesota has a good team this year. But so do we.” A pause, then, “Will you be watching?”

Ilya decided to be honest. “Maybe. I’m going out with some friends to a bar. Hopefully they will have it on the tv.”

“Oh, well, have fun with your friends. Are they school friends?”

“Yes. We try to get together at least once a month.”

“That sounds nice. What do they do now?” Shane sounded genuinely curious.

“Maria teaches at a boarding school, Philip is working on his PhD, and Saki is a writer.”

“Wow. You have smart friends.”

Ilya laughed. “Well...compared to yours, maybe. But surely hockey players aren’t all bad? I know at least one who is very smart.”

“Shut up,” Shane said, and Ilya could hear the laugh in his voice. “They’re not all bad. Marly, Cliff Marlow, is probably my best friend. He’s smart, just kind of...unserious. But get him started on music and he’ll talk your ear off. Connors is really into movies. I think he’d probably be an actor or director or something if he wasn’t playing hockey. He loves all the behind the scenes stuff.”

Ilya was nodding along. “They don’t sound too bad. I’m a little surprised.”

“Yeah? Did I surprise you?”

Ilya laughed. The understatement of the fucking century. “Yes, Shane Hollander, safe to say you have surprised me many times over.”

“In a good way?”

“Obviously. I don’t invite people into my home and then fuck them if it’s not in a good way.”

The audible intake of breath had him grinning again.

“Yeah, that’s fair. I’m glad you did.”

“Glad I invited you over? Or glad I fucked you?” Ilya smiled and bit his lip. He was going to get Shane Hollander to relax one way or another on this phone call.

“Both.”

“Hm. And are you wanting to do those things again?”

“Yes. Definitely.”

“Mhm. Tell me about it.”

“Ilya,” Shane said, and his voice was slightly whiny, slightly turned on. But he said Ilya’s name, and now Ilya was grinning again while his cock was hard and his stomach fluttered and Jesus, this was pathetic, and he didn’t care in the least.

“Shane.” First names, first names, oh how they held so much in these early days of this thing they were dancing around.

“I had a really good time last night, and I would like to do that again. When I get back, you can come over to my place if you still want to.”

“To fuck you?”

Shane snorted. “Yes. But not just that. To hang out, have dinner, watch a movie, anything.”

Ilya nodded again, even though Shane couldn’t see. It sounded nice, and Ilya wanted to. But there was the slightest pang of regret that they would always be relegated to whatever they could do inside their respective apartments. They could never go out to dinner or a concert or even a movie. Not that it mattered... Ilya did not date. Whatever they were doing, it wasn’t that. The fact that those thoughts had crossed his mind at all...

“I look forward to it.”

“You can come over Saturday if you want. We have a morning flight back, so I’ll be home by early afternoon.”

“Are you asking me?”

“Uh, yeah. Do you want to come over on Saturday?”

“Yes. Are you going to feed me?”

“Of course. Not sure if I’ll cook. But there will be food, I promise.”

“Mhm. And what else besides food?”

“We can watch something. I got a new surround sound system recently.”

“Can I see your books?”

Shane laughed. “Yeah, of course.”

“And your bed?”

Ilya imagined he was licking his lips. “Yeah, you can have a VIP tour of that.”

Ilya laughed. “Good. Then yes, I will come over on Saturday.”

“Okay. Well, I should probably go. I’ll let you know how much of this book I end up reading.”

“Please do. Goodnight, Shane Hollander.”

“Goodnight, Ilya.”

Ilya put his phone facedown on his chest, still smiling like an idiot because he got two ‘Ilyas’ out of Shane Hollander.

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Boston lost to Minnesota. It was a low scoring game, and they only lost by a point. One of their defensemen took a hard hit and was probably out for the season with what looked to be a broken clavicle. A lot of reasons to be frustrated. When Shane finally made it back to his room, the first thing he did was text Ilya.

Shane: Just wanted to say hi. Hope you’re having a good night with your friends.

Then he got in the shower and turned the water as hot as he could stand it and let it wash away some of the lingering bad mood. He dried off, toweled his hair, pulled on sweatpants and a t-shirt, and got between the stiff hotel sheets. He looked at his phone, surprised to see a text.

I.R.: I am

I.R.: sorry about your game

Shane: Thanks. Don’t want to interrupt your night. I’ll talk to you tomorrow?

I.R.: of course

I.R.: let me know what time to come over

Shane: I will.

I.R.: sweet dreams, Shane Hollander

I.R.: I hope they're about me

Shane was smiling now, his mood already improved by a ridiculous amount. Maybe that should be worrisome. A big red flag, turn back now, danger ahead. He just couldn't care right then.

Shane: Me too.

He put his phone down and picked up Cut & Run to read until he fell asleep.

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Ilya thought about going home with a woman from the bar. She'd been eyeing him half the night, and she was very much his type. When he went up to the bar by himself, she sidled up next to him and made her intentions clear. And instead, he'd returned to his friends with another round of drinks, talked and drank until midnight, then went home alone. Ilya had never spent so many consecutive nights in a row alone, now broken only by one night with Shane Hollander.

He woke on Saturday with anticipation already zipping through him, ready for another night with Shane, even if he wasn't sure Shane would let him stay over. He was just getting ready to unlock the shop's door when his phone buzzed.

Shane: "But stupidity is one of two things we see most clearly in retrospect. The other is missed chances."

Missed chances...no surprise that was something that resonated with Shane.

Ilya: enjoying 11/22/63?

Shane: Yeah, it's really good. Almost done.

Ilya: need something else?

Shane: That would be great, if you have something.

Ilya: I will

Shane: Still want to come over today?

Ilya laughed, but Shane's need for reassurance was endearing.

Ilya: yes

Shane: Anytime after 5 should be good. Just text me when you get here so I can meet you at the door. It's the one at the back of the building, all the way to the right.

Ilya: got it

Shane: Do you like Mexican food?

Ilya: yes, very much

Shane: Okay, I'll see you later. Hope you have a good day.

Ilya unlocked the door and got busy catching up on online orders and ordering stock. The holidays were fast approaching. The following week was Thanksgiving and thus Black Friday. Ilya didn't celebrate Thanksgiving unless he accepted an invitation to eat with friends, which he often did. But Black Friday had become a familiar event. This would be his third at One Good Memory. He couldn't compete with Barnes & Noble or Amazon, but he'd at least have some small discounts that would last through the weekend. It would draw in a little extra business while people were off work and trying to escape their families.

Mallory arrived a little before noon, and Ilya left her to it while he went to the storeroom to unpack stock and box up online orders. Vanya wandered in at some point and curled up on the bottom shelf between a couple of boxes. It was a pretty lowkey day overall.

Ilya didn't want to leave Mallory alone for too long, so he waited until 6 to head to Shane's.

"I'll only be 10 minutes away, so call or text me if you need anything, okay?" Ilya told Mallory. "Vanya is upstairs, just lock up on the way out."

"Sure," Mallory said, already looking down at her phone again. Ilya didn't care about that. She was great with customers when she needed to be. "I'll be fine." Mallory worked alone in the store often enough, though usually Ilya was just upstairs. It was a busy, safe neighborhood, and this tiny store didn't draw that much attention; it also had big windows, making everything visible from the street, especially at night. Mallory had mace, a panic alarm button, and Ilya's number.

"Okay. Have a good night."

Ilya headed out, walking toward the red brick building where Shane apparently lived. He waited until he was a couple of minutes away and then texted.

Ilya: I'm almost to your building

Shane: Coming.

Ilya laughed...he couldn't help it.

At the brick building, he turned down the alley and around to the back of the building. The door Shane had described was cracked open, and when Ilya got near, it opened fully to reveal Shane Hollander in sweatpants and a sweatshirt, looking dangerously adorable with slightly

messy hair and a nervous expression on his face, eyes darting around behind Ilya even though the back of the building was empty and a little spooky.

“Hey,” Shane said as Ilya stepped in past him. And before Ilya could respond, Shane was pushing him up against the closed door and kissing him. It caught Ilya by surprise so much that it took a couple of seconds before his arms came up around Shane and he kissed him back properly.

“Well, hi to you, too,” Ilya laughed when Shane let him go.

“Sorry,” Shane said sheepishly.

“Mm, never apologize for that.” Ilya pulled him back in for one more quick kiss. “So, are we going to fuck in the stairwell, or are you going to invite me up?”

Shane laughed. “Come on.”

Around the 5th floor, Ilya started regretting his assurance that he was fine with stairs. Maybe he needed to do some stadium sprints. But he made it to the 8th floor without dying, and then he was in Shane Hollander’s apartment. And it was fucking huge. And nice. And it made Ilya’s apartment look like a messy closet in comparison. The front wall was red brick with huge, fancy floor-to-ceiling windows, and the floors were polished hardwood. Shane’s leather couches were much less worn than Ilya’s, and his kitchen was big and spacious and spotless, with white cabinets and marble countertops.

“Nice place,” Ilya said. He kicked his shoes off next to Shane’s and walked into the middle of the living room, looking around. There were a few books on the end table, and by the titles, Ilya figured they were all about hockey.

“Thanks. I’m really happy I moved here.”

Ilya turned to look at him, his chest going warm with the implications. “Me too.”

“So, are you hungry? I figured we could order delivery.”

“Sure. I need to be available to run back to the store just in case. So not too much of this until after 8,” Ilya said, grabbing Shane around the waist and pulling him in until they were pressed together.

“Will Mallory be okay by herself?”

Ilya nodded. “I’m sure she is fine. But just in case, I don’t want to be too distracted.” Then he kissed him, letting himself get lost in it until they were both grinding against each other.

“Okay. Too much.” Ilya stepped back, smiling at the unfocused eyes and still parted lips in front of him.

“Yeah. Okay. Let’s order food.”

By the time the food arrived and they’d both eaten their fill of chicken tacos, guacamole, and chips and salsa, it was half past 7.

“So...show me your books.”

Shane brought him to a small room first. “This is my office. Mostly my library, really.” One wall was lined with bookshelves, and there was a big wooden desk and cushy rolling chair under the window. Ilya browsed the shelves. More hockey books than Ilya knew existed. Memoirs, historical accounts, stats, playbooks. There was also plenty of mainstream fiction...from Stephen King to James Patterson, and Ilya was relieved to see not much of the latter. Mysteries, thrillers, literary fiction. But no erotic romance, no queer books.

“And where are the rest of your books, Shane Hollander? This is not everything.”

Shane gave him a big, slow nod. “Yeah. Those are in my bedroom.”

“Well? Show me.”

Shane turned and led him down the hallway to the master bedroom. It was big, more brick walls, with a very comfortable looking king size bed that was neatly made, all perfect corners and annoying accent pillows. There were a few books on the nightstand, but they appeared to be of the same ilk as the ones he’d just seen. Then Shane walked over to a wide wooden door and opened it to reveal a large walk-in closet. Shane flipped a switch, lighting the inside. Neatly hung clothes lined one side, shoes in a fancy shoe rack on the other, garment bags in one corner. Back against the right side, behind the clothes, was a wooden dresser. Shane walked over to it, opened the middle drawer, and moved some t-shirts aside to reveal a few stacks of books.

“Ah, gay books in the closet, huh?” Ilya laughed.

“I know, I know. But this is the one area that is off limits to the cleaning service. It even locks with a key.”

Of course Shane would have to hide his queer books behind a locked door. A locked closet door. It was funny and heartbreaking all at once.

“Mm, you do have several of these types already.” Ilya lifted a book with a half naked man holding a football.

“Yes, a few. First I just...I don’t know, it was surprising to see stories about people like me having...relationships. But turns out they’re also kind of...fun.”

Ilya looked up at him, noting the slightly nervous, embarrassed look. He looked at another stack, moving books over to see what was underneath.

“The Joy of Gay Sex,” Ilya said. “Wow, you are getting into the nitty gritty over here.” Ilya knew that was a pretty famous non-fiction book on the subject, though he hadn’t personally read it.

“Oh god.” Shane’s hand was suddenly there, trying to push the other books back into place. Ilya let him, then closed the drawer and pulled Shane against him.

“Nothing to be embarrassed about. New rule...you are not allowed to be embarrassed about anything in front of me.”

Shane snorted. “I don’t think it works like that.”

Ilya shrugged and kissed him. “It does if I say so. Was that book useful?”

Shane nodded, his eyes dropping to Ilya’s lips, maybe lower. Anywhere but his eyes. “It was actually. I know I could just google anything, but for some reason, spending time on those sites on my computer makes me more nervous than just having a few books to look at.”

“Makes sense. Nothing like a real book in your hands anyway.”

“Yeah. That too.”

“Maybe some more hands-on research will be useful?” Ilya whispered against his ear. He felt the shiver go through Shane’s body and kissed his neck, wanting to drag it out.

“Yes.”

Ilya pulled back. “Later. It’s not 8 yet.”

Shane nodded, a little fast, like he was shaking himself free of what his body was doing. “We can watch tv.”

Ilya followed him back to the living room and sat on the couch while Shane turned the tv on and settled next to him. Ilya watched him fiddle with the remote for a bit, scrolling through streaming services.

“Want to watch more of Stranger Things?” Shane asked.

“Sure. Put episode 2 on.”

Shane pressed play and set the remote down, and Ilya grabbed him around the waist and pulled him on top of him. Shane laughed and looked down at him.

“I’m too heavy,” he said, trying to wiggle off.

“No. Here,” Ilya shifted so he was lying against the armrest and Shane was on him, chest to chest, between his legs. “Okay?”

“Mhm.” Shane nuzzled into his chest, turning his head to the tv. Ilya ran his hands up and down his back, never tiring of that. One of Shane’s hands was on his bicep, fingers moving idly, his other stretched up to run through Ilya’s hair. Maybe they were both just touch starved idiots. Ilya touched other people all the time, but never just because. Never just because he wanted his hands on their skin and his fingers in their hair and his lips on the top of their head. He pressed a kiss to the top of Shane’s, knowing he should stop, knowing he couldn’t.

I will never leave him. It will be this, always, for as long as he will let me. If I had had words to speak such a thing, I would have.

But there were none that seemed big enough for it, to hold that swelling truth.

Ilya tried to focus on the show and not the warm weight on top of him. The show was good, the feeling of Shane Hollander wrapped around him was better. He was heavy, but Ilya felt light. Lighter than he'd felt in ages. He sighed quietly and shifted his attention back to the tv.

Mallory texted him a few minutes after 8 to let him know the store was locked up, and she'd see him tomorrow. Shane let episode 3 autoplay, and they eventually shifted on the couch until they were both lying on their sides, Shane in front of him, a little further down on the couch so Ilya could still see the tv. He had one hand resting on Shane's hip, and Shane's head was tucked under his jaw. He was grateful that Shane's couch was wide enough to hold them this way, and he probably would have happily stayed there all night. But when episode 3 ended, Shane paused it and turned over so they were face to face. Impossibly close. There was only one thing to do, so Ilya pulled Shane up until the space between their mouths disappeared, and so did all pretense about what was next.

"Is it almost time for my VIP tour of your bed?" Ilya murmured against his lips.

"Yeah. Let's go."

In Shane's bedroom, they both undressed and got in the bed. Ilya crawled on top of Shane, wanting nothing more than to devour him once again.

"You have stuff here?" he asked before they got carried away.

"Stuff?" Shane blinked at him.

"Condoms. Lube. Maybe a towel for the bed?"

"Oh, yeah. Of course." Shane leaned over and pulled a bottle of expensive looking lube out of his nightstand. Presumably expensive because it was in a black bottle with minimal fancy looking writing. Then he set a condom on the bed and wiggled out from under Ilya to go into the en suite and came back with a huge towel. He didn't think Shane would like his bed to be subjected to what Ilya was about to do without a towel.

"Can you get on your stomach?" Ilya said after they spread the towel out. Shane gave him a slightly hesitant look and then stretched out on his stomach on top of the towel. He looked over his shoulder at Ilya, expression somewhere between off the charts horny and like Ilya asked him to walk the plank. "Relax," Ilya laughed. "This is a good position."

He spread Shane's legs and knelt between them, then shifted so he could lean all the way down and press open-mouthed kisses to the small of his back. Shane let out a pleased little noise, and Ilya could feel some of the tension roll out of him. He kept kissing his lower back, moving to press his lips into the dimples above his ass, left first, then right. Then he moved lower, spreading Shane open with his hands and licking over his hole, a long stripe that pulled a deep but loud moan from him.

"Oh fuck," he heard Shane breathe out while his hips rocked against the bed.

Ilya kept going, focusing his tongue on the tight ring of muscle. Shane was already writhing beneath him, and Ilya wished he had more hands so he could grab one of Shane's, let him hold on while Ilya took him apart. But his hands were busy holding him open, and he focused on what his mouth was doing instead. He licked and pushed at Shane until he could feel him softening against his tongue, until the noises he was making came louder and more frequently. Ilya's own cock was hard and desperate for attention. He would have happily made Shane come that way, just his mouth and tongue, but they both wanted more.

Eventually he took Shane's fancy lube and worked him up with his fingers. He moved to kneel beside him so he could lean forward and kiss his neck while he moved his fingers. Shane was so pliant beneath him, eyes closed, neck stretching. He looked like a work of art. His slightly flushed skin a canvas that Ilya wished he could mark. Something about seeing Shane Hollander like this, knowing he was the only one, made him possessive, even now that it wasn't the first time. Maybe he shouldn't assume he was the only one, but somehow, he didn't think Rose Landry had ever had three fingers in his ass while she sucked on his ear.

When Shane was ready, Ilya slipped his fingers free and rolled on the condom. Then he lightly tapped Shane's hip. "On your knees," he said softly, watching Shane's face for any discomfort. Shane got on his knees, bracing himself on his forearms, and Ilya admired the arch of his back, the way his muscles stood out. He knelt behind him again and lined himself up.

"Okay?" he asked, nudging his cock against Shane's hole but not pushing in.

Shane nodded.

"Words," Ilya said gently, leaning forward, covering Shane's back so he could kiss his neck.

"Yes," Shane said. "Please."

Ilya stayed where he was, kept his lips against Shane's neck while he pushed into him, slowly, trying to give him time to adjust and listening to his breathing and the little groans that gave way to moans as it turned from pressure to pleasure. Ilya was putting forth a Herculean effort to stay still because Shane felt like heaven, like he'd ascended. The first time, he thought it was just because it was new. Because Shane was attractive and desirable, and the fact that he was famous and closeted and chose Ilya didn't hurt. He thought it was just a culmination of wanting and then having, and that it would pass. He would get it out of his system. Shane would become another name on a list of many names. Not for the first time, the universe saw fit to humble him, because Shane Hollander was anything but a name on a list.

If I could have him like this in my dreams every night of my life, I'd stake my entire life on dreams and be done with the rest.

In that moment, he wondered if he'd ever get enough of Shane Hollander, and he did not want to know the answer. He started moving, slowly at first, until Shane's noises were all uninhibited pleasure, low and needy and driving Ilya with every little intake of breath and every flex of his fingers in the sheets and every push back against Ilya's thrusts.

Ilya straightened up and grasped Shane's hips, lifting them just enough to improve the angle and keep him steady while Ilya thrust harder and faster. Sooner than he expected, he was on the verge of coming and slowed down, not wanting it to be over yet. He reached down to stroke Shane's cock, finding it steadily dripping precome onto the towel. As soon as he touched him there, Shane moaned loudly, and Ilya could tell he was close too. Ilya stilled his hips and then carefully pulled out, smiling at the little noise of frustration that escaped Shane's throat when he did.

"Turn over," Ilya said. "I want to see you."

He shouldn't have said it, shouldn't have done it, should have kept this tiny bit of distance between them, but he didn't want to and didn't care. Shane got on his back, and Ilya pushed into him again, pressing their bodies together, their lips. He let Shane breathe into his mouth, swallowing his moan as Ilya thrust into him hard, needing to feel him, wanting Shane to feel him. He kept his eyes open and on Shane's warm brown ones, letting himself fall into them, watching his long lashes flutter over them. Ilya used one hand to brush sweat-damp hair off his forehead, wanting the full view.

"Are you close?"

Shane nodded, and the hand he had on Ilya's upper back moved up to tangle in the hair at the back of his neck, and Ilya smiled because Shane's hand belonged there, had claimed those curls as his own personal handhold.

Ilya reached down to wrap his hand around Shane's cock again. He was getting too close, and he needed Shane to come with him. He kept his hips moving, hard and fast, trying to keep from spilling himself too soon while he watched Shane's head tip back against the pillows, those perfect red lips open on a moan. So close, he was so close, he could feel his orgasm just there, tightening his body, sending pulsing waves of heat and pleasure through him, like fire that couldn't be put out.

"Come for me, Shane." He said it against Shane's ear, knowing it would send him over the edge, and it did. Shane clenched around him and moaned a high, broken sound that Ilya felt in his balls as they tightened and his own orgasm ripped free, spilling inside of Shane while Shane spurted over his fist between them, and it was a perfect moment of surrender and shared pleasure, matching groans and whispers of those elusive first names filling the air. When his hips stilled, Ilya buried his face in Shane's neck, both of them slick with sweat and breathing hard. Ilya kissed his neck, then lifted his head. Shane's eyes were still closed. Ilya brushed the sweaty hair off his forehead again, letting his thumb linger, gently rubbing circles at his temple. Shane blinked up at him, his mouth curving up.

"Is it always that good?" Shane asked, bringing his wrist up to his forehead with his hand palm up. Ilya pressed a kiss there too.

"No," he said honestly. What he didn't say was that it had never been this good, and he had a long list to compare to. No one else had ever made him feel so much and crave so much more. He sighed and kissed Shane's lips, enjoying the feel of him, while still inside his body. Eventually he slipped out and sat up to tie off the condom. "I'll be right back," he said, leaning down to kiss him again. "Stay."

Ilya went into Shane's en suite bathroom, not even surprised by how massive it was, all dark marble, a large walk-in shower and a huge tub. He opened drawers under the sink until he found washcloths. He cleaned himself off and then wet one with warm water and went back into the bedroom, where Shane was stretched out, looking relaxed and happy. Ilya's chest was doing something very annoying in response to knowing he'd put that look on Shane's face.

He climbed on the bed next to him and used the washcloth to wipe his stomach clean, then his cock, then he slipped it between his legs, watching Shane's face the whole time. Shane moved his thighs apart, making room, so Ilya took that as permission and wiped the lube and sweat from his skin as gently as he could. When he was done, he pulled the towel out from under Shane's hips and tossed both that and the washcloth in the hamper he'd seen in the bathroom before returning to the bed to stretch out next to him.

Shane rolled onto his side, one of his hands already on Ilya's chest, fingers tracing the faint hair around his nipples.

"Do you need to leave?" Shane asked.

"No."

"Vanya will be okay?"

"He's fine. I fed him before I left. As long as I'm home to feed him breakfast, he'll be perfectly happy having the place to himself."

"Good. Will you stay?"

Ilya nodded. Just another thing he shouldn't do but wouldn't even consider the alternative.

"Only if you read to me."

Shane smiled. "Any requests?"

"You pick."

Shane shifted and got off the bed, and Ilya enjoyed the view as he disappeared into the walk-in closet. He came back with a book that Ilya couldn't see the cover of, grabbed something from his nightstand, and settled back on the bed.

Ilya glanced up and then sat up immediately. "You wear glasses?"

"For reading," Shane said. He looked... Ilya took a deep breath.

"And fucking."

Shane laughed. "What?"

"Next time. I want you to wear those."

"You have a glasses fetish?" Shane was smiling at him, amused.

“Just for you,” Ilya said. He reached up and brushed his thumb along Shane’s cheekbone, just below the frames, dragging along his favorite freckles. “Now what are we reading?” He settled back down next to Shane.

“Call Me By Your Name. I’ve been wanting to reread some parts of this one.”

Ilya nodded and put his head on Shane's chest. “Let’s hear it then.”

Shane flipped through some pages and then started reading. *“I looked away, because he was staring at me, and I knew I was flushed, and I knew I’d made a face, though I still wanted him to stare at me even if it embarrassed me, and I wanted to keep staring at him too...”*

Shane was still reading, and Ilya was contemplating why Shane had started here in particular, but he was glad he did and took the opportunity to prop himself on one elbow and look his fill. Shane in his glasses, his skin still slightly flushed, his eyes darting away from the page for just a second to meet Ilya’s, his lips curving up almost imperceptively. Ilya ran his hand down Shane’s chest, his stomach, into the crease of his leg...an intimate place to be, especially now while sex wasn’t the goal. Shane kept reading, though he moved his leg out just a fraction...permission, a new level of comfort between them.

“...I was on the cusp of something, but I also wanted it to last forever, because I knew there’d be no coming back from this. When it happened, it happened not as I’d dreamed it would, but with a degree of discomfort that forced me to reveal more of myself than I cared to reveal...”

Ilya leaned down to kiss his chest, his lips moving where his hand had been before. He was still listening intently, the words drifting through him as if on a lazy river, gently and lingering, Shane’s voice pulling tension out of him he hadn’t realized was there.

“...I thought, from this moment on—I had, as I’d never before in my life, the distinct feeling of arriving somewhere very dear, of wanting this forever, of being me, me, me, me, and no one else, just me, of finding in each shiver that ran down my arms something totally alien and yet by no means unfamiliar, as if all this had been part of me all of my life and I’d misplaced it and he had helped me find it.”

Shane stopped reading for a moment, watching Ilya’s hand still trailing over his skin, watching the occasional press of his lips, and sighed contentedly. He switched the book to his left hand, his right coming up to its favorite spot, the curls that were there just for him, tangling amongst them and making Ilya’s eyes flutter. Then he started reading again.

“...What is life without this? Which was why, in the end, it was I, and not he, who blurted not once, but many, many times, You’ll kill me if you stop, you’ll kill me if you stop, because it was also my way of bringing full circle the dream and the fantasy, me and him, the longed-for words from his mouth to my mouth back into his mouth, swapping words from mouth to mouth, which was when I must have begun using obscenities that he repeated after me, softly at first, till he said, “Call me by your name and I’ll call you by mine...”

Shane put the book down then and pulled Ilya on top of him. Ilya looked down at him in those glasses and with the words about two other men hanging between them and kissed him until the glasses fogged up and ended up tossed aside and nothing was left but breathless

kisses and warm hands and a lot of things that stayed trapped behind words unspoken. Shane's hand was still tugging and soothing the curls at his neck. *You'll kill me if you stop, you'll kill me if you stop.*

-

Shane woke up with a heavy arm across his stomach and a pleasant ache between his legs. He could tell it was still early by the very faint light coming through the window. He glanced over at Ilya, whose face was buried in the pillow next to him, a halo of golden brown curls and even lighter lashes lying against his cheeks. He looked relaxed and younger, mouth slightly open, the expanse of his back exposed and tempting. Shane gently moved Ilya's arm off him and walked quietly to the bathroom. When he got back, Ilya was awake and watching him with a sleepy smile on his face.

"Morning," Shane said.

"Good morning." Ilya sat up and kissed his forehead and then made his way to the bathroom. Shane looked at his phone. It was only 7:30am. For once, he was planning to skip their optional gameday skate. He'd been having some nagging soreness in his left ankle, and the coaching staff forbade him from showing up today. It really wasn't necessary for him to be at optional skates anyway, he just felt like he should, for morale.

"Do you want coffee?" Shane asked when Ilya came back into the room.

"I should probably go. Vanya will be impatiently waiting."

Shane nodded. "Okay."

"You can come with me if you want. I can make us coffee and give you another book. Forgot to grab it last night."

"Sure, I'll take a walk over." He figured it was early enough on a Sunday that no one would be out and paying attention to what Shane Hollander was doing.

They both got dressed and made their way down the 8 flights of stairs. The cold air rushed to meet them when Shane opened the door, and he wished he'd grabbed more than a light zip-up. As they made their way to One Good Memory, Shane's fingers were itching to reach out and tangle with Ilya's. It was a foreign thing, wanting to touch another man in public. Because even if he'd ever in his life wanted to, he hadn't acknowledged it. Now he was acknowledging it, actively fighting it, and wishing he didn't have to.

While they walked, Ilya told him about his Black Friday plans, and Shane told him about his upcoming schedule. They passed a couple of people jogging, but no one gave him a second look. Shane was grateful to step into the warm store and follow Ilya up to his warm apartment. Vanya was there waiting, meowing almost as loudly as the last time Shane had been here for breakfast.

"I hear you," Ilya said as he scooped Vanya's food into his bowl. "You'd think I never feed him on time or something."

Shane laughed. "He's just making sure you don't forget."

Ilya snorted. "As if I could."

Ilya made them both coffee, and they sat at the kitchen table, drinking it and talking, and it was really nice. It felt so normal, but also like something forbidden, something Shane wasn't allowed to be doing.

Somehow they ended up on Ilya's couch, with his mouth around Shane's cock until he was coming down Ilya's throat, and then they switched, and Shane sucked Ilya until he did the same. Whatever shyness Shane had still been feeling last night seemed to have dissolved into nothing more than want and comfort, and he wished he could curl up on the couch with Ilya and do this every day.

When it started getting closer to 10, they extricated themselves, righted their clothes, and made their way downstairs, Vanya zipping past them to be the first one back in the store.

"I picked another publicly safe book for you," Ilya said. He unlocked the front door and then made his way behind the counter to grab a book sitting beneath it. "You don't have to agree just because I suggest it, okay? This one is not queer, so I think you are safe to read it in front of people, but it is a YA book. Is that a problem?"

Shane shook his head. "No, honestly, no one will even pay any attention anyway. But YA is fine."

Ilya handed him the book. *The Serpent King* by Jeff Zentner. "I read it recently and really liked it. Thought you might appreciate it as well."

"Thanks, sounds good to me." Shane pulled his credit card out and handed it to Ilya. He didn't even look over when the door to the shop opened. He was thinking about how he wasn't ready to leave, didn't want his time with Ilya to be over yet, even though he could probably see him again tomorrow or the next day, since he didn't have games. He was so lost in thought that he barely registered when someone else stepped behind the counter. But then that someone was leaning in and kissing Ilya on the cheek, with so much familiarity it knocked the breath from Shane's lungs. Especially because while Ilya did look slightly surprised for a second, his face quickly shifted into a genuine grin and he pulled the woman into a hug.

"Sveta," he said, and then something else in Russian. Then in English, "I forgot."

The woman was beautiful. Light brown skin, perfect shoulder-length curls, a smile as bright as the morning sun.

"I see that," she said, head turning to take in Shane, and he saw the flash of recognition immediately.

"Shane Hollander," she said in delight. "I'm a big fan of yours." She looked at Ilya in question, and the smile had dropped from his face, just momentarily, before returning.

“Yes, Boston’s star center is a regular here now,” he said to her. Then to Shane, “This is Svetlana Vetrova, co-owner of One Good Memory.”

Chapter End Notes

Books mentioned in this chapter:

Fatal Shadows by Josh Lanyon*

Cut & Run by Madeleine Urban and Abigail Roux*

The Locker Room by Amy Lane*

A Single Man by Christopher Isherwood

The Serpent King by Jeff Zentner

Call Me By Your Name by André Aciman

*much like Promises from earlier chapters, I haven't read these three books in probably 15 years. No idea if they hold up...if you seek them out, do remember they were indie published (and thus potentially not edited to the same standards as trad published books)

***came back to add that I found out Josh lanyon is now using Gen-AI (for art at least, don't know what else yet but ew), and I definitely do not support that. I read her books a long time ago and had considered rereading some, but I'm pretty disappointed and won't be doing that now.

[Book list doc](#)

Chapter 9: They say I'm going crazy

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya was an idiot. He was so busy being charmed by Shane fucking Hollander that he'd forgotten Svetlana was coming by today. She'd been in Russia for the past couple of weeks, and they'd texted here and there. He knew she'd be back soon. But then Shane invited him to his home, and he'd worn his glasses, and he'd read some very poignant sections of *Call Me By Your Name* out loud, and Ilya was but a man. An easily distracted man. And why did it even matter that she was here? She belonged here. But Ilya knew something very big had just shifted, and he was going to have to deal with it.

"Uh, hi," Shane said nervously. "Nice to meet you. I like the store."

Ilya almost laughed because Shane was cute, but he also wanted to say something, anything, to wipe that expression off his face. He glanced at Svetlana. She was still looking delighted at meeting the captain of the Raiders.

"That call was bullshit," she started, launching into a rant about some ref call during the Minnesota game. Ilya was barely listening, still trying to do damage control in his head. But as Svetlana talked about hockey, Shane's face relaxed a little. This was his element. He was back to being Shane Hollander the jock, Shane Hollander the captain of the Raiders. He could pretend he was not Shane Hollander who'd fucked a man the night before. Which shouldn't have dug in as deep as it did in Ilya's own chest. It was just strange, Svetlana not knowing this facet, however new it was, of his life. She knew everything. She was his family. And now he had to stand here in front of her and pretend he didn't know this man as more than just a famous customer. And that felt very fucking wrong.

He realized a second too late that their conversation had stalled, and he looked over to find Svetlana staring at him. *Fuck*. He could see the exact moment that at least one puzzle piece slid into place, erasing his previous worries only to add new ones. She always saw too much. That happened when you grew up together and witnessed all of each other's worst and most personal shit and then fucked about it.

"Well, hope you have a good day," Ilya said to Shane, keeping his voice light and casual, just how he'd talk to any customer. He'd almost said *Come again soon* and he thanked the universe he hadn't because they might have both died on the spot for different reasons.

Shane nodded, a little too fast. "Thanks, you too." Then he turned and left the store so quickly it looked like he was being chased.

Ilya didn't want to look over at Svetlana. He could see her eyes on him in his peripheral vision. He knew what was coming.

"So...Shane Hollander is a regular, huh? Since when?"

“Yes, he’s been coming in for a few weeks. Nice guy.”

He finally looked over. Yep, that expression was very much her ‘I know you’re fucking lying to me’ face. She was smiling, close-lipped, amused and incredulous. “Ilya Rozanov, you better start talking right now.”

He sighed. “What?”

“You know what. What the fuck was that? You both looked like you were going to jump out of your skin. And I know you. You were having a full freak out just now.”

“Fuck off. I was not. Why are you here?” She didn’t answer the rhetorical question, but she did roll her eyes.

Vanya wandered over then from wherever he’d been. He jumped up on the counter and rubbed against Svetlana, begging for attention.

“Hi my baby, I missed you too. What has your daddy been up to while I’ve been gone, hm? Is he fucking a hockey player?”

“Ugh,” Ilya groaned. “Why are you like this?”

“Don’t fuck with me, Ilya. I spent 10 hours on a plane yesterday behind some guy snoring so loud the flight attendant thought there was a mechanical issue with the plane. And I’ve only had 4 hours of sleep since.”

“Then maybe you should go take a nap.”

“I plan to. After you tell me what I just witnessed.”

Ilya rubbed at his eyes, harder than necessary, anything to stall. He couldn’t out Shane. But he also couldn’t lie to her.

“Sveta, can’t you just leave this alone. If you think you already know, why do you need to interrogate me.”

She dropped her chin and gave him a look that could make grown men cry. And had.

“How did this even happen? I can barely drag you to a hockey game even this many years later, and now you’re what, chasing the best player in the league?”

“I’m not chasing anyone. I do not chase.”

She snorted. “I know. Hence my confusion.”

He just looked at her and shook his head. She didn’t wait for an answer.

“Well, whatever you’ve done, that poor man looked like the whole floor dropped out from under him. I knew he was a little uptight, but wow.”

“He’s not uptight,” Ilya said automatically, defensively, and immediately regretted it. Especially because it was a little true.

She laughed. “Yeah? I bet you know firsthand, don’t you? How tight is he exactly?”

Ilya shook his head again, but he couldn’t help the smile. “Fuck off. Leave it alone. You already know you’re always right. You don’t need me to spell it out. And you also need to keep it to yourself.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. I will be getting details later, whether you think so or not. But I am exhausted. I’m going upstairs to crash for a bit. Unless there is more I need to know? Am I going to walk into your bedroom to find Raiders jerseys and hockey paraphernalia?”

“Of course not.” He quickly rummaged around in his memory for where the Raiders t-shirt was the last time he saw it. Probably, hopefully, at the bottom of the hamper.

“Okay then. I’m going to take a nap. And later we’re going out. Right?”

“Yes, yes, I remember now. I’ll be up after Mallory gets here.”

“Alright.” She was still looking at him like she was trying to x-ray his brain. “Are you coming with me, Vanya? The only one who’s happy to see me,” she said with another pointed look at Ilya.

“I am always happy to see you.”

She rolled her eyes again, then walked to the back and disappeared behind the door to the stairs. Ilya didn’t know what to do. He needed to talk to Shane because he saw the look. The slight panic, probably the fear of potentially being outed. But there was something else too, and Ilya knew neither of them should be feeling it and he for sure shouldn’t be trying to fix it.

He pulled his phone out and hit call under Shane’s contact. It rang and rang until voicemail picked up, and Ilya hung up. He texted instead.

Ilya: sorry about that

Ilya: Svetlana is my best friend

Ilya: I forgot she was coming by today

Ilya: are you freaking out

Ilya: call me

Ilya looked at all those texts in a row and sighed. How did he get here. A minute later, his phone rang.

“Hey. You good?” he answered.

A beat of silence, and then, “Yeah, I’m good. Was I being weird?”

Ilya laughed. “No. You looked a little nervous. Svetlana can be intense about hockey. Her father was a famous Soviet goalie, so she knows a lot. Big fan of you and your team if you couldn’t tell.” He was rambling.

“Yeah, she knows her stuff, clearly. But um...does she know?”

Ilya swallowed, stalling. Honesty and risk making Shane freak out, or lies and risk making Shane freak out later if/when he found out?

“I think she suspects, yes. Sorry. She knows me very well, and I think we both gave away a bit too much. But she is safe, I promise. And I didn’t confirm anything.” He leaned on the counter and heard Shane sigh.

“Yeah, okay.”

“I’m sorry, Shane.”

“It’s okay. Not your fault. It’s fine, right?”

Ilya couldn’t tell if he was asking if his secret was safe and would be fine, or if they were fine.

“Yes, I promise.”

“So...co-owner?”

“In name and money only. She owns 30%. I was only able to buy the store with her help. Her father’s help really, but he gave her a lot of free rein then.”

“Oh. Well, that’s nice. I’m glad you had help.”

“Yes. Are you sure you’re good?”

“Yeah, fine. I’m going to review some tape and get ready for tonight.”

“Will I see you tomorrow?” Ilya asked, needing some kind of reassurance that things had not shifted that much, that they were still doing whatever this stupid, dangerous thing was.

“If you still want to.”

“I do, Shane Hollander. Very much.”

“So you aren’t going to be with...Svetlana.”

He could tell her name had been hard to force through his lips. “No. I am going out with her tonight for drinks to catch up. She’s been out of the country for the last couple of weeks. We will almost certainly be somewhere that is playing your game if she has her way, so I will also be watching.”

“Can I text you after the game?”

Ilya could hear the real question under the spoken one. “Yes, you can text me. Or even call me.”

Usually he would have dragged Svetlana home with him, willingly of course. They would have gotten pleasantly drunk, eaten something delicious and full of carbs, and then fucked, assuming neither found someone else first. But Ilya knew, somehow, that he would not be fucking her tonight. Briefly he felt a pang of disappointment, because he did love her and they had the kind of good sex that came with years of knowing each other's bodies and likes and dislikes and caring about each other enough to want to please the other just because they could. They'd seen each other at their best and worst and everything in between. There were no hangups or awkward moments. But there also wasn't the overwhelming desire to just touch and linger in the moment...an important distinction apparently. And Ilya knew he was so far gone, in so fucking deep, because tonight he'd say no. And he knew that would also give the whole fucking thing away.

"Cool. I will. Uh, thanks for calling."

"Of course. I wish we could have spent all day in bed." He heard Shane's little intake of breath.

"Me too."

"Well, I will let you go get ready for your game. Score one for me."

"I will. Talk to you later." He could hear the smile in Shane's voice, and his chest loosened by several degrees.

"Bye."

He hung up, slipped his phone back in his pocket, and pressed his forehead hard against the counter.

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Shane was dizzy when he hung up. The relief he felt had nearly sent him to the floor. Ilya's first call had come right as he was stepping into the elevator. He had ignored it and swiped his card, needing to get up to his apartment first. But then he answered, and he was glad he did. He wasn't even bothered about Ilya having...someone. He was bothered that his own response to it was overwhelming disappointment and jealousy and nearly heartbreak, which was absurd. A man he'd only known for weeks couldn't break his heart.

But then the reassurance that whatever this thing was hadn't changed, that Svetlana was not...someone. Not in that way. Right? Isn't that what Ilya confirmed? He hadn't said it outright, but...*fuck*. Shane wanted to text Rose. They'd texted a few times since he'd sent her those screenshots of Ilya's texts, but they kept catching each other at a busy time with promises to text later. He'd given her just the most basic details about the dinner: yes, he'd gone; yes, it had been fun; yes, he was pretty sure it was a date; yes, they'd seen each other again. And Rose had told him she was busy with her current film and had met someone on set and would tell him about it soon. She was also coming to visit in December, so he'd get a chance to fill her in then. He didn't need to tell her all of this. He just had to trust that Ilya and Svetlana were not together. And if they were, the arrangement must be...open.

He let himself keep thinking about it while he worked out, but when he was done with that, he was done thinking about Ilya and Svetlana. Not about Ilya, though. Never done with that. Just the concept of them together. He had to get it out of his system, consider it from every angle, and then he could focus on Winnipeg. And the phone call he hoped to make after they won.

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Ilya decided not to go upstairs right away when Mallory arrived. Svetlana was there so they could hang out and catch up after her trip, but since she was exhausted, he figured he could give another couple hours and catch up on packing online orders. Maybe he was also hiding. He didn't want to have the conversation he knew they were going to have because saying things out loud made them too real. Words were different when they weren't just living inside of you.

He spent most of the time he was packing orders thinking about Shane Hollander, something that was starting to take up an unnecessarily large amount of his days, even when they hadn't had a dramatic morning and he was facing down an all-knowing Svetlana. He just didn't know what the fuck to do about it.

Around 2:30, he finally made his way upstairs. He found her awake and watching tv.

"I was wondering if you were ever coming up here," she said as soon as he walked in. Vanya was curled up next to her.

"Did you sleep?" he asked, taking the seat on her other side.

"Three hours. I feel almost human again. Don't think I've forgotten this morning."

He snorted. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes. Are you going to feed me?"

"I'll toast a bagel for you."

"Fine. You know how I like it."

Ilya smiled and shook his head, but he got up and lightly toasted an everything bagel, spread exactly the amount of cream cheese she liked, and brought it to her on the couch.

"Thank you. I knew you still loved me."

He turned the tv volume down. "So, are you going to tell me any more about your trip?"

She looked over at him, mouth full of bagel, eyes too serious. After she swallowed, she said, "I didn't see them. Only my father did."

"What did he say?"

She exhaled a long breath. "That your father is dying."

“I already know. Alexei has been calling.”

“I wouldn’t listen to a damn thing he says. Bastard.” She said it in Russian. Alexei was terrible enough that English couldn’t quite capture the depth of it.

Ilya turned and lay back against the armrest, and she moved the plate with the bagel out of the way so he could drape his legs across her lap, feet landing close enough to Vanya that he picked up his head and looked offended.

“I should go there,” Ilya said eventually, and just saying that out loud made him feel sick.

“There is nothing you can do. My father says he’s not there. He remembers nothing, and even when he does, it’s for only a few seconds here, a couple of minutes there. Sometimes he thinks they are back in their younger days. He rarely remembers who Polina is at all anymore.”

Ilya snorted, feeling a little smug about that. “Maybe he’d be more pleasant now. He will have forgotten that he hates me.”

“You owe them nothing, Ilya.”

“I know.”

She took another bite before moving on. “I’m ready to hear about Shane Hollander now.”

Ilya groaned. “You can’t leave it alone, huh?”

“No, I can’t. I know you’re good, but how the hell did you get Shane Hollander of all people?”

He rolled his eyes. “I didn’t get him. I don’t have him. He just started coming into the store, so I recommended some books to him. I guess I did a good job since he keeps coming back.”

She laughed. “You must have done a *very* good job indeed.”

He flipped her off. “You know just how good I am.”

“Mhm. And am I going to get a reminder later?”

Ilya turned his head, looking at the wall behind the tv.

“I knew it,” she said and smacked his leg, self-satisfied but not disappointed. “How long has this been going on?”

Ilya shrugged. “A few weeks I guess.”

“And already your bed is closed for business. Jesus, Ilya. How serious is it?”

“It’s not serious. He’s very closeted. He might actually die if it ever gets out, so you better not gossip with any of your hockey-loving friends. I mean it.”

“I wouldn’t do that to you. But why are you doing this? He can’t be that good of a lay. And you’ve never turned me down for anyone, so I know it’s serious, even if you don’t want to say it.”

Ilya’s first instinct was to argue, to tell her that he was, in fact, that good a lay. But first, it wasn’t her business. And second, it wasn’t about that, and he definitely wasn’t going to admit that. And he wasn’t going to argue anymore about it being serious. He’d said enough.

“Whatever. This is already boring. Where are we going tonight?” he asked, knowing this wouldn’t be the end of the conversation.

-

They ended up at one of their regular bars, enough TVs playing the Boston game that Ilya barely missed a second of it. A few of their mutual friends from BU were there, plus a couple of Svetlana’s friends that Ilya liked. It was fun, he’d had a few beers and a few shots, and he was having a great time watching Shane and his teammates kick Winnipeg’s ass handily. Svetlana elbowed him after both of Shane’s goals, like a much more annoying version of a wink.

The game was in the third period, and Ilya was already tired of listening to Svetlana and her friend Tara complain about their boss. He’d been talking to one of their mutual BU friends, Lance, until a blonde had sat on Lance’s other side about 10 minutes earlier, and Ilya had been forgotten in favor of getting laid. He could respect that. He was grateful everyone was occupied because when a Winnipeg player hit Shane so hard he flew into the boards shoulder first, Ilya gripped the bar so hard he was surprised it didn’t crack beneath his fingers. He was up off his stool, had probably made a noise that was swallowed up by the din of the bar. He wasn’t sure if Shane’s head had hit too or just his shoulder, waiting for the replay. He felt someone put a hand over his, but he couldn’t look away from the tv because Shane still hadn’t gotten up, and his teammates were in front of him blocking the view. Ilya cursed the stupid cameras. He finally looked over to see Svetlana watching him, concern on her face.

“He didn’t go down that hard,” she said loud enough that he heard it, quiet enough that no one else did. “Look.” She nodded up at the tv where Shane was up and skating back to his bench, waving to show he was fine. Ilya sat heavily back on the stool. Last time he saw Shane get hit, it was on a replay, and he already knew he was fine. He did not like what just happened. Didn’t like thinking about what would have happened if Shane was really hurt and he wouldn’t even know. He’d only hear whatever espn was allowed to say. The thought turned his stomach.

“You good?” Svetlana asked, giving him a look. “You need another shot?”

“No.” He was leaving as soon as the game was over. “Are you going home with Tara?”

“Probably. If not, I’ll go home to sleep. Don’t worry about me.”

Ilya nodded. He watched the last few minutes of the game play out. Boston won. He watched a little longer, enough to see Shane helmetless and smiling. Then he ordered an uber.

“I’m out,” he said, pulling Svetlana into a hug. “Glad you’re home.”

“I’ll see you in a few days.”

“Maybe call before you show up, huh?” he said teasingly, but he also kind of meant it. He wasn’t sure Shane would survive being walked in on.

“Yes, fine. Though I wouldn’t mind seeing that,” she said, eyes flicking up to the tv. “Kidding.” She held her hands up in feigned innocence. Ilya laughed, kissed her cheek, said his goodbyes to everyone else, and then left.

In the car, his phone buzzed.

Shane: Are you still out?

Ilya grinned.

Ilya: on my way home right now

Shane: Alone?

Ilya: yes

Shane: Can I see you?

Ilya sighed and leaned back against the seat, but his whole body was coursing with anticipation already.

Ilya: yes, come over

Shane: Okay. Might not be for another hour or so. Is that okay?

Ilya: of course

Ilya: text me when you’re on your way

Shane: I will. See you in a bit.

Ilya got out in front of the store, and he was still grinning. Something about being able to see Shane in person, get his hands on him after seeing him go down on the ice, combined with the fact that Shane initiated it, like he couldn’t even wait a day to see Ilya again...Ilya was floating.

He took a quick shower to wash away the smell of the bar and the cigarette he’d smoked outside earlier, pulled on sweatpants and a tank top, hoping they’d be pulled off again soon. He turned the tv on to waste time and let Vanya walk all over his lap and rub against him.

“I wasn’t even gone that long,” he told the needy cat. “I need you to get all of this out of your system now and leave us alone later.”

Vanya gave him a look that very clearly said 'doubtful.'

About an hour later, his phone buzzed.

Shane: Be there in 5.

Ilya gently pushed Vanya off his lap, slipped on his slides, and went downstairs to wait. He saw Shane approaching and unlocked the door, waiting until the last second to push it open and let him, and a rush of cold air, in.

“Hey,” Shane said. He was wearing sweatpants too, and a fleece, his cheeks pink even in the dim yellow light coming from the streetlamps.

“Hi,” Ilya said, locking the door and grabbing his hand. They walked quickly through the store and into the stairwell, and Ilya closed the door behind them. They both had the same idea, which meant their mouths crashed together a little too hard. The kiss was messy and desperate, and Ilya wanted to pull Shane against him. Instead, he pulled back and looked him up and down.

“Are you okay?” He brought one hand up to hover next to Shane’s right shoulder, not sure how hurt he was.

“Yeah. My shoulder is sore, but mostly fine. I need to ice it later.”

Ilya nodded. “Come on.” He led the way upstairs. If they were going to do anything, it should at least be on a soft bed.

Inside, Vanya greeted Shane with the enthusiasm of someone returning from war. Ilya rolled his eyes and smiled.

“I missed you, too,” Shane told Vanya over the obnoxious meowing, but his eyes were upturned, looking at Ilya. “Even though I saw you this morning.”

Ilya had given Vanya enough time. “Is it my turn yet?”

Shane straightened. “Yes.” He wrapped a hand around the back of Ilya’s neck, pulled him in for a kiss, and Ilya slid his hands around Shane’s waist, pressing them together, both of them already hard under their sweatpants. Ilya moaned into his mouth, and Shane kissed him harder.

“Aren’t you tired?” Ilya asked against his lips, slowly walking them further into the apartment without moving apart.

“Not yet.”

“Mm, and did you come here to watch tv? Read?”

Shane smiled his addictive crooked smile, and Ilya kissed him again until it faded under his lips.

“Or did you come for this?” Ilya asked and pushed his hips hard against Shane’s.

“Yes. Not just that.”

“What else?” Ilya stepped back now and led him to the bedroom, stopping by the bed to pull his tank top over his head, still watching Shane, waiting for an answer.

Shane shrugged, and Ilya noticed a wince, his right shoulder not lifting as much as his left. “Just wanted to see you.”

Ilya sucked in a breath and ignored everything else that was happening inside of him to lean forward and unzip Shane’s fleece. Shane started to shrug out of it, and Ilya said, “Let me.” He tapped Shane’s left arm so he’d lift it and pulled that sleeve off first, then he pulled the other down his right arm without lifting it. He was wearing a loose t-shirt beneath, and Ilya lifted the hem over his head, then pulled it down his arms and let it fall to the floor.

“Thanks,” Shane said quietly.

They both kicked off their underwear, and Ilya got on the bed first, patting the spot next to him. He expected Shane to stretch out next to him, but he propped himself on his left arm instead and leaned in to kiss Ilya’s neck. It was unexpected but more than welcome, drawing a moan from him. He kept kissing Ilya’s neck, then down his chest, his right hand wandering down to wrap around Ilya’s cock. Ilya didn’t know what made Shane so bold tonight, but he was happy to be devoured and caressed, his body already embarrassingly oversensitive.

“Fuck,” he breathed, fingers running through Shane’s hair. Shane’s hand was doing too good a job on him, his mouth felt too perfect. “Come here.” He moved his leg out and pulled Shane on top of him by the waist, careful of his shoulder, letting him settle between his legs. Shane’s face hovered above his, and Ilya just took him in. His big brown eyes, a swirl of colors that reminded Ilya of delicious things like honey and milk chocolate and espresso, were right there, meeting his, the slightest crinkle because his crooked smile was back, like he was exactly where he wanted to be. Ilya swallowed hard, his chest filling up with something too warm.

It was almost like fear, in the way it filled me, rising in my chest. It was almost like tears, in how swiftly it came.

But it was neither of those, buoyant where they were heavy, bright where they were dull.

It was just the alcohol. He was still buzzed. That’s why his chest was warm, and his heart was beating too hard. He welcomed Shane’s mouth against his, needing those earnest eyes to not see too deep into him while he was in this state. The kiss was hungry and messy, and their cocks were sliding together, and Ilya was rocking up against Shane in a steady rhythm that had them both panting into each other’s mouths.

“Wait,” Shane said suddenly, his voice breathy and pitched a little high.

“What’s wrong?” Ilya asked, stilling his hips and making sure he wasn’t pulling on Shane’s shoulder. But he wasn’t. Both of his hands were on Shane’s lower back, thumbs pressing into those perfect indents above his ass.

Shane was looking at him again, but he didn't feel exposed now. Shane's eyes were hooded, hazy with desire, and his lips were red and kiss-swollen, and the pink flush Ilya was becoming enamored with was spreading up his neck. He looked wrecked and beautiful.

"I want you to fuck me."

Ilya almost came right on the spot, hearing those words from Shane's mouth, in his strained voice, his hips still moving slightly against Ilya's, like he couldn't help himself. He hadn't even looked away as he said it.

"Good, because I want to fuck you," Ilya said, his own voice barely steady. "What position won't hurt your shoulder?"

Shane rolled his shoulder and winced. "Probably on my back."

"Switch."

Shane moved to stretch out next to him, and Ilya got what they needed from his nightstand. He slicked his fingers and dropped his hand between Shane's legs, circling one finger around his entrance, eyes glued to his face. Ilya never minded this part, he was good at foreplay. But it was still mostly just a step on the way to where he really wanted to go. With Shane, though, he could watch his face for hours while he fingered him open. He was so expressive. Ilya could see everything there, in his eyes, on his brow, his lips. When he pushed the first finger in, one corner of Shane's mouth pulled in, his brows pinched just a little. When he crooked his finger at the second knuckle, Shane's brows unpinched and lifted, his lashes fluttered against his cheeks, and his lips fell open, the bottom one extended a little further out than the top, begging to be nipped. Ilya leaned in and kissed him, then used his teeth to pull on Shane's lower lip, drawing a surprised moan from him. Then he soothed it with his tongue, and Shane met it with his own, while Ilya pressed another finger into him. He kissed him, let Shane take the lead when he wanted to, when his hand landed in Ilya's hair and tugged, and his lips dropped to Ilya's jaw and his neck, like he couldn't get enough. Somewhere in there, Ilya got a third finger in, kept stretching him open, barely aware of his fingers while Shane's mouth was trying to undo him. Eventually Shane leaned back against the pillows again.

"Ilya," he whispered, and Ilya shuddered. *One Ilya*. "I'm ready."

He slipped his fingers free and rolled on the condom before settling between Shane's legs and making sure none of his weight rested against his right shoulder.

"Is this okay?" he asked, leaning down to press a kiss to said shoulder. Shane nodded, eyes dropping closed before Ilya's lips even touched him.

Ilya pressed his cock against him until he slipped inside, watching Shane's face do a similar dance as earlier, brows pinching a little harder, lips pulling in a little more, his head pushing back against the pillows. Ilya tried to focus on something beyond his cock in that tight heat and moved to kiss Shane's neck, beneath his ear, up his jaw, finally catching his lips and pushing his tongue past them in a gentler approximation of what he was doing with his hips, which moved slowly at first, and then rocked into him a little harder and faster until he found a rhythm that had Shane's eyes flying open and his lips parting under Ilya's.

He kept his pace steady, not wanting to pound into him too hard, his shoulder still a concern, even if Shane didn't seem particularly worried. He also wanted it to last, to let it build and consume them both.

Ilya looked between their bodies, at Shane's cock, hard and flushed and leaking between them, precome pooling on his stomach. He swiped a thumb through it and brought it to his mouth, his eyes on Shane's while he dragged it down his tongue. Shane whimpered, barely audible above the noise of their bodies meeting, and Ilya leaned down to kiss him. Shane's tongue pushed against his, tasting himself there, hungry and grasping at Ilya's neck, his fingers finally finding their way to Ilya's curls, making him moan into Shane's mouth.

"Fuck, Ilya." *Two Ilyas.*

Ilya kissed him again and then asked, "Is your shoulder okay?"

Shane nodded against the pillow, and then he stretched his neck, showing off the flush and the sweat-slick skin, and Ilya licked a stripe up the column of his throat, earning him a hair pull.

"Look at you," Ilya murmured against his jaw. "Does anyone else get to see you this way, or just me?"

Shane looked at him then, hazy eyes sharpening. "Just you."

"My Shane," he whispered.

He knew he shouldn't have said it, even in the midst of his body burning up from the inside, he knew. The first time he uttered it could have been chalked up to an accident, an in-the-moment slip. This time, he knew and did it anyway. It was worth the effect. The hand in his hair tightened, Shane's other arm came up around his back and pulled him in close, their sweaty chests pressed together, which wasn't ideal for the angle, but it didn't really matter. Ilya let Shane cling to him. He clung to Shane. He buried his face in Shane's neck on his left side and fucked him harder, feeling his orgasm building in his core, and by the way Shane was clenching around him and moaning in his ear, he was close too.

Then Shane was squeezing him tighter, curling into him, and in his thready voice, "Ilya." *Three Ilyas.*

Ilya felt the warm, wet splash of cum between their stomachs, Shane tightening around his cock, his name in Shane's wrecked voice still caressing him all over, and he thrust into him a few more times before he spilled himself inside of Shane and whispered his name against his fever hot skin and then collapsed on top of him, still aware enough to keep his weight off his right shoulder.

"Am I hurting you?" he asked after a few moments.

"No." Shane tightened his arm around his back, his fingers moving gently against Ilya's scalp now, not tugging any longer.

Eventually, reluctantly, Ilya lifted his head, finding Shane smiling shyly up at him. He kissed him and then pulled out, sitting up on his knees. “Are you staying?”

Shane nodded, his face going soft, but there was something else there too, maybe hesitant, worried, regretful... Ilya couldn't tell, and he didn't want to, so he brushed a thumb across Shane's cheek and said, “Be right back.”

Ilya cleaned up and brought a washcloth back for Shane. When they were both at least somewhat clean and less sweaty, Ilya stretched out next to him. Shane's eyes were already blinking sleepily, probably exhausted from his game and the sex. Ilya ran a hand lightly over his shoulder where he could already see the angry red and purple bruise blooming.

“You need to ice this?” he asked.

“I'll do it tomorrow. It's really not that bad. I've had much worse.”

Ilya nodded, not wanting to think about that. “At least you won.”

“You watched?”

“Yes, most of it.”

“With Svetlana?”

Ilya knew that was coming. “Yes.”

“And you two aren't...together?”

Ilya sucked in his bottom lip and thought about what he wanted to say. “We are not in a relationship, no.”

Shane was looking at him expectantly, hearing the ‘but’ that Ilya left silent. His fingers were tracing idly across Shane's chest while he decided what else to reveal.

“We grew up together. She has been here for all the worst moments. And all the best. We applied to all the same colleges and went to the one we both got into.” He needed Shane to know the full story because even if this thing between them was temporary, Svetlana was not.

Shane nodded. “That sounds nice. She's important to you.”

“Very.” Ilya paused, needing to say the rest of it. “There is nothing romantic, but we do fuck sometimes.” He said it as lightly and casually as he could, but he could see the little flinch pass through Shane's features. Ilya wanted to be annoyed by it...should be annoyed by it. Shane wasn't his, he wasn't Shane's, and he never would be. Shane didn't have any right to an opinion on this, on the only person in his life who was always there for him. And yet...

“Not lately, though,” Ilya said and dragged a thumb across Shane's bottom lip. He could physically feel him relax.

“Oh.” Shane swallowed and took a deep breath. “Do either of you ever go to games?”

“Mm, Sveta does sometimes. I haven’t been to one in a long time.” The last time he’d gone, Shane was just barely past being a rookie. Ilya hadn’t paid significant attention to him, other than to admire his skills. Mostly.

“Would you want to?”

Ilya cocked his head. “Why are you asking?”

“I get two tickets for every home game. My parents use them when they’re in town. Sometimes other friends or family.” Ilya was holding his breath. “If you and Svetlana came together...”

Ilya exhaled. Right. A man and a woman together, super not gay. The only way he could associate himself with Shane Hollander.

“Only if you want to. You won’t hurt my feelings if you don’t.”

“Maybe,” Ilya said carefully, desperately and simultaneously wanting and not wanting to. “I’m sure Sveta would love that. Thank you.”

Shane nodded nervously. “We play here on Tuesday, in Ottawa on Thursday, which is Thanksgiving, I guess, and then here again on Friday. But I know this week is busy for you. Maybe sometime in December?”

“Sure. I will ask her.”

Ilya brushed Shane’s damp hair off his forehead, then dragged a finger down his temple. He couldn’t stop touching him, even if he wanted to. And he didn’t.

“You sure it’s okay if I stay?” Shane asked, his eyes looking heavier by the second.

“Yes, I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me too.”

Ilya reached behind him to turn out the lamp. Shane started to turn over toward him on his right side, let out a low noise of pain, then stopped.

“The other way,” Ilya said. Shane turned the other way, and Ilya spooned against his back. Already a familiar position that made Ilya immediately relax, his own eyes drooping. “Do you need an alarm?”

“Probably not. I don’t need to be at the rink until late morning.”

“Vanya will wake us up before then, don’t worry.”

Shane laughed quietly. “I figured.”

“Goodnight, Shane.” He pressed his lips to the back of Shane’s neck briefly, then settled into the pillows.

“Goodnight, Ilya.” *Four Ilyas.*

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Shane woke to something walking on him, which should have been startling because Shane had never woken to anything walking on him before in his life. But he reached up before even opening his eyes, hand landing on soft fur.

“Hi,” he whispered, and then Vanya’s head was rubbing against his jaw. It was a nice way to wake up, made better by the warm body pressed against his right side. His shoulder was still sore and had stiffened overnight, but otherwise, he was so comfortable he never wanted to move.

Ilya stirred next to him, and then those eyes like sun-dappled seawater were blinking at him in the low light coming in from the window. God, why was his body already throbbing? He’d been awake for one minute. Ilya’s eyes had been on him for a mere ten seconds.

“He woke you up?” Ilya asked, voice sleepy and mumbling.

“Yeah, but it’s okay.”

Ilya turned to look at the clock. “I guess we should get up. Already after 7.”

“What do you do on Mondays?” Shane asked, remembering that the store was closed today.

“Errands, catch up on ordering and shipping stuff. Maybe fucking hockey players who are in my bed.”

Shane laughed and nudged him with his shoulder, which had been a mistake. He groaned, and Ilya sat up.

“You okay? They checked your shoulder last night, right?”

Shane nodded. “They did. It’s fine, just hit at a bad angle but no joint separation.”

“Must have been hard to bruise through the pads.”

“Yeah. I saw him coming but couldn’t move in time.” He shrugged, then winced. “I’m okay. I might have to take it easy at practice today, but it should be fine for tomorrow’s game.”

Shane had noted how concerned Ilya had been the night before, how even when he was lost to their shared pleasure, he made sure not to jostle or push on his shoulder. It was sweet and made Shane feel cared for. People were always fussing over his injuries and making sure he was in perfect physical condition, but only because they needed him that way. He was an asset with a price on it. Not to Ilya. *My Shane.* He shuddered at the memory.

Vanya walked over to Ilya, stepping onto his exposed back and meowing. “I am already awake, Vanya. You are the worst.” Shane smiled at the affection in Ilya’s voice. “I’m going to go feed him. I’ll be back.”

Shane watched him get out of the bed, still stark naked, muscles flexing, ass so perfect that Shane might've argued against its existence before he witnessed it himself. He heard Ilya stop in the bathroom, and when he moved on to the kitchen, Shane got up to take his turn. He really should start remembering to bring a toothbrush with him. He at least borrowed some mouthwash like last time and swished thoroughly. In the mirror above the sink, he was surprised to see the smile on his face. A dopey smile that Ilya must get to see a lot lately. Shane bet Rose didn't see this smile on him much, if ever, during their short relationship. Thinking about Rose somehow led to thinking about Svetlana. Was Shane jealous? His chest still went tight every time he thought about her, especially now that he knew they were... whatever they were...romantic relationship or not. He was having a decidedly immature reaction to it and wanted to keep Ilya all to himself. He knew that Ilya wasn't his to keep, but it's not like Ilya had turned him down yet. He always seemed just as interested in what they were doing as Shane.

He went back into the bedroom with the intention of putting on some clothes before he went to meet Ilya in the kitchen, but Ilya was there, on the bed, still naked, his mouth upturned into something between a smile and a smirk. His hands were behind his head on the headboard, elbows out, looking much too tempting, so when he patted one of his thighs, Shane did not hesitate to crawl onto the bed and straddle his lap. Ilya's arms immediately wrapped around him and pulled him into a kiss. He tasted like toothpaste, and Shane once again hoped the mouthwash was enough.

Kissing Ilya always made Shane feel like he was floating and sinking and being consumed and consuming and a million other things that he could feel in his skin and his mouth and his cock and his chest, and it was almost overwhelming; he felt like he'd burn up if he didn't stop, but he'd die if he did.

And in that moment, I swear we were infinite.

He sighed into Ilya's mouth. Or maybe it was a moan or a whimper, he couldn't tell because his hand was at the back of Ilya's neck, tangled in his curls, and his cock was rubbing against Ilya's stomach, needing more friction, and Ilya's was rubbing against his ass, and maybe he needed that too. Shane didn't have as much to compare to, but he believed Ilya when he said it wasn't always like this. How could it always be like this?

He felt Ilya stretch toward the nightstand without breaking the kiss and then he heard the click of a cap, and he half expected to feel a finger on his hole, but instead Ilya pulled first one leg out from between Shane's and then the other until Shane was cradled between them and lying on top of him. Then Ilya's hand was wrapping around their cocks and stroking them together, slick and tight, and Shane was fucking into his fist while Ilya moaned into his mouth, sharing breath, lips brushing but not kissing, both of them too far gone already. Shane couldn't get enough of Ilya's needy little moans and groans and the rare whisper of something in Russian that he wished he could remember and look up later, but his brain was barely operating at base level and couldn't manage it just then. He liked that Ilya was never quiet during sex because it was hot, and it made him feel better about not being quiet.

Shane should have been embarrassed that while his body was about to fly apart into a million pieces because Ilya was stroking him and rubbing against him and kissing him and moaning

into his ear, he was having the very clear thought that Svetlana couldn't do this with him. Maybe Ilya did this with other men, but Shane didn't know about them. And maybe this wasn't even very exciting for Ilya anyway, but it was something. God, he *was* jealous. Svetlana knew about him, could ruin him, and his brain was only worried about this. He really was in deep.

"Fuck, Ilya," he moaned against Ilya's neck, and a low, broken noise slipped from Ilya's throat, and his body went taut against Shane and there was slick warmth against Shane's cock, and he looked between their bodies just in time to see Ilya coming against him, which was enough to push Shane over the edge. He pressed himself closer to Ilya, buried his face in his neck while he spilled himself over Ilya's fist and cock, and his hips stuttered and stilled, Ilya's hand still wrapped around them both.

Shane let himself collapse more fully against Ilya, savoring the fact that Ilya could take his weight, seemed to want it even, as his arms came up to wrap around Shane, and he didn't even care that Ilya's hand was wet against his back.

When he'd caught his breath, he lifted his head and pressed his lips to Ilya's, gentle now that they were spent. He moved to kiss Ilya's temple and then his forehead, not even knowing where the desire to be that tender came from, but he felt like a man possessed, or at least like a possessive man. Ilya was looking at him with parted lips and disbelieving eyes, and Shane wanted to kiss that look away too, so he did.

"You want to shower?" Ilya asked eventually, when Shane's face was nuzzled into his neck again. "And then I'll make coffee."

Shane nodded against him and then peeled himself off, their sweaty skin not wanting to be parted. The shower was quick and crowded, and hands only roamed enough to wash each other, and not unlike the first time, showering together was surprisingly intimate. It also felt like something had shifted, but Shane wasn't sure if it was just him, and he also didn't know why or how or what to do about it. Thinking about it too hard was making him dizzy and anxious, and he only wanted to bask in the afterglow so he pushed it far, far away and let Ilya gently wash him clean. They dried off and got dressed, and Shane sat at the kitchen table while Vanya circled his ankles.

"Is this right?" Ilya asked, setting a mug in front of him. Shane took a sip, and there was already cream and sugar in it, but only the tiny bit that Shane preferred during the season.

"It's perfect. Thank you." Ilya smiled and sat next to him, and Shane's chest was too tight just because Ilya already knew exactly how he took his coffee.

"Do you want breakfast?"

"No, that's okay. I need to get going in a few. I'll grab something at home before I go to practice. Thank you, though."

"So, tomorrow you play here?"

Shane nodded. “Yep. St. Louis. And then we leave Wednesday to head to Ottawa for a game on Thursday. Friday we play here again.”

“Busy week.”

“For you too.”

“Yes, but not too bad. We don’t get the true Black Friday crowds.”

“Will you do anything on Thanksgiving?”

“I have an invitation to a friend’s house,” Ilya said and shrugged one shoulder. “I will probably go for a while at least.”

Shane tried to stop his next words, he really did. “Is Svetlana going?”

The corners of Ilya’s mouth twitched. “Most likely, yes. It is a mutual friend.”

“Cool.”

“Don’t worry, I will still watch your game.”

“You don’t have to.”

“That one is in your hometown, yes?”

“Yeah, it is. My parents will be at the game. They love when we play in Ottawa.”

Ilya was looking at him with a curious expression. “Do they know?”

“About...me?”

Ilya nodded.

“Uh, no,” Shane said, gaze dropping to his hands. “I wasn’t exaggerating when I said it was only you and Rose.”

“They would not be okay with it?”

Shane took a deep breath and let it out through his nose. “I don’t know. I mean, no, I think they would be. It’s just...” He shook his head once, trying not to get stuck in the ‘what if’ of it all; he’d spent enough time there already. “I’ll tell them one day.”

Shane glanced up to see that Ilya’s expression had shifted into something unreadable, but whatever it was, it made Shane’s stomach squeeze uneasily.

“I should probably get going,” he said, setting his empty mug down.

Ilya stood and put their mugs in the sink. “I’ll walk you down.”

Vanya joined them too, sprinting down the stairs and circling at the bottom until Ilya let him into the store.

“Bye, buddy. See you next time,” Shane said, bending to pet Vanya by the front door. “I’ll text you later?” he said when he straightened up to find Ilya very close to him. Close enough that he could lean forward and kiss him if we wanted to. He looked back over his shoulder at the street outside. A couple was walking by, not looking into the shop windows, but Shane waited until they were out of sight before he leaned in. Ilya’s lips met his, so warm and familiar, and Shane suddenly wanted to go back upstairs and never leave. Instead, he pulled back and gave Ilya another smile, ignoring the same unreadable expression back on his face, before pushing through the glass door and leaving before he found a reason not to.

-

Shane had his shoulder checked out at practice, and the medical staff told him he’d be better off letting it rest until the next day. It was just bruised and strained. He skated and worked with a rookie on shooting, then did some workouts in the gym that didn’t require any pressure on the joint.

In the locker room after, Cliff sat in front of his stall next to him.

“Want to grab lunch? I’ve hardly seen you off the ice lately,” he said, shoving stuff into his bag. “Connors is out today.”

Shane didn’t have any plans really. He wanted to see Ilya, but he’d just seen him this morning. And last night. And the night before. Ilya probably needed a break from him.

“Yeah, where are you thinking?”

“Let’s hit up that new sushi place on Boylston.”

Shane met Cliff at the restaurant after they’d finished up at the practice center. They ordered food and chatted about the season and the game against St. Louis the next day. But as Shane knew it would, the conversation shifted to the one thing he wished he could avoid.

“So, how’s it going with your new girlfriend?” Cliff asked between bites of sushi, chopsticks held clumsily between his fingers.

Shane tilted his head and gave him a look. “You know I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“What happened with the one you were texting at the club?”

“Nothing. I barely know her.”

“Hollz, I’ve known you for 6 years, and you’ve never once been as happy and...” he waved one hand in front of him, palm up, like he was trying to pull words from the air, “like relaxed but on edge at the same time. It’s been a couple of months of this now. You weren’t even like this when you were with Rose.”

Was that true? Well, the Rose part definitely was. But he'd been pretty happy every time they made it to the playoffs. Really happy when they won the cup. He was happy and relaxed when he was at the cottage, which Cliff had visited a couple of times. But Cliff was right, he'd never been this happy before, and that revelation was too big to be having in a sushi restaurant.

Once again, he wondered what would happen if he just told Cliff. Ilya was having another entirely different effect on him because a book quote popped into his head, one that had been tumbling around since he read Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda. *And this gay thing. It feels so big. It's almost insurmountable. I don't know how to tell them something like this and still come out of it feeling like Simon.* How could he tell Cliff and still come out feeling like Hollz? Like Hollander? Like Shane Hollander, captain of the Boston Raiders? What if no one wanted just Shane?

He'd slipped his phone out of his pocket without even realizing it. He glanced down at it, still trying to decide what to tell Cliff. It was resting on his thigh under the table, and he was startled to see that he'd already unlocked it and clicked on his text thread with Ilya. Maybe there was one person who wanted just Shane.

"I was happy with Rose," he said finally.

Cliff gave him a look. "You flinched every time you got a text from her. I mean, I get it, she's hot. But she seemed really normal and down to earth, right?"

"Yeah, of course. She's great. I told you, we're still friends. She's coming to visit in a couple weeks."

"Oh," Cliff said, dragging the word out like a tease. "She's coming all the way to Boston to visit even after you broke up? Damn, Hollz."

"It's not like that." Shane's ears went hot. "She's stopping here for a couple days before she goes to New York to film something. I'm just on the way." Then he added for good measure, "I'm not dating anyone right now."

Cliff nodded and then looked wistful. "It'd be nice though, right? To settle down?"

Shane's eyes went wide. "What? *You* want to settle down?"

"I don't know. I think about it sometimes. Having someone to come home to after a week on the road, someone in the stands when we're here. I mean shit, half our team is married with multiple kids."

Shane was surprised to hear that from Cliff, who had never once in the 6 years Shane had known him indicated that he wanted somebody waiting at home for him. He seemed to relish the ability to go out and pick up someone new on any given night.

"Yeah," Shane said softly. "It would be nice to have someone to come home to." He looked down at the phone still in his lap, still open to Ilya's texts. He locked it and slipped it back in pocket. "I just don't really have time for that right now."

Cliff sighed. “Yeah, that’s true. Plus, I’ve never met anyone worth giving up the embarrassment of riches we’re used to.”

Shane laughed, more because he did not partake in that embarrassment of riches the way Cliff did, and Cliff knew that. “You’ve got plenty of time, buddy. We’re only 25.”

“So is Reid, and he already has 12 kids.”

“I think it’s 3,” Shane said with a laugh. “And he looks like he hasn’t slept since rookie season, so...”

“Good point. That’s probably why he never wants to play ball anymore. Speaking of which, we’re playing on Monday next week. Don’t even try to get out of it.”

“I’ll be there.” He tried not to feel disappointed that it would be more time away from Ilya and then reminded himself that time with Ilya wasn’t guaranteed anyway. Because Ilya wasn’t his.

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Ilya was having a hard time focusing on work. The store was closed since it was Monday, but he had orders to pack and shelves to stock before the increase in business he’d hopefully have during the rest of the week. His mind was on Shane Hollander, per usual. They hadn’t even known each other a full two months yet, and somehow he’d wormed his way into Ilya’s every waking moment. But today he was thinking about Shane asking to see him last night, and then asking to be fucked, and then inviting him to a game, even if it came with the requirement of Svetlana being with him. This Shane, compared to the Shane of the first couple of times they’d hung out, was much more confident. Ilya was probably the first person he’d ever been able to be himself around. Fully himself, not having to tuck any part away in the back of his closet. How Ilya’s chest had soared, hearing Shane ask for what he wanted, and how it had fallen when he remembered that Ilya was just a temporary detour for him, a way to explore without risk.

It is better to be unhappy and know the worst, than to be happy in a fool's paradise.

At least he knew it. He knew that Shane would move on one day, and knowing sucked, but at least it wouldn’t be a surprise. And he would keep doing it anyway, because he was still a fool. If it meant Shane would be more confident and sure of what he wanted in the future, when he was ready to face it, at least Ilya could feel good about helping him get there. Even if the thought of him getting there with someone else made him feel like punching something.

His phone buzzed in his pocket around 6pm while he was digging through boxes in the storeroom, startling him out of his very unhelpful mental wandering.

Shane: Did you have a good day?

Ilya snorted and rolled his eyes, mostly at himself for how his pulse ticked up, and his stomach did the thing just at seeing Shane’s name, even after his own very real reminders

about what this was.

Ilya: yep, got a lot done

Shane: Still working?

Ilya: almost finished

Did he dare ask why Shane was asking? He waited.

Shane: I probably won't be free again until Saturday.

Ilya shook his head, still smiling. He would make Shane work for this one. He didn't respond. It only took a minute.

Shane: But I'm free tonight.

Ilya: ask what you want to ask, Shane Hollander

Shane: Do you want to hang out?

Ilya let his head knock against the shelf.

Ilya: you want to come here or me to come there?

Shane: I'll come there if it's okay.

Ilya: yes, obviously, or I wouldn't have said so

Ilya: Vanya will be pleased

Shane: Now?

Ilya: sure, I'm in the shop

Ilya: door will be open

"Your best friend is coming," Ilya said to Vanya, who was sitting in the storeroom's doorway, watching him. Ilya walked past him to go unlock the front door, then he returned to what he was doing. His body was already pulsing with anticipation and need. Humiliating.

About 10 minutes later, he heard the bell on the door jingle, then the sound of the lock sliding into place. Ilya stood up from where he was kneeling just in time to be pulled against Shane's body, lips smashing together before he could even steady himself. He wrapped his arms around Shane and kissed him back, happy to be devoured.

Shane pulled back, smiling. "Hi."

"Missed me?"

Shane dipped his head. "Maybe."

Ilya laughed. "I think we should add another rule."

“What?”

“The first one was that you aren't allowed to be embarrassed about anything in front of me. Second rule...honesty only.”

Shane's smile pursed nervously, and Ilya cursed himself because he was dooming himself more than Shane. But he didn't care. He wanted it.

“Tell me something true, or tell me nothing at all,” he said, leaning in so the words grazed Shane's ear, and Ilya could feel them work their way through Shane's body like a tremble.

“What's that from?” Shane asked, his voice low.

“A book I have not given you yet.”

“But you will?”

Ilya nodded. “Yes, I will. One day.” He actually hadn't planned to, because if they played their highlighting and book-swapping game with it, it might reveal too much. But now he'd said it in the same breath he'd asked for honesty.

“So. Did you miss me?” he asked again, letting those words whisper against Shane's ear too .

“Yes,” Shane said, this time without hesitation.

“Good. Let's go upstairs.”

Ilya didn't even stop walking when they got inside his apartment, except to close the door and lock it. He went straight to the bedroom, Shane following, neither of them pretending they wanted anything else right now.

Clothes came off, Ilya let himself indulge in kissing his way around Shane's body, lingering a little longer on the bruises and scrapes, knowing that hockey players were always battered and bruised. He'd never had to think or care about it beyond his own skin, so many years ago, and now it was a reminder that Shane was human, tough but human, and he put his body on the line almost daily.

They fucked slow and sweet, face to face again, under the guise of resting Shane's shoulder, but Ilya just wanted to watch his face while they both fell apart against each other. Another thing he shouldn't spend too much time thinking about...when was the last time he'd fucked another man in this position? When was the last time he wanted to? He'd never felt any desire to watch their faces while he slid in and out of their bodies. Now he was fighting to keep his eyes open so he could watch the warm brown ones locked on his, so he could press his lips to the freckles beneath them and kiss the mouth open on a moan that occasionally contained his name and nearly made him weep with how much he still needed to hear it.

As if he knew, Shane said it again when he came, while he tightened around Ilya's cock and his body and his heart. His hand was in Ilya's hair where it belonged, tugging, his other arm pulling Ilya in close, and Ilya would never tire of the way Shane clung to him when he came, like Ilya was an anchor, a safe place when all his walls were down.

Ilya followed him over the edge, burying himself as far as he could in Shane's body, then collapsing onto him, careful of his weight but still letting Shane take it until he caught his breath and got up to clean them both off. He curled back around Shane after, head resting on his left shoulder, Shane's hand back in the curls on his neck.

"I like these," Shane said after a while.

"I have noticed. I like your hand there."

Shane's fingers moved a little more insistently, dragging through them and brushing against his neck, sending goosebumps down his body.

"Have you eaten?" Ilya asked before words dislodged themselves from places they should stay hidden.

"No."

"I have stuff to make chicken stir fry. You want that?"

"Sure, that'd be great. I'll make it up to you next time and bring dinner." Ilya didn't let himself linger on *next time*.

They both got up and pulled on some clothes. Shane helped him cut up vegetables and then sat at the table with a can of ginger ale while he cooked. They talked about Cut & Run while they ate.

"Ty and Zane are very popular among people who read that genre," Ilya said. "I was reading posts about the best MM couples, and they are often at the top of the list."

Shane nodded. "I can see that. The tension and the way they hated each other first...kind of hot."

Ilya laughed, enjoying the casual way Shane could talk about things like that now. When they were done eating, he put the plates in the sink and stood up.

"Want to watch tv? Or read?" Ilya was already starting to think of that as their own little post-sex ritual, even if they had detoured for dinner first. Shane did not disappoint.

"Sure. Your turn to read."

"Okay."

In the living room, he stood in front of his bookshelf, trying to decide what to pick.

"We could finish Cut & Run?" They were just over 75% through it.

Shane didn't look thrilled. "What about something else we've already read?"

Ilya nodded. He foolishly picked up *The Song of Achilles* and held it up. Shane's smile widened, so Ilya brought it over to the couch and sat down next to him, then pulled Shane

against him.

He flipped through the pages, wondering if he should pick a safe place to read from or return the favor and pick something more telling, as Shane had done with Call Me By Your Name. He opened to chapter 15 and started reading.

“That evening, when we had set aside our dinners, Achilles lay back on the bed...”

While he read, Shane’s face nuzzled against his shoulder, hair tickling his jaw. Ilya kept reading, trying to keep his voice even and his hand steady in front of him. He managed for a few paragraphs.

“Achilles was looking at me. ‘Your hair never quite lies flat here.’ He touched my head, just behind my ear. ‘I don’t think I ever told you how I like it.’”

Shane’s hand crept up his neck to thread through his curls again.

“My scalp prickled where his fingers had been. ‘You haven’t,’ I said. ‘I should have.’ His hand drifted down to the vee at the base of my throat, drew softly across the pulse. ‘What about this? Have I told you what I think of this, just here?’”

Shane’s hand slowly moved to his neck, fingers dragging against the sensitive skin under his jaw, over his pulse, and Ilya paused briefly to swallow before his voice continued, lower than before.

“‘No,’ I said.

‘This surely, then.’ His hand moved across the muscles of my chest; my skin warmed beneath it.

‘Have I told of this?’”

Ilya was waiting for it. Shane used his other hand to caress down Ilya’s chest, lingering there, thumb brushing his nipple through his t-shirt. Ilya inhaled deeply through his nose and kept reading.

“‘That you have told me.’ My breath caught a little as I spoke.

‘And what of this?’ His hand lingered over my hips, drew down the line of my thigh. ‘Have I spoken of it?’

‘You have.’

‘And this? Surely, I would not have forgotten this.’ His cat’s smile. ‘Tell me I did not.’”

Shane’s hand fell to his lap, pushing along his thigh, fingers digging in a little, enough to pull a low sound from Ilya’s throat before the next words made it past his lips.

“‘You did not.’

‘There is this too.’ His hand was ceaseless now. ‘I know I have told you of this.’ I closed my eyes.

‘Tell me again,’ I said.”

Shane's hand slipped beneath the waistband of his sweatpants, and Ilya set the book down beside him. He briefly allowed himself, before he surrendered to Shane's warm hand and insistent mouth, to think about Patroclus and Achilles and their fates. *There was more to say, but for once we did not say it. There would be other times for speaking, tonight and tomorrow and all the days after that.* Ilya tried to believe that while Shane Hollander once again consumed him.

Chapter End Notes

No new books mentioned in this chapter...though there is a quote from a book that will be included in a later chapter. It breaks the timeline, but I make the rules here. There will be more plot in the next chapter too, we just had to get some more feelings first. I know everyone was worried about Svetlana showing up too, but see...a whole chapter to allay those fears. We're good here. Still reading, still vibing.

[Book list doc](#)

Quotes:

It was almost like fear, in the way it filled me, rising in my chest. It was almost like tears, in how swiftly it came.

But it was neither of those, buoyant where they were heavy, bright where they were dull.
- The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller

And in that moment, I swear we were infinite. -The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky

It is better to be unhappy and know the worst, than to be happy in a fool's paradise. -
The Idiot by Fyodor Dostoevsky

Chapter 10: I just gotta get out of this prison cell

Chapter Notes

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

Boston won against St. Louis the next evening. Shane played just as well as he always did, but his shoulder was still fucked. He got home at almost midnight, barely making it into his apartment before his phone was in his hand.

Shane: Hey, how was your night?

I.R.: good

I.R.: watched some boring hockey

Shane smiled. He'd been hoping, as he always was now, that Ilya had been watching. Before he could respond, another message popped up.

I.R.: how's your shoulder?

Shane: Still fucked. Just sore though. It's fine.

I.R.: maybe you need a massage?

Shane: I had one earlier today. I think it helped some.

Belatedly he realized that maybe Ilya had meant something else entirely and quickly added:

Shane: I could probably use another.

I.R.: I know a masseuse who makes house calls

I.R.: want me to send them over?

Shane definitely wanted.

Shane: Do they make house calls at midnight?

I.R.: for you, yes

Shane: I'll be waiting then.

He quickly changed clothes and then went downstairs to wait, still feeling slightly bad about the many flights of stairs. It was late...he could just take Ilya in through the front and use the elevator. But he was already down the stairwell, and then Ilya was there, stepping through the doorway.

Shane didn't hesitate to crowd Ilya against the wall and kiss him, and Ilya didn't seem to mind based on the way his arms immediately snaked around Shane's waist and pressed their bodies together.

“Hi,” Shane said, pulling back with what he knew was a goofy, but hopefully fond, smile on his face. Ilya was wearing one too. “Let’s go upstairs.”

“I’m going to have to start working out more if you keep inviting me here,” Ilya said around the 4th floor.

Shane laughed. “I’m sorry. Want me to carry you?”

Ilya bumped his left shoulder. “What if I said yes?”

“We can test it when my shoulder is less fucked.”

Ilya snorted. “If you can carry me up 8 flights of stairs…” He shook his head.

“I do workout a lot.”

“I have noticed, Shane Hollander.”

They made it to the 8th floor, snapping back together like magnets as soon as the front door was shut behind them. Shane pulled Ilya through the living room, down the hall, into the bedroom, barely separating, half tripping over each. It was sort of bewildering, this overwhelming desire that apparently couldn’t be quenched for even hours at a time anymore. If he thought about it too much, about what it may mean, he might have felt a little panicked. But it felt too good, and Shane really just wanted to feel good and to make Ilya feel good.

“Get on the bed,” Ilya said, pulling his clothes off. Shane was slipping out of his pants, folding them in half to set on the chair in one corner of his room. Ilya just tossed his clothes by the bed. Shane laid himself out on the mattress, half leaning against the headboard, watching Ilya as he stalked closer. “Do you have oil?”

Shane’s brows drew together. “What?”

“Massage, remember?”

“Oh. I didn’t think you were really going to do that.”

“Why not? You don’t want my hands all over you?”

Shane bit his lip against a smile. “I do. I don’t have oil though.”

“That’s okay. Turn over.”

Shane shifted down and then onto his stomach, eyes still trained over his shoulder to watch Ilya, who was looking at him like a spread of something delicious. He crawled onto the bed and up Shane’s body, his thighs bracketing Shane’s ass as he leaned forward to put his hands lightly on Shane’s upper back.

“Tell me if I hurt you, okay?”

Shane nodded, and Ilya's hands started massaging, thumbs digging in beside his shoulder blades. Shane moaned at how good it felt, both his hands and the way his ass pressed against Shane's, and thus pushed his cock harder into the mattress beneath him.

"Good?" Ilya asked.

"Mhm. Why are you so good at this?"

Ilya laughed and leaned in, lips close to his ears. "I'm not, you're just horny."

Shane snorted and pushed his hips against the bed again. "Maybe."

"Ah ah ah," Ilya tutted. "Honesty only."

Shane rolled his eyes, even though Ilya probably couldn't see. "Fine. Yes. But it does feel really good." Ilya's hands had worked their way up and out to the tops of his shoulders, his biceps, and then slipped below them near his armpits, which made him squirm.

"Stop," Shane whined playfully. "I'm ticklish."

"Probably shouldn't have told me that," Ilya said, dragging his fingers lightly up his sides again and not stopping, making Shane squirm until he managed to turn over onto his back and grab Ilya's wrists. Ilya was grinning down at him, clearly enjoying it, so Shane rolled them until he was on top, Ilya's wrists pinned to the bed. Shane let himself lie fully on top of him, wrists still held down, and kissed him. Ilya moaned into his mouth.

"Another benefit of working out a lot." Shane pushed Ilya's wrists further up the bed to emphasize his point, only to be summarily rolled onto his back again, Ilya using the moment of surprise to twist his wrists from Shane's grip and pin him instead.

He was grinning again. "Guess you should work out more."

Shane laughed, but he was very okay with this turn of events, happily letting Ilya pin him down and kiss him until they were both rocking their hips together, the kiss getting more and more messy, lips sliding together with no rhythm.

"Is this hurting your shoulder?" Ilya asked, his voice breathy against Shane's lips.

"No." Shane realized that even though Ilya had his wrists pinned, his grip on his right one was loose and not really holding him down like his left was. He was about three seconds and one well-positioned thrust away from coming, but Ilya's continued concern pushed past that. He wanted to say something, anything, that would make it clear he cared about Ilya just as much and wished he could pull book quotes out of thin air the way Ilya could. "Thank you," was the best he could come up with, but Ilya's face softened before he kissed him again.

"I thought you weren't free again until Saturday," Ilya said, and Shane did not know how he was trying to hold a conversation right now.

"Didn't know in-home massage was an option." His words turned into a moan as Ilya rubbed against him again.

“Mm, guaranteed happy ending too.” Ilya leaned down to kiss his neck, and Shane’s body was basically in a liquid state, no longer a fixed shape. His pinned wrists and Ilya’s lips and their hard cocks rubbing together were the only solid things left.

“Ilya.” It came out like a plea, and Shane felt Ilya’s body collapse more heavily onto him, like his spoken name had cut a string. Shane welcomed it. He let Ilya’s mouth and body take him apart until he was coming, and then Ilya was coming, and both of their names were in the air between them, safe words hiding perilous ones.

“I should probably go,” Ilya said after they'd both regained control of their breathing.

“You don’t want to stay?” Shane tried not to let disappointment creep into his voice, but he wanted nothing more than to curl around Ilya and fall asleep.

“I’ll have to leave early to feed Vanya. And you have practice, yes?”

“Yeah. But...I want you to stay.” He was going to make an excuse about it being late or the walk being short in the morning anyway or that he didn’t have practice that early. But the truth was, he just wanted him to stay. Honesty, as Ilya requested.

Ilya’s face softened into a smile. “Okay. But you have to read to me.”

Shane smiled too, this ritual almost as satisfying as the sex. “Yeah,” he said, stifling a yawn.

Ilya brushed the hair off his forehead affectionately. “You’re too sleepy. Let me.”

Shane reached over and grabbed *Call Me By Your Name* from his nightstand drawer. He hadn’t put it away in the closet last time. Risky maybe, though the cleaning service certainly had no reason to be poking around in his nightstand. It was still a risk he wouldn’t have taken before.

Ilya took the book from him and flipped through the pages while Shane settled in, snuggling closer and letting his head rest next to Ilya’s shoulder.

“But it might have started way later than I think without my noticing anything at all. You see someone, but you don’t really see him, he’s in the wings. Or you notice him, but nothing clicks, nothing “catches,” and before you’re even aware of a presence, or of something troubling you, the six weeks that were offered you have almost passed and he’s either already gone or just about to leave, and you’re basically scrambling to come to terms with something, which, unbeknownst to you, has been brewing for weeks under your very nose and bears all the symptoms of what you’re forced to call I want.”

Shane listened, wondered at the choice, but he was sated and tired, and Ilya was warm against him and his voice lulled him to sleep.

-

Ilya left early the next morning, after blowjobs and a few desperate kisses, as if they wouldn’t be able to see each other again in a few days. But Ilya would be lying if he said he wouldn’t miss him while he was gone. He would also be lying if he said that wasn’t a problem. Luckily

he spent Wednesday and part of Thursday readying the store for Black Friday, and joined Svetlana and a handful of friends at Lance's house for Thanksgiving. They always made it a potluck, and it'd mostly become everyone bringing either something cultural or something fun.

Svetlana had come over late morning on Thursday, and they made pelmeni together. It was becoming tradition now. They were even making an extra batch with mushroom filling this year for their friends Yasmin and Cody, who were both vegetarians.

"So," Svetlana said while she rolled out the dough. "How's your hockey player?"

Ilya was impressed it had taken her this long to bring him up. "He's not my hockey player. And he is fine I guess. You already know where he is today."

"Mhm. You seem awfully happy lately."

Ilya rolled his eyes. "How would you know?"

"I can tell the difference, even in texts. I know when you're having one of your bad days. Obviously I also know when you're having an exceptionally good day."

Ilya sighed. She was good at spotting a bad day, even when he didn't realize he was having one sometimes. The days when everything was too heavy, and he either felt too empty or too full of the wrong things.

"Maybe I have been happy," he said honestly.

"I'm glad. You deserve that. But..." she said, dragging the word out. Ilya knew what was coming. "Is he ever going to come out?"

Ilya looked away from her. "I don't know. You know what the MLH is like."

"That would certainly shake things up." She gestured for him to start with the filling. "How long do you think this can go on without anyone finding out?"

Ilya had asked himself that several times of late. The answer wasn't favorable. "I think he will end it before that happens."

He turned back to face her, finding her eyes on him, an expression a little too close to sympathy on her face. "You good with that?"

No, he wasn't good with it. Of course he wasn't. But what other path forward was there.

"Yes. Why wouldn't I be?" he lied.

She shook her head lightly. "If he breaks your heart and I have to stop liking the Raiders, I'm going to be pissed."

Ilya laughed. "My heart is safe, you can keep your Raiders."

He was glad his hands were occupied because the urge to pull his phone out and look at his texts was nearly overwhelming. He knew Shane was spending time with his parents today, between whatever he had to do before the game and the game itself. They'd texted the night before, Shane filling him in on what he'd read of *The Serpent King*, asking him how his day had been. Ilya had been grateful when Vanya curled up next to him on the pillow, but even still, sleeping without Shane already felt like a disappointment for no good reason.

"And when do I get to see your hockey player again?"

"Stop saying that. He invited us to a game."

She put down the glass she was using to cut the dough into circles. "Really? When?"

Ilya shrugged. He hadn't brought it up because he still wasn't sure he wanted to go. Even though he desperately wanted to go. "Probably anytime. A December game I guess. Why are you looking at me like that? You can go to a game whenever you want. Surely tickets aren't that expensive?"

"That's not the point. He invited you, *us*, to a game? That's kind of a big deal, isn't it?"

Ilya shrugged again and turned to grab the bowl of pork filling. "Just a regular boring hockey game."

Svetlana's head fell dramatically to the side, eyes narrowing. "Ilya. He's inviting you into the place where he has to hide. I think that's a pretty big fucking deal."

"But only if you're with me." He looked up. "And I want you to be, but..."

"Yes, I know," she said sympathetically. "But it's a step. Plus, they're on a tear right now. It's too bad they aren't playing Pittsburgh at home in December."

Ilya rolled his eyes. "I hate that you even know that."

"I bet you knew it too."

He had looked at the schedule a few times. He hadn't dared let himself look more than a couple weeks out, though. Couldn't stand to think about which of those little squares on the calendar might eventually mark the end of...whatever they were doing. And the fact that he couldn't even put a name to it was all the sign he needed that he better pull the fuck back.

-

Later, after their eclectic Thanksgiving dinner, everyone was sitting around Lance's living room, beers in hand, talking and watching tv, which, thanks to Svetlana, was tuned into the Boston v. Ottawa game. Ilya was on the couch talking to Cody while his eyes kept dragging back to the screen, always looking for #24.

"How's the store doing?" Cody asked.

“Not bad, considering. I still have a decent customer base locally, and the online orders have been steady.”

“Man, I envy you sometimes. I know it’s still a lot of work, but I’m already tired of clocking in at 9 and out at 5 and sitting behind a desk all day.”

Cody had been a business major like Svetlana, and he really had no idea what Cody’s job was other than that he worked for a software company and mostly complained about it.

“You could put your degree to use elsewhere, couldn’t you?”

Cody sighed heavily. “Maybe one day.”

Ilya could relate. There were a lot of things he wanted to do, only a few of them pertaining to Shane, and putting them off for another day was too tempting and easy and spared him the disappointment of them not working out. His phone buzzed in his pocket, pulling him away from those thoughts before he had time to worry about them.

Shane: Hey, hope you’re having a good time with your friends.

Ilya looked up at the tv. The teams were off the ice for the break between periods. Shane was texting him from the locker room, and why did that make Ilya feel giddy.

Ilya: I am

Ilya: we are watching your game

Ilya looked up from his phone, feeling rude, but Cody had his phone out too.

Shane: Good because we’re about to win.

Ilya laughed and looked at the score. 3-1 to Boston before the third.

Ilya: never doubted you

Ilya: I’ll be watching

Shane: Talk to you later?

Ilya: I’ll be here

A few minutes later, he watched the teams spill out onto the ice again, and eventually he watched Boston clinch the win. Svetlana had ended up wedged between him and Cody sometime during the third period.

“I told you they’re on a tear. Hollander is unstoppable.” The game was over, and the camera zoomed in on Shane and Marlow knocking helmets, then their other teammates skated over and leaned in, celebrating.

“Mhm,” Ilya agreed. He watched as they peeled apart and the camera stayed on Shane, his smile open and happy, and as if he knew the camera was on him, he looked directly at it and winked. It was so unexpected he turned to look at Svetlana to see if she thought so too.

She glanced at him. "Your boyfriend looks extra happy today," she said quietly. "Was that for you?"

"He's not my boyfriend." The defensive denials were really starting to pile up. "He probably always does that."

She shrugged. "Maybe. Are you ready to go?"

People had been slowly trickling out, but there were still a handful scattered around the living room and kitchen, some voices louder after too many beers. Ilya was ready to go home and wait for a text, or maybe a phone call.

"Yeah," he said, eyes still on screen. "Let's go."

-

Ilya was home and lying on the couch, Vanya sitting on top of the back cushions above him, when his phone finally buzzed again.

Shane: Did you watch the end of the game?

Ilya bit his lip, wondering if this was a loaded question, and decided to go for it.

Ilya: yes

Ilya: who were you winking at? Rose Landry?

Shane Hollander was turning him into a petty idiot. His phone buzzed again, but this time with a call.

"Asshole," Shane said, but in the same tone someone might say 'sweetheart.'

"Well? Then who?"

"You obviously. I'm not sure winking is my style, though. Did I look like an idiot?"

Ilya laughed. "No, I enjoyed it. Very sexy."

Shane groaned. "Anyway. How was your day?"

"Very good. Sveta and I made pelmeni to bring to our friend's house. I ate too much. Someone made baked mac and cheese, and I think it had 4 lbs of cheese in it."

"Uh, I don't know if that's a good thing. What's pelmeni?"

"Mm, they are like little dumplings with meat filling. I will make them for you one day." *One day.* A lot of one days, a lot of maybes.

"I'd like that. You're home now?"

"Yes."

“Alone?”

Ilya smiled, he couldn't help it. “Yes, Shane Hollander. I am alone. Would you like to make good use of that?”

He heard Shane's breath whisper through the speaker. “Oh. Yeah.”

“Are you in bed?”

“Yeah, you?”

“I'm on the couch, but I'll move because someone is sitting right above me.”

“Tell him I said hi.”

“Goodnight, Vanya,” Ilya said, petting the cat. “Your biggest admirer says hi.” Vanya watched him as he stalked out of the living room, and he pulled the bedroom door shut behind him. Vanya would be allowed in after. “What are you wearing?” Ilya asked as he stretched out on the bed, half joking.

“A t-shirt and pajama pants.”

“Glasses?”

“Yeah. I was going to read. You're distracting me.”

“I would like to distract you some more. Switch to facetime.”

The little invite window popped up, and Ilya accepted it. Shane's face came into view, a little too close to the camera before he pulled it back, and Ilya got a perfect view of freckles and glasses and a crooked, cheek-biting smile.

“That's better. Take your shirt off,” Ilya said. He briefly set his phone down and did the same. When he picked it back up, Shane was adjusting his glasses, chest bare. “Now touch yourself.”

Shane laughed. “Impatient tonight?”

Ilya shrugged. “You are alone in bed wearing your glasses, what is there to wait for?” He switched his phone to his left hand so he could do the same. “Let me see.”

Shane hesitated, his lips parting like he was going to protest.

“You are shy now? Even though I have seen your cock up close and personal many times.”

“Shut up,” Shane said playfully and then lowered the phone so Ilya could see his hand wrapped around his cock, and even in the dim light of the hotel room lamp, he could see the tip glistening with precome.

“Already so wet for me.”

The screen snapped back to Shane's face, an incredulous and maybe slightly offended expression tugging at his features. "I'm going to hang up."

"What? No, Shane Hollander. I love it." Shane's face slid into surprise. "All for me, right?"

Shane nodded. "Yeah," he said and dropped the phone back to his hand stroking his cock and deliberately dragged his thumb over the tip, letting precome string between the head and his finger. Ilya's own thumb mimicked the move.

"Taste yourself," he told Shane, his voice already too low and steeped with desire.

The phone screen moved back to Shane's face, to his thumb reaching up to his mouth and pushing in, to his tongue dragging along it, and Ilya had to squeeze the base of his own cock because that almost sent him over the edge already. "Fuck, Shane," he whispered.

It didn't take long for either of them. Their phones moved from face to cock a few times, but when Ilya was close to coming, and Shane's phone was wavering enough to let Ilya know he was too, he told Shane to keep it on his face. "You too," Shane said, breathy voice sending another surge of white hot pleasure through Ilya.

Shane came first, and Ilya watched his face contort with it, the glasses framing his eyes as they squeezed shut, mouth parted on a low moan, and Ilya wished he could catch it on his lips. A few more fast strokes of his own hand had him spurting over his fist, his head tipping back as he listened to Shane's breathing through the speaker, imagined Shane there on top of him, around him. He wasn't sure he could have conjured up anything or anyone else while his body erupted. *Shane Shane Shane*. Even then, in the midst of orgasm, with a flushed and sated Shane blinking at him through the screen, Ilya went to the bad place.

I suddenly realized that we were on borrowed time, that time is always borrowed, and that the lending agency exacts its premium precisely when we are least prepared to pay and need to borrow more.

He came down from the orgasm, eyes fixed on Shane, neither of them saying anything aloud, but it felt like a lot was being said anyway. Eventually they both put the phone down long enough to clean up.

When they were back, Shane's eyelids were heavy, likely with exhaustion now instead of arousal. "Tired?" Ilya asked.

Shane nodded. "Yeah, but..." he trailed off and licked his lips.

"What?"

"I was going to say I wouldn't complain if you read something."

"Of course." Maybe Shane was becoming attached to this too. "Be right back."

He got up to retrieve *The Song of Achilles* from the living room, Vanya nowhere to be found now. Back in bed, he picked up his phone, which was showing Shane's hotel ceiling.

“Did you fall asleep on me?”

“No.” Shane’s face appeared, lying on a white pillow, face a little smushed.

Ilya smiled. “Good, I am not reading to myself. Let’s switch back to a regular call. I can’t hold the phone and the book.” He savored one last look at Shane’s sleepy, relaxed face before the screen went black.

“Okay. Ready?” Ilya asked.

“Mhm.”

Ilya opened the book to a dog-eared page and started reading.

“Later, Achilles sleeps next to me. Odysseus’ storm has come, and the coarse fabric of the tent wall trembles with its force. I hear the stinging slap, over and over, of waves reproaching the shore. He stirs and the air stirs with him, bearing the musk-sweet smell of his body. I think: This is what I will miss. I think: I will kill myself rather than miss it. I think: How long do we have?”

He had chosen poorly, but it didn’t even matter. Shane couldn’t see the way his face had become drawn, the way the words had settled like a weight on his chest, or even the way his pulse stuttered with those last words. He likely hadn’t even heard the way Ilya’s voice broke on the second to last line, because he was already asleep.

-

They didn’t see each other on Friday. Shane flew back to Boston and had to get ready for a game against Calgary that evening, and Ilya and Mallory both worked the store together most of the day to handle the increase in traffic.

Even after the game, which Boston lost 2-1, Shane was exhausted from back-to-back games and travel. He had Saturday mostly off, and they made plans to see each other then.

Ilya went downstairs a little early on Saturday to get the store in order, putting books back in their proper places, restocking a few shelves. By 10, everything was as good as it was going to get, and he unlocked the glass front door. There was a decent flow of people, Ilya suspected due to small business Saturday or whatever they were calling it now. He was appreciative either way. When Mallory arrived around noon, he stayed downstairs with her, much like Thursday. When there was a lull in customers around 5pm, he took the opportunity to run upstairs.

Vanya was already there because Ilya didn’t like him in the shop when it was busy, for his own safety.

“Yes, hello, ingrate,” he said as he stepped inside, only to be greeted with some very offended meowing. “You will live not being down there for a couple of days.” He bent to scoop Vanya up and give him some proper attention so he’d stop wailing. “I think your favorite person might be here later too.”

He let Vanya down and pulled out his phone, finding texts from said person.

Shane: How's your day going?

Shane: Let me know what you want for dinner and I'll bring it over.

Ilya: it's been good

Ilya: give me some options that you are good with

Ilya didn't care much, but Shane would. Shane sent him back a handful of restaurants nearby, and Ilya picked a popular ramen place a few blocks away.

He spent a few minutes to taking care of things upstairs and then headed back down. He helped a couple of people find what they were looking for, picked up some stray books, and around 6:15, his phone buzzed again.

Shane: Be there in about 15 minutes.

Ilya: you can use the back entrance tonight

Ilya: I don't think Mallory knows who you are, but the store is a little busier than usual

Shane: Oh, yeah. Thanks.

The fact that Shane never questioned coming through the front door during business hours was already surprising, and Ilya wondered if he'd just gotten used to the store being fairly empty. Or maybe he was just distracted. It didn't seem like a risk Shane would willingly take just for him. But there was another door to the stairwell, just behind the stairs, so it shouldn't be a problem. It was inconvenient because you had to walk behind several other businesses to reach it, but it was useful for smoking outside by the dumpster. He texted Shane back to tell him where to turn down the alley and met him at the door 15 minutes later.

"Hey," Shane said, smiling, bundled against the cold evening, hands full with bags.

"Hi." Ilya let the door close behind them and then pulled Shane in to kiss him because apparently he couldn't wait until they made it upstairs. Shane leaned into it, both of them much too needy for having been apart only a few days. "Let me take one of those," Ilya said, pulling back and taking one of the bags from Shane's hand.

Upstairs, Vanya was waiting, his meowing sounding suspiciously more joyful in Shane's presence.

"Hi, Vanya. You missed me?" Shane bent to pet him, so Ilya took the other bag and brought both to the kitchen. He turned to find Shane following with Vanya in his arms, and he couldn't hide his smile.

"You two," he said fondly, shaking his head. "Let Shane have dinner first." He reached out to pet Vanya, then up to brush his fingers through Shane's windswept bangs.

Shane's eyes snapped up at his lone first name, which was still usually reserved for bed. Ilya just smiled and turned to the counter to unpack the food. A moment later, there was a solid

body pressed against his back and arms around his waist and a chin on his shoulder, and Ilya nearly melted into the floor.

“I missed you,” Shane said, and Ilya couldn’t fully turn, couldn’t let their eyes meet, but he did press his cheek against the side of Shane’s head.

“I missed you too.” Honesty, even as the calendar squares danced in his head, mocking him. Vanya was slinking between their legs, happy as could be to have them pressed together just for his benefit.

Shane let him go and got drinks out of the fridge, moving around the kitchen like he belonged there. They sat at the table and dug into the ramen, chatting about Ilya’s busy work days and Shane’s busy game and travel days and eventually books.

“You didn’t tell me *The Serpent King* was going to be so sad.”

Ilya tilted his head. “Didn’t want to spoil it. Did you like it?”

“I did, yeah. It’s definitely not a book I would have picked up on my own either. You’re undefeated in book choices.”

Ilya smiled. “Of course I am. Did you have any favorite quotes?”

Shane nodded. “I even put a couple in my notes app, just in case.”

“In case I asked?”

“Maybe.”

Ilya lifted his brows, and Shane smiled. “Fine, yes,” he added.

“Let’s hear them then.”

Shane pulled his phone out. *“Nothing makes you feel more naked than someone identifying a desire you never knew you possessed.”*

Not the one Ilya was expecting. Shane wasn’t looking at him, and it seemed purposeful, avoidant. “Is that how you feel?”

He looked up. “I have. A few times.”

Ilya didn’t think he meant just about his sexuality or bedroom activities, but he didn’t push.

“Something Marly said the other day made me feel that way.” He didn’t leave any space for Ilya to ask further questions. “I also liked this one, but it’s kind of long.” He looked up quickly. *“So when I watch trains, it makes me think about how much movement there is in the world. How every train has dozens of cars and every car has hundreds of parts, and all those parts and cars work day after day. And then there are all these other motions. People are born and die. Seasons change. Rivers flow to the sea. Earth circles the sun and the moon circles Earth. Everything whirring and spinning toward something. And I get to be part of it*

for a little while, the way I get to watch a train for a minute or two, and then it's gone." He stopped and took a sip of his ginger ale. "I don't know why, but that passage made me feel..." he trailed off.

Ilya nodded. "Like everything is fleeting."

"Yeah. I guess so. Stuck with me."

"You did not list the one I expected," Ilya said, watching Shane's eyes flicker between him and the can, like he was nervous about those admissions.

"Which one?"

"If you're going to live, you might as well do painful, brave, and beautiful things." Ilya reached out and tipped Shane's chin up, forcing eye contact. "I think I got it right. That seemed like a big one. Maybe a little cheesy, but I like it."

"I did like that one too, and some others. It was a good book."

"I'm glad you liked it." Ilya didn't think Shane would get as much out of the fucked up father-son dynamics, but he probably had at least related a little to not fitting into the world in which you're forced to exist.

"Hey, um," Shane started, then he picked up the can of ginger ale and took a sip. He set it down and dragged a finger along the rim. "I wanted to ask you something."

Ilya waited a couple of seconds while Shane was apparently trying to find the words, which made Ilya's stomach dip uncomfortably. Bracing for something, the calendar squares making a reappearance.

"Would you want to play basketball with me and some of my friends?"

Ilya's head tipped forward, brows shooting up in surprise. "What?"

"On Monday. I know the store is closed, but I wasn't sure if you're busy? Some of my teammates are going, but we can always use more people. There are usually other friends of players there."

Ilya swallowed hard. "You want me to play basketball with your teammates?" Surely he was mishearing. Hallucinating maybe. He looked down at his drink. Just regular Coca Cola in a red can.

"Sorry, you don't have to. I just remembered that you like to play, and Marly said we'd be a few people short for full teams. You can say no."

Ilya laughed. A loud bark of laughter that made Shane's eyes go wide. He couldn't explain what was happening in his chest because he didn't know. He couldn't tell Shane that the calendar squares that had gotten lodged in his head of late were suddenly shoved away. He couldn't even say out loud exactly how much he wanted to say yes, even though he didn't

care one way or the other about the basketball itself. Instead, he composed himself, reeled it in, and said, "I would go, if you want me to."

Shane nodded, a smile pursing his lips. "I do. I told them I had a friend who might be interested."

A friend. Ilya didn't let it dim the warmth that had flared in him. It was something at least, and neither had made any promises or declarations of anything else, so Ilya wasn't even expecting *something*. He was suddenly feeling light, elated. He shouldn't be this moved by a simple invitation to play basketball, but the implications were dizzying.

He stood and leaned over the corner of the table and kissed Shane, pushing his tongue into his mouth until he tasted ginger ale, and Shane's hand landed on the back of his neck and pulled him closer.

"We have to behave until 8, in case Mallory needs help," Ilya said when they separated. "But after that, I will take you to bed, and we can make up for the last few days. Okay?"

Shane was nodding again, eyes fluttering, and Ilya leaned back in, this time kissing his neck, scraping his teeth against warm skin and drawing a low noise from Shane's throat.

"Ilya, this isn't behaving." But Shane's hand was still tight on the back of his neck, and he'd said Ilya's name, and Ilya was having a hard time putting space between them.

He pressed one more kiss to Shane's lips and then forced himself to pick up the food containers. Shane got up and took care of the empty cans, and then they made their way to the living room.

As soon as Shane sat on the couch, Vanya was in his lap, back arched and rubbing against Shane's chest vigorously, like he was claiming him.

"Excuse you," Ilya said, lifting Vanya out of Shane's lap. "You're embarrassing me."

Shane laughed. "He's allowed."

"I think he is trying to steal you from me."

"Can't I have you both?" Shane asked, his voice too soft.

Ilya sucked in his bottom lip and inhaled, giving Vanya one last pet before he set him on the other end of the couch.

"Yes." Honesty, his own rule biting him in the ass again. But then he forgot all about behaving and knelt on the couch, his knees bracketing Shane's thighs so he could straddle his lap and lean in. One of Shane's hands was under his t-shirt, sliding up his chest, and Ilya's mouth was on his neck, drifting down...and then there was a soft warm mass of fur climbing into their laps. Ilya let his head drop to Shane's shoulder, looking down at the cat. "Your timing is impeccable as always," he said sarcastically.

“Well, it’s not 8 yet, so he has a point.” Shane was smiling at Vanya, his lips still red and shiny from their kisses.

Ilya sighed dramatically. “Fine. Here. He’s all yours.” Ilya stood up and gestured at Shane’s lap, where Vanya was reclaiming his spot already. Ilya sat next to Shane and turned the tv on. They managed to keep their hands to themselves for the next 45 minutes, when Mallory finally texted to let him know the store was closed and locked.

“We are free,” Ilya said, setting his phone down on the coffee table. Vanya was still in Shane’s lap. “Well, you aren’t.”

They were sitting close, shoulders pressed together, their hands occasionally brushing in Vanya’s fur. Vanya was eating up the attention. Sometimes he got a little overstimulated when a customer tried to pet him too much or for too long, and he’d scamper away, or even hiss in rare instances. He never did that to Ilya, and it seemed, not to Shane either.

Ilya moved one hand up to run through Shane’s hair instead, letting his fingers drag gently up and down his scalp, the back of his neck, enjoying the way Shane was slowly leaning further and further into it.

“How’s your shoulder?”

“Much better.”

“Good. Whenever you feel like pushing this brat off, we can test it out.” Ilya pressed his fingers harder into the back of Shane’s neck.

“Not fair. I don’t want to be the bad guy here.”

“I have no problem being the bad guy in this scenario.” Ilya stood up and picked Vanya up from Shane’s lap, cradling him in his arms for a moment. “I love you, but you need to find something else to do for now,” Ilya told him. Then he set Vanya on the back of the couch and extended a hand to Shane. “Quick. He doesn’t actually listen.”

Shane laughed and took his hand, allowing himself to be pulled up and toward the bedroom where the door was immediately closed behind them. It didn’t take long before clothes were shed and bodies were tangled and lips were mashed together. Ilya was lying on his back, Shane straddling him, just kissing and rubbing against each other.

“Tell me what you want tonight,” Ilya said before his mouth dragged along Shane’s jaw.

“You.” Shane dipped a hand between them to stroke Ilya’s cock, letting him know exactly what he meant.

Ilya pushed himself up a little, so he was partially leaning against the headboard, then reached over and grabbed the bottle of lube already waiting so he could slick his fingers. Shane started to move off him, and Ilya put his other hand on Shane’s thigh. “Stay like this.”

He reached between Shane’s legs, deliberately running his palm over his balls before pushing a finger between his cheeks to massage his entrance and Shane sagged against him, pressing

their foreheads together. Ilya pushed his finger in, enjoying the very closeup view he had of Shane's face for a few moments before Shane straightened up and sank down further onto his finger.

"Fuck," Ilya whispered, pushing a second in beside it, making Shane writhe against him. "You are hot." Shane smiled, and it was not his shy half smile or his soft grin that always made Ilya's chest flutter. It was an *I know* smile. Confident and sexy, closer to what he wore when the cameras were on him, talking about his impressive hockey skills, but less inhibited, no doubt that it was tinged with sex and desire, and Ilya liked it there, especially while his fingers were in Shane's ass and Shane was moving above him. It was another thing that he thought maybe only he got to see, and he didn't take that for granted.

Shane riding his fingers was having a disproportionately large effect on his cock. Like maybe he could come just from watching and the occasional brush of Shane against him while he moved.

As much as he was enjoying that, he slipped his fingers free and rolled a condom on. Shane was looking at him, like he was waiting to see if Ilya would tell him to change positions. But Ilya just slicked his cock and held it steady, and Shane moved to line himself up, sank down. Ilya put his hands on Shane's waist to steady him, to slow him down, for both their sakes.

"Is this okay?" Ilya asked, using every bit of his considerable control to keep from thrusting up into that tight heat, giving Shane time.

Shane nodded and sank the rest of the way until he was fully seated, then leaned forward, both hands on Ilya's chest, face a little scrunched but slowly relaxing as he adjusted. Ilya kissed Shane, then drew his own knees up, making the angle easier. Shane started to move, rocking his hips back and forth, up and down, slowly finding a rhythm that had Ilya's head tipping back against the headboard.

Once he found the rhythm, Shane rode him hard, one hand had moved to the bed next to Ilya's shoulder, the other to the headboard. Ilya matched him with his own thrusts, both of them breathing hard, Shane's chest flushed, Ilya's probably too. He was too far gone to notice, his eyes glued to Shane, to his face, lips parted on low, breathy little noises of pleasure, eyes hooded with it, sometimes meeting Ilya's, sometimes looking between them, where Shane's cock bounced and their bodies were connected.

Ilya could barely focus on anything but the man above him, but he had the fleeting thought that this was impossible, how big it felt, how each time felt bigger, and he felt more overtaken. Maybe he'd known for a while what this was, to him at least, but he was starting to wonder if it could even be contained.

I would rather break the world than lose you.

But did Shane feel that way? He was too scared to ask. It wasn't time for that yet. Instead, he wrapped his arms around him tightly and rolled them until he was on top. They were both close to orgasm, he could tell by the way Shane was moving and breathing and moaning, and Ilya knew his own body would come apart as soon as Shane's did.

Shane's arms and legs wrapped around him, keeping him deep and close, and Ilya kissed him for as long as he could between breaths, between moans, between their eyes meeting, and Shane's not moving away.

When Shane curled up against him, spurting between their stomachs and clenching around Ilya, it took only a few more thrusts for Ilya to join him, his body made of nothing but pleasure and warmth, feeling nothing but Shane around him as he spilled himself inside of him. He panted into Shane's neck, and Shane ran his fingers through Ilya's hair as he came down from it and back to himself.

Ilya kissed him and then slipped out so he could sit up and get rid of the condom. Shane looked even more blissed out than usual, face relaxed and happy, watching Ilya like he had not a care in the world. Ilya liked that look. He leaned down and kissed those perfect red lips once more, whispering, "Stay," before leaving the bedroom to clean up.

He came back with a wet washcloth and wiped Shane's stomach and between his thighs clean, keeping his touch gentle against his hole. Shane was watching him with soft eyes that seemed to be saying something Ilya would die to hear and knew he wouldn't, so he gave Shane a smile in return that he hoped was saying the same. When he was done, he climbed back onto the bed to stretch out beside him.

"It's still early," he said, tracing a finger down the middle of Shane's chest. "We could watch something."

Shane shook his head. "I'd rather read. Wouldn't you?"

Ilya smiled. "Yes, I would." He started to reach for something on his nightstand, but he had another idea. "What about something a little different tonight?"

Shane looked at him questioningly. "Okay."

"Get dressed," Ilya told him. "I don't have a copy, have to go downstairs. But you can stay up here if you want."

"No, I'll come."

They both got up, and Ilya threw a clean pair of sweatpants to Shane so he didn't have to put jeans back on. He noticed that Shane had his BU shirt again today, and it still gave him a little thrill, seeing it there.

Vanya was nowhere to be found when they walked through the living room and out to the stairwell, so Ilya closed the doors behind them. Downstairs, the shop was dark, only the streetlamps providing some dim light, and they were going between the second-to-last and last shelf, so no one would be able to see them from the street anyway.

Instead of grabbing the book right away, Ilya took the opportunity to push Shane back against the shelf lining the wall and kiss him. It felt silly but poetic, kissing Shane amongst stacks of books. He did have them to thank for the two of them meeting after all.

Ilya let him go reluctantly, and Shane leaned in, chasing his mouth, so he gave him one more kiss and then turned to pull the book he was looking for from its place on the shelf.

“Want to stay down here for a few?” he asked. It was cozy somehow, being among the shelves together post-fuck, the quiet, dark store feeling intimate and like their own little hideaway.

“Sure.”

Ilya sank to the floor, and Shane sat beside him. He seemed fine on the hard floor, despite the previous activity, so Ilya settled in and pulled Shane against his side. He had to take his phone out and use the flashlight to see.

“You know Walt Whitman?” he asked and tilted the cover toward Shane. *Leaves of Grass*.

“Yeah, I think so. I mean, I know he was a poet, but I’m not sure I’ve read any.”

“Do you like poetry?”

“I think I do, but I admittedly don’t read it much. I’m not sure I’d even know where to start.”

Ilya smiled. “That’s what I’m here for.” He opened to the one he wanted to start with.

“Maybe you will like this.”

Shane leaned his head on Ilya’s shoulder, and Ilya took a deep breath and started to read.

“O you whom I often and silently come where you are that I may be with you,

As I walk by your side or sit near, or remain in the same room with you,

Little you know the subtle electric fire that for your sake is playing within me.”

Ilya put his phone down, letting the flashlight shine down at the floor, plunging them back into darkness.

“Well?” he asked.

“I like it,” Shane said, and his hand slipped into Ilya’s now empty one and squeezed. “Any others?”

“Yes, many.” He had to take his hand back to pick up his phone again. He set it against his chest, angled well enough to illuminate the page he’d flipped to, then he picked up Shane’s hand and started to read again.

“I celebrate myself, and sing myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good as belongs to you...”

They stayed there a while, sitting together between and against the shelves in the dark while Ilya read, fingers entwined and Shane's head still resting against him. Eventually they made their way back upstairs into Ilya's bed and used hands and mouths to worship and take each other apart again before they fell asleep curled together.

-

The following day, Boston played Tampa, and as soon as Shane got home that night, he texted Ilya and ended up walking through the dark interior of One Good Memory once again, barely making it into the stairwell before they were pressed together. Shane stayed the night, but he had to leave for a while on Monday morning for practice. When he got back around noon, Ilya was waiting out front, dressed for basketball with a bag slung over his shoulder.

"Hey," he said, getting into Shane's car. "I did not expect Shane Hollander to drive a jeep."

"Why not?" Shane asked.

Ilya snorted. "No reason. Makes perfect sense," he said, reaching over to rest a hand on Shane's thigh.

"Whatever," Shane said, accepting the tease. "How was your morning?"

"Well, I woke up with a very hot hockey player in my bed, sucked his cock, made him coffee, and now he's driving me around. Seems pretty good, yes?"

Shane laughed. "That's not what I meant."

"Oh, you mean work. I packed some online orders, did some ordering to prepare for holiday shopping. Very boring."

"Tell me about the holiday stuff." He mostly just wanted Ilya to keep talking because his nerves were starting to prick under his skin. Ilya was about to meet his teammates. He felt some nauseating mix of excitement and dread at the prospect. Listening to Ilya talk helped until they parked at the gym and had to actually get out of the car.

Cliff pulled up right as they closed the doors to the jeep. "Hollz," he said loudly, getting out of his much more expensive sports car and walking up to them.

"Hey, Marly. This is my friend Ilya. Rozanov." Shane almost choked as he said those words, hoping and praying that Cliff did not remember I.R. from his phone at the club several weeks ago. He was counting on alcohol softening that memory for Cliff.

"Rozanov, like that Carolina forward who retired a few years ago. I'm gonna call you Roz. Can I call you Roz?"

Shane relaxed, and Ilya looked amused. "Yes, fine." He took Cliff's proffered hand, and Cliff pulled him into a shoulder bump.

"You're basically the same fucking size as Hollz," Cliff said to him, then he looked at Shane. "He's on my team."

“Fuck off, Marly,” Shane said. “You can’t have my friend on your team.”

“It’s only fair. Plus, I’m your friend too, in case you’ve forgotten.”

Shane laughed as the three of them started walking toward the gym, but his insides were still tangled, more from the surrealness of Cliff Marlow and Ilya Rozanov being in his presence at the same time than actual nerves.

“I will be on his team,” Ilya said. “That way I have a chance to beat you.”

Shane laughed again. “Wow. Already ganging up on me.”

“I don’t know how close you two are,” Cliff said to Ilya, “but this guy can’t stand to lose. And he’s about to.”

“I didn’t know you were so competitive off the ice too,” Ilya said.

“I’m not. I just like to win.”

Cliff gave him a look. “Exactly.”

Inside, they joined Connors and Hammersmith, a couple of other Raiders and one other friend of a Raider. They ended up with 4 on 4, and Cliff did in fact keep Ilya on his team. It was fun that way, Shane could admit. It was the first time he’d seen Ilya do something so physical that wasn’t sex, though it may as well have been. He tried his best to keep his mind on basketball and not the way Ilya’s muscles rippled under his gray tank top every time he moved or the way their sweat-slick skin rubbed together when Shane tried to steal the ball from him. When they took a break, he had to look away from Ilya’s throat as he swallowed water at the other end of the bench. *Get it together.*

“Your friend is fucking legit,” Cliff said, nudging his shoulder and knocking his thoughts back to a PG rating. “How do you know him?”

“Oh, he owns the bookshop in my neighborhood.”

Cliff laughed. “Of course you’d befriend a bookshop owner. That’s great, man. I like him.” He sounded genuinely happy, and it made Shane’s chest loosen. He so desperately wanted his friends to like Ilya. Even more so, he wanted Ilya to like them.

They finished their game, and Shane’s team lost again. He wasn’t even mad because watching Cliff and Ilya celebrate and talk shit together was making him giddy.

“Sorry, Hollz. I call dibs on Roz in perpetuity,” Cliff said. Ilya looked at Cliff strangely, and Shane wondered if it was his use of the word ‘perpetuity’ or because it meant he wanted Ilya to come back. Maybe both.

“You can’t call dibs on my friend.”

“I can and I did. Right, Roz?”

Ilya laughed and said, “Yeah, *Hollz*. He can and he did.” Ilya put a hand on his shoulder, and before Shane could stop himself, he flinched. He regretted it immediately, before the motion had even finished, but it was too late. Ilya’s hand dropped like he’d been burned. Cliff was watching them with interest, and Shane wasn’t sure if he already had been or if Shane had given them away. He didn’t even care. He only cared that Ilya’s face had fallen briefly, so quickly he probably wouldn’t have noticed if he wasn’t so tuned into him, if his face wasn’t nearly as familiar as his own these days. He couldn’t undo it, so he reached up and slung his arm around Ilya’s shoulders and pulled him in close. It was still a friendly gesture, something he’d do to Cliff or Connors or any one of his teammates. But he hoped Ilya knew what he meant by it.

They said their goodbyes, Ilya promising to join them again next time.

“Hey, it was really good to meet you, man,” Cliff said, pulling Ilya in for a bro hug. “You should come hang out with us more often. Next time we hit up the club, I’ll make sure *Hollz* invites you, yeah?”

“Sure, I’m always up for that,” Ilya told him, but his eyes slid to Shane’s, his expression a little uneasy if you knew where to look.

“See you tomorrow,” Cliff said, turning to him. They’d all be on a flight to Philadelphia the next afternoon for a game on Wednesday. “Enjoy your night off.” Shane wasn’t sure if he was imagining the tone in Cliff’s voice as his eyes darted from Shane to Ilya. He probably was. Other than the regrettable flinch, the whole afternoon had been perfectly normal.

“You too,” Shane said. They grabbed their bags and headed out to the car, the cold air welcome against his still sweaty skin. Once the doors were closed, Shane couldn’t wait any longer to ask, “Did you have fun?”

Ilya looked over at him. “Yes. Did you?”

“Yeah, it was great. I’m glad you came. They all loved you. Especially Cliff.”

“I like him, he’s fun. Not what I expected.”

Shane nodded as he drove them out of the gym parking lot and back toward One Good Memory. “He’s really smart. I think I mentioned before, he’s really into music and concerts. And he’s kind of a goofball, but also a really good guy.”

Shane glanced over at Ilya, who was looking out the window. He had a slightly distant look on his face, and Shane wanted to pull over and kiss it away. He didn’t even know if he’d put it there or if Ilya was just thinking about something or if he was imagining it all together.

“Do you want to hang out tonight?” Shane asked. It sounded so insignificant compared to how it felt every time they were together.

Ilya looked over at him, a smile stretching his lips, eyes brightening. “Of course. Yours or mine?”

“I feel like I’m always at yours. Is that okay? You know you’re welcome to come over anytime, your place is just...better.” Cozier, warmer, more lived in. It felt like home.

“Well, Vanya will be happy if you come over. And I like having you there.”

Shane smiled and reached over with his right hand, threading their fingers together on the console while his left stayed on the steering wheel. “Is it okay if I park at home and we walk over?”

“Of course. Do you want to walk separately?”

Shane almost asked what he meant, but he realized before the words surfaced. “No. It’s fine.”

“You sure? It’s daylight, streets will be busy.”

Shane shrugged. “Unless you don’t want to be seen with me.” Today, Ilya meeting his friends, had been one step. One very tiny step in the grand scheme of things. But he had to start somewhere. This...dealing with Shane being recognized fairly often...was another step, another piece of the puzzle. If Ilya was unwilling, the whole thing would never come together, and Shane would have to be okay with that.

Shane glanced over to find Ilya staring at him with an odd look on his face. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, uh...it’s just, if you spend time with me in public, you’ll likely end up in pictures. I don’t get followed or papped as often as a real celebrity, but it does happen sometimes. And fans like to post pictures on social media of course.”

Ilya was still looking at him. “I wasn’t worried about myself.”

“Oh. Good. It’ll be fine then.”

Ilya squeezed his hand, and Shane wished he could keep his gaze on him, to properly take in each of the little emotions that seemed to be passing over Ilya’s face. But he turned his eyes to the road and just squeezed Ilya’s hand back.

Shane pulled into the parking garage next to his building. “Do you mind if I run upstairs and grab some stuff?”

“No. Want me to wait on the street?”

Shane swallowed. How many steps was he going to try to climb in one day? One more, he decided. One more. “No, come up with me.”

Instead of going down to the street and around the building, he took Ilya straight into the lobby. There was one person coming out of the elevator, an older woman dressed to the nines, sunglasses on before she’d even made it outside. She barely glanced their way. Shane led them into the elevator and swiped his keycard for penthouse access.

Ilya was looking at him again like he wanted to say something, but he didn't. His face was unreadable.

The elevator opened into the same small foyer as the stairwell. Shane unlocked the front door and let Ilya in. "Want to shower here?"

Shane's shower was large enough for both of them to fit easily.

"Sure." Ilya's voice was quiet enough that Shane dropped his bag and grabbed him by the waist.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Shane Hollander. I'm having a very good day," Ilya said, pulling him close and quickly pressing their lips together.

"Me too." Shane pulled him through to the bedroom where they shed their clothes, then into the bathroom and the walk-in shower. He turned on the multiple showerheads, waiting until the water was hot before stepping in, Ilya right behind him.

The shower started with both of them just getting clean, watching each other but keeping hands to themselves. It didn't stay that way. Shane started it by lathering shampoo into Ilya's hair and taking his time, massaging his scalp, loving the way Ilya leaned into him, the little purring noises he made. It might have been sweet and wholesome if they weren't both hard. Shane was about to put a temporary damper on that.

"Thanks again for coming today. It really meant a lot," he said, fingers still dragging through Ilya's hair as the water ran clear. He grabbed the conditioner and started massaging that into Ilya's hair next.

Ilya turned his head slightly, just enough to see Shane's face. "It meant a lot that you invited me."

"I was wondering if you might want to meet another friend of mine."

"Who?"

"Rose Landry."

This time Ilya turned all the way around, making Shane drop his hands. "What?"

"Yeah...she's coming to visit in a couple weeks. She's staying here for two days before she goes to New York. I thought maybe we could have dinner together. The three of us. Or you can invite Svetlana too. If she'd want to come."

Ilya was staring at him. His tongue darted out, catching a few drops of water before it disappeared again. "Like dinner here at your house?"

Shane shook his head once. "Well...if you'd prefer, we could do that. But I meant like...out. Rose likes to go out. She's already sent me a list of fancy restaurants to pick from. But I uh...

I understand if you don't want to do that. Chances of being photographed are much higher with her there." He reached up and started washing the conditioner out of Ilya's hair, trying to ignore that intense, unreadable expression again. He thought Ilya was going to say no. And he would have understood.

"Rose knows about me?"

"Yeah, a bit. Not like exactly who you are. But she knows I've been uh...seeing someone. Someone who owns the bookshop nearby."

Ilya blinked at him. Shane waited for the no, but it didn't come. Instead, Ilya pulled him in, until their bodies were pressed together, and kissed him. It was wet and hungry, the water from the shower sliding between them, into their mouths every time their lips parted, but neither of them cared. Shane felt like he was floating. Ilya had met his friends. Ilya was in his shower. Ilya was maybe going to do something in public with him very soon. He felt like his future had been just a dull block of hockey and lonely summers at the cottage, watching everyone around him find what they were looking for while he sat on the sidelines, not even allowed to try. But maybe he would be allowed to look one day. Maybe he'd be allowed to find it too. Even if the thought scared him, terrified him even, if he let himself think about it too hard. But there were other things there too, good things.

Because we should do things we're afraid of. It makes it easier every time we do it.

He pulled back to look at Ilya again. "So, is that a yes?"

Ilya laughed. "Yes, Shane Hollander. Take me to dinner with your famous ex-girlfriend." He shook his head. "Meeting you has made my life very strange."

"Hopefully in a good way?"

"Very good."

Shane couldn't fully articulate what it meant to him, meeting his friends and agreeing to meet Rose and being patient with him while he figured out how the fuck to exist as himself in this world that seemed determined not to let him. So he kissed him again and then sank to his knees, hoping Ilya knew, hoping he was making the right choice.

Chapter End Notes

Books mentioned in this chapter:
The Serpent King by Jeff Zentner
Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman

plus quotes from some others already in the doc, and some that will be soooooon (only look at the quotes listed below if you don't mind knowing what's coming)

[Book list doc](#)

P.S. I'm on threads (shadow_lilies1) and tumblr (shadowlilies1) for now.

Quotes:

I suddenly realized that we were on borrowed time, that time is always borrowed, and that the lending agency exacts its premium precisely when we are least prepared to pay and need to borrow more. - Call Me By Your Name by Andre Aciman

I would rather break the world than lose you. - This Is How You Lose The Time War by Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone

Because we should do things we're afraid of. It makes it easier every time we do it. - The Serpent King by Jeff Zentner

Chapter 11: Find me, find me, find me, yeah

Chapter Notes

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

They made it out of Shane's shower, each one orgasm down, and put on clean clothes to walk back to One Good Memory. Ilya was still reeling from the day. He'd met Shane's teammates. Shane had reacted poorly when he touched him. Cliff Marlow wanted him to come back again. Shane invited him to meet Rose Landry. One of those things was not like the other. Ilya tried not to let it get to him, even if it had hurt in the moment, an almost physical ache, like Shane pulling away from him had ripped something out of his chest. But then Shane had quickly put an arm around his shoulder and everything was fine again, patched up and holding. Now they had plans to go out together in public. Not alone, but it was more than he'd ever expected.

"What should we do for dinner?" Shane asked halfway back to Ilya's.

"What are you in the mood for?"

Shane looked over at him. "You pick today. Whatever you want. We always get what I want."

"Because you have restrictions and I don't."

"So... I can figure it out." Shane's hand brushed his fingers briefly, and Ilya looked down to see if it was just accidental. But they weren't that close together. Shane had moved his arm purposefully. It took everything in Ilya not to entwine their fingers, out here in the daylight on this busy Boston street.

"How about that place a few blocks down? I forget the name. Jolly's or Johnny's? They have pie."

"Sure. Sounds good."

"Do you even know which place I mean?"

"No. But it doesn't matter. I'll find something."

Ilya nodded and glanced around them. A guy walking in their direction was eyeing Shane with excitement and started to raise his phone.

"Hey," Shane said, acknowledging him with a wave. The man's arm slowly lowered.

"Hey, I'm a big fan. Good luck, tomorrow."

"Thanks." Shane gave the guy a high five as they passed. And that was it. They kept walking, and Shane didn't say anything about it. "So. Pie?" he asked.

“Ah, yes. They have a bunch of different homemade pies by the slice. Sveta brought apple and blueberry over once and I have been dreaming about them since.”

Shane laughed. “Can we order to go?”

“Of course.” Ilya never expected otherwise. “I’ll go pick it up. You can go hang with Vanya.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. Find it on the map, J something, should be on the corner three blocks from the store. Look at their menu and see if there is anything you want. If not, there is also a Lebanese place next to it.”

Shane picked a salad with extra chicken and promised he’d take a bite of whatever pie Ilya got. Ilya let him into the store and then headed for the restaurant.

After he ordered and picked up the food, he made his way back home to find Shane, shoes off, kicked back on his couch with his cat in his lap, looking like he belonged nowhere else in the world but there.

“Hey,” Ilya said, closing the front door behind him. “Ready to eat?”

Shane stood up, Vanya still in his arms.

“He’s not invited.”

“Well, you can tell him that,” Shane said. He was cradling Vanya like a baby. It was terrible and cute and made Ilya’s chest pulse.

“We can eat in here. Sit, I’ll grab you a ginger ale.”

Shane dropped back onto the couch with Vanya, and Ilya handed him the bag of food. By the time he got back to the living room, Shane had the food spread out on the coffee table and Vanya was settled next to him.

“You got three slices of pie?” Shane nodded at the three slice shaped containers.

“I almost got 4.”

“Which ones are these?”

“Blueberry, strawberry rhubarb, and chocolate. Are you going to try them?”

“Told you I would. I’m not *that* strict. Plus, I need a lot of calories during the season, generally speaking. I’m just mindful of what they come from.”

“Okay,” Ilya said affectionately and bent down to kiss the top of his head, which was really unnecessary and he didn’t care. “Here.” He handed Shane the ginger ale and sat beside him.

After Ilya finished his sandwich, he reached for one of the little pie slice containers. “Strawberry rhubarb first,” he said as he opened it and dug in. “Mmm, delicious.”

“Are you planning to share?” Shane set his empty container down.

“Yes. Here.” Ilya held out a bite. Shane didn’t hesitate to lean in and take the bite from Ilya’s fork. “Well?”

“Really good. But I want to try the chocolate one.”

“I think you can find it,” Ilya said, leaning back against the armrest.

Shane rolled his eyes and grabbed one of the other pie containers. Ilya watched him take a bite of it, licking the fork slowly, obscenely, and it had Ilya’s mouth watering around his own fork. Shane looked over at him with a nearly uncharacteristic smirk on his face.

“I want a bite,” Ilya said, making no move to get it himself.

Shane held the fork out, just far enough that Ilya had to lean forward to reach it. He gave Shane a show, flicked his tongue against the underside of the fork, let his lips linger around it, sucked it into his mouth. Then he licked his lips slowly, keeping his eyes on Shane’s, watching his lids lower just a fraction, his bottom lip fall open, his breath come a hair quicker. Then Shane set both his and Ilya’s pie containers down, and before Ilya could do more than swallow his bite, Shane was crawling into his lap and kissing him so hungrily, it was like they hadn’t just sucked each other off an hour ago.

Shane pulled back to suck in a breath, but he didn’t lean back down after. His slightly hazy eyes were moving across Ilya’s face, and his expression had tightened into something more serious.

“Hey, um,” Shane started. “About earlier. At the gym.”

Ilya held his breath. The pie was suddenly sitting too heavy in his stomach.

Shane shook his head once, eyes darting up briefly. “I know I uh...reacted weird, when you touched me. But I hope you know it wasn’t...I wasn’t...fuck. It wasn’t because of you. You know that right?”

He cupped Ilya’s jaw, his big hand so gentle and warm, it was making Ilya’s eyes sting. Ilya nodded, not trusting his voice.

“It was just like...a reflex. I’m sorry. I just needed you to know. I’m not embarrassed to be with you in public, even if I can’t tell anyone that we’re more than friends.”

Ilya wasn’t sure if he was sinking or floating. Being ripped apart or put back together. His throat was too tight and his nose was prickling, so he scrunched it and sniffed and licked his lips and tried to pull some words from somewhere, anywhere, to move them past this and back to stable ground.

“I know,” he managed finally. “It’s okay.”

Shane was still looking at him intently, the eye contact almost unnerving, but Ilya wanted more. He wanted Shane to say whatever was lurking there. He wasn't sure if it was the same thing that was pushing against his own ribs, and that was enough to stop him from pushing. Shane licked his lips again and smiled, nodded once, then bent to kiss Ilya again. It was softer now, the hunger taking a back seat to whatever had almost just passed between them. Ilya wanted to be frustrated, but then he'd be a hypocrite, sitting on words that scared him.

I have so much to say to you that I am afraid I shall tell you nothing.

It's not like he'd even know where to start. And Shane had given him so much today already. Not enough to throw out the calendar entirely, but it was put away for now, slotted into a place out of sight. Maybe by the time it made a reappearance, Ilya would be ready for it.

"Okay," Shane said. "Blueberry?"

Ilya laughed, grateful to be pulled back. "Yes."

They shared the third piece of pie, Shane holding the fork and feeding Ilya bites. It was disgustingly sappy, and Ilya felt equally cherished and like a lovesick fool.

Eventually the leftovers went to the fridge and they settled in to watch a couple of episodes of Stranger Things. Ilya ended up draped over Shane, cradled between his legs and his head resting on Shane's chest, both with arms wrapped around the other until one of Shane's hands ended up in his hair, making him feel fuzzy and warm. Vanya had taken up residence on the back of the couch above them. Ilya could hardly put into words how content he felt. Here, in this moment, in this place, with this person, the rest of the world and his family and the things he would have to confront sooner or later fell away as Shane lulled him with fingers idly massaging the back of his neck, his heart beating steadily beneath Ilya's ear.

Shane's hand began to drift further and further down his back, making long drags over his t-shirt, eventually pushing it up and pressing his fingers skin to skin, nails scraping lightly. Ilya wasn't sure if he wanted to fall asleep or fuck, it felt so good.

He knew which Shane wanted, if the increasingly hard bulge against his abdomen was anything to go by. Ilya moved against him, just enough to put pressure against his cock. Shane's hips rocked up, and Ilya stopped moving, pretending he hadn't noticed. Shane was still for a moment, but as Ilya expected, he couldn't help but push up against him again. Ilya ignored it. That little sequence of events repeated a few times until Shane finally dragged his hand back into Ilya's hair and tugged.

"Ilya," he said, voice low and a little desperate, making Ilya's cock even harder against the couch.

"Yes?" he said, voice trying for innocence, even as he was still sometimes moved far too much by a simple utterance of his name.

"You know what."

Ilya shook his head against Shane's chest. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Shane Hollander. Please enlighten me."

Shane's chest moved under him with laughter. "Ilya," he pleaded.

"I'm waiting."

"Let's go to bed."

"Why? I'm not tired. It's early still."

He felt more than heard Shane's head fall back against the arm of the couch. "I'm going to go by myself then."

Ilya shrugged. "Okay. Goodnight."

Shane laughed again. "Fuck. Fine. Please come to bed with me. I want you."

"Oh, is that right? That's all you had to say." Ilya resumed his early movement, rocking against Shane until he was making breathy little noises and tightening his fingers in Ilya's hair again. "Okay, calm down. Don't come in your pants."

"Shut up. I wasn't going to."

Ilya propped himself up so he could see Shane's face. "Would be hot. But I have other plans for you."

"Can we get to those plans now?"

Ilya grinned. "Yes. Come on." He stood up and held out a hand for Shane.

They got naked and into Ilya's bed, and the first step of Ilya's plan was underway. His face was buried in Shane's ass, thighs pushed wide, and his tongue was working him open vigorously enough to have Shane pushing against him already.

"Does Rose Landry know you are inviting me to dinner?" he asked suddenly, mouth close enough to Shane's hole that his lips brushed against him as he spoke.

Shane's upper body lifted off the bed exorcist style, so Ilya looked up at him for a moment before resuming his licking.

"Fuck," Shane gasped, leaning back again. "Why are you asking me that right now?"

Ilya didn't have a good answer. Though he did think Shane would either be much more forthcoming or not forthcoming at all while in this state.

"I would like to know." He licked up to the soft skin between his hole and balls and sucked on it lightly.

"Fuck Ilya, oh my god."

“Answer.”

“She told me I should.” His voice was strained and Ilya loved it.

“She knows everything about us?” he asked before dragging his tongue up Shane’s balls and then back down.

“Jesus, Ilya. I can’t...” he moaned. “She knows enough.”

“Hmm,” he hummed against his taint. “And why do you want me to invite Svetlana?”

Shane was sitting up again. Ilya smiled against him. Did he detect some jealousy still?

“Rose is a lot. Thought you might need reinforcements.”

Well. That was sweet and almost made Ilya feel bad. So he went back to licking Shane’s hole aggressively until he fell back against the pillows again. He reached up with one hand, letting it land over Shane’s heart, and he melted a little when Shane covered it with one of his. Ilya lifted his head, this time to move slowly up Shane’s body. He stopped to lick the precome collecting under the head of Shane’s cock, then made his way up to Shane’s mouth and pushed his tongue against his lips until they parted and let him in.

Shane moaned into his mouth and pushed his cock against Ilya’s groin. “Why are you interrogating me while you...” Shane started when Ilya moved to kiss his jaw.

“While I what?” Ilya kissed up to his ear and nipped at it lightly.

“Ilya,” he groaned, and Ilya needed more of that. He sucked on the lobe of Shane’s ear while he rocked against him.

“I wasn’t interrogating you. I want to know more about Rose,” Ilya said against his ear.

Shane made a frustrated noise. “While we’re doing this?”

“It doesn’t seem to be negatively affecting you.” Ilya reached down to give Shane’s cock a good stroke.

“Yes, but...”

“Okay, I’ll stop.” He kissed Shane’s lips again and then pressed their foreheads together.

“Thank you for inviting me.” Despite the playful interrogation, he did want Shane to know how he felt about it. How big it was.

Shane nodded, eyes blinking. “I’m excited to go to dinner with you.”

Ilya didn’t know if he was imagining the tinge of sadness in Shane’s voice. Maybe his brain was adding it, superimposing it over Shane’s words to remind him that this was only possible in this one very specific situation and they’d never be able to go on a real date. But Shane’s words made his heart beat faster and his eyes burn and it wasn’t because of the Rose of it all.

Shane *wanted* to go out with him. That at least existed somewhere better than wanting to hide completely.

He kissed Shane again and then slicked his fingers with the lube that now lived on the nightstand.

“Me too,” he said honestly, sitting up on his knees so he could reach Shane’s spit-slick hole. He pushed a finger in and bent to kiss Shane’s chest, laying open-mouthed kisses across his already flushed skin, moving slowly back and forth in a zig zag pattern. By the time he had two fingers in him, his mouth was hovering above the crease of his thigh, and Shane was watching him with hungry eyes. Ilya licked at the skin there and then quickly rolled on a condom, slicked himself, and replaced his fingers with his cock. He pushed in easily but slowly, kissing Shane’s neck as he slid home. “Okay?” he asked, even though he could tell by the way Shane’s hips were rolling up against him that it was.

“Yes, so fucking good.”

He found a good rhythm and stayed close at first, keeping their bodies mostly pressed together. “Am I allowed to spend the night with you while Rose is in town?” he asked. He genuinely could not stop himself.

Shane laughed, breathy but amused. “Ilya. Yes. Why are we still talking about her?”

“I need to know what to expect.”

Shane’s head was tilted, stretching, giving Ilya more access to kiss his neck. “Are you jealous?” he asked, voice low and sexy, which was making it harder for Ilya to properly consider.

Was he jealous of Rose Landry? Yes, he fucking was. She had been allowed to have him out in the open. There would never be a *Shane Hollander steps out with new beau Ilya Rozanov* headline, or whatever other dumb media bullshit that shouldn’t matter but did.

“What if I was?”

Shane’s hand was in his hair, yanking his head back until they were looking at each other again. Ilya stopped thrusting and let his hips rest against Shane.

“Ilya,” Shane said, his voice so soft and tender. “You have nothing to be jealous of. Especially not Rose. I...” he trailed off and sucked his bottom lip in. Ilya waited, his brain trying to focus on Shane’s mouth even while his cock was still buried in him and his brain was short circuiting with the possibilities of what was about to come out of those lips.

“Nothing I did with Rose could ever compare to this,” Shane finished, but it came out hesitant, almost stilted, like he had changed course as the words formed.

Ilya nodded. Right, sex. Of course the sex was better for Shane, Ilya had the right parts and Rose didn’t. And he was good at it. He would keep being good at it. He started thrusting

again, rolling his hips just right, kissing Shane's neck again to get him back to where they were before Ilya started talking about things that needn't be talked about.

"No? You like this better?" he whispered in Shane's ear, trying to pull himself back into the moment too.

"So much," Shane moaned. He'd left his hand in Ilya's hair, and it was lightly tugging and brushing at his curls, sending a shiver through him. "You're perfect."

Ilya felt like he was being pulled in opposite directions every time Shane opened his mouth. He wasn't upset though. Shane's hand in his hair and those words against his jaw and the body wrapped around him were perfect too.

"You are. *My Shane.*"

In here, he was, and Ilya wasn't going to give him up so easily.

"Yes, yours." Shane's words worked their way through him like his fingers massaged the back of his neck, making his body melt and reform, each time a little more entrenched in Shane's, a little less just his own.

Ilya lost track of everything except where he plunged into Shane's body and their breath mingled and his hair twisted between Shane's fingers. Eventually he sat up on his knees and lifted one of Shane's legs to rest on his shoulder, allowing him to get a better angle for them both and see Shane's face as he cried out in pleasure and came on his own stomach. Ilya followed him into orgasm, his body overtaken until he was spent and letting Shane's leg down and collapsing on top of him. He could have shifted to his side, but he didn't want to. He wanted to wrap himself around Shane for a little longer. He realized belatedly that he was feeling raw after their day of revelations, and he was blaming that for his little spiral about Rose.

Ilya eventually got out of bed to clean up, and Shane followed him into the bathroom, where he now kept a toothbrush. Sometimes sharing the sink while they both spit out toothpaste felt like the most intimate part of the night.

Clean and wearing boxers, they piled back onto Ilya's bed and left the door open this time, just in case Vanya wanted to make an appearance.

"What should we do now?" Shane asked, propped on one elbow.

"We could read. Or we could talk more about Rose Landry."

"Ilya," Shane said with a smile. He let his head fall back dramatically. "What now?"

"I'm only kidding. Since you liked Whitman, what about some more poetry?"

Shane nodded. "If you're reading it."

"Yes. Let me get it."

Ilya got up and crouched in front of the bookshelf on the opposite wall until he found what he was looking for. He flopped back onto the bed, making Shane bounce.

“This is not queer. But it is important for modern poetry.” He opened the book to a specific poem. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. “You know it?”

Shane shook his head. “I know of T.S. Eliot, but not this specific one.”

Ilya started to read and then stopped. “This first bit is in Italian. It’s from Dante Alighieri’s Inferno.” He kept going after that section.

*“Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;”*

Shane snuggled in closer the longer Ilya read. He paused eventually to ask, “Should I keep going? Are you bored?”

“Not at all. Please keep going.”

Ilya kept reading, and Shane didn’t stir until one particular part, one Ilya knew was favored and oft quoted.

*“Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.”*

“Wait,” Shane said, laying a hand on Ilya’s chest. “I want to hear that part again.”

Ilya reread and looked down at Shane, wondering what was going through his head. But Shane just nodded, and Ilya took that as permission to keep reading. Shane shifted again at another notable part, but he didn’t ask Ilya to repeat it.

*“I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.”*

As if he knew the poem was reaching its conclusion, Shane nuzzled into his chest and pressed his lips against him as he read, “*Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?*”

When he finished, he set the book down and ran his hand through Shane’s hair. “Well? Is poetry on the yes or no list?”

“Yes. I really like it, especially when you read it. I don’t know if I entirely *get* all of it...”

“Neither do I. No one does. If it makes you feel something, that’s what matters. To me anyway. Did that make you feel anything?”

Shane nodded. “Yeah. Though I’d probably like to reread it one day. It felt...I don’t know. Maybe it felt relatable, even if I can’t say why exactly.”

Ilya thought that might be the case. Though on the surface it seemed to be about a man having doubts about approaching a woman, always heavily analyzed and disagreements abounded, it felt like there was also a lot of anxiety and fear of rejection and the woes of missed opportunities, things he knew Shane was wrestling with constantly. They were the reasons Ilya was being patient, taking whatever he was allowed, and hoping the man in his arms might one day dare to disturb the universe in a way that let him stay.

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Shane flew to Philadelphia the following day, Tuesday, for a game there on Wednesday, and then Thursday he came back to play against Carolina. Ilya didn’t see him in person again until after the Thursday game, but they texted and talked on the phone and everything was the same as it had been. Except that Ilya wasn’t allowing himself to count down the days until some unknown date that would mark the end of the thing that was filling up his days and his life and his heart. He focused instead on Shane inviting him to dinner, and Shane acknowledging him to his friends.

Shane: Marly has asked me about you twice already. He really wants you to come to basketball again, and out to a club next time we have a couple days off in a row.

Ilya had read that text Wednesday morning and felt his throat go tight.

Because while Shane’s invitations into his life had stalled the countdown, Ilya still felt unmoored. He felt like he was being dragged by rushing water and kept snagging on things, hoping they were strong enough to hold but expecting to be whipped away again at any moment.

After Wednesday’s game, while still in Philly, Shane texted to let him know he was about to read more of *The Locker Room* by Amy Lane, the next of the MM romance books they were reading together. They’d both read the first few chapters already, and Ilya had wondered what possessed him to pick this book about a pro athlete and the man he was in love with, practically married to, and still hiding. The further he’d read, the more his stomach sank. This was not going to just be some hot sex that he and Shane could share as foreplay. Last night he’d read:

Xander swallowed. “Because it’s you and basketball, Christian. Only one of you can break my heart.”

Christian nodded, and propped himself up on his elbow, the moonlight haloing that golden hair behind him. “I don’t love basketball nearly as much as I love you,” he said softly, and lowered his head for a kiss.

Then Ilya had closed the book and tossed it on the floor next to his bed. He was being ridiculous, he knew it. He and Shane weren’t even...those weren’t words they said to each other. And he doubted Shane would ever love anything as much as he loved hockey anyway, even if he could ever love...

The way he talked about hockey and dedicated himself to it, made his whole life fit around it...Ilya understood that. He might have even lived it, had his own life gone just a little differently. He knew there was some kind of poetic irony in that. The thing he'd walked away from, that made his father hate him, was now personified and holding his heart in its hand, could crush it at any time. But the hand was gentle and warm and lulling him into a false sense of security.

Shane: I hope I don't sound like Xander when we're doing this.

Ilya laughed and flipped through the pages, trying to see if he could find which part Shane meant.

Ilya: which? "Waaahhh...God?"

Shane: Yeah.

Ilya: no, you're much worse

Shane: Fuck you.

Ilya: I wish

Shane: Me too. Tomorrow?

Ilya: you know where to find me

Shane: It'll be late, as usual.

After texting Shane for a little longer, until he told Ilya he was falling asleep, he switched to another text thread.

Ilya: tell me you're free a week from friday

A message popped up almost right away.

Sveta: Should be, why?

Ilya laughed, because there was no preparing anyone for his next words.

Ilya: we're going to dinner with Rose Landry

Sveta: Sorry, what???????

Ilya: Shane invited us to dinner

Ilya: Rose knows about me apparently

Sveta: Oh Ilya, you really are in a mess aren't you?

Ilya: it's nothing

Ilya: we get to go to a fancy dinner with a movie star

Ilya: might as well

He knew she'd see right through his attempt at disinterest, but at least he tried.

Sveta: So we're going on a double date with your boyfriend and his beard?

Ilya: shut up and say yes please

Sveta: Fine, yes.

Sveta: How could I miss this?

Ilya just knew she was laughing. But at least she was coming. He suspected Shane might be right, he might need reinforcements. Just not only because of Rose Landry.

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Between that night and the day Rose arrived, Shane had two away games and two home games. They'd settled into a pretty good routine, working around Shane's travel and practice schedule and Ilya's working hours. Every night that Shane was in town, they managed to sleep together in one of their beds, usually Ilya's, even if it meant an early departure the next morning. Some evenings they cooked together, some they got takeout. More often than not, they spent time together in Ilya's apartment, fitted together on his leather couch watching tv or reading, either to each other or on their own in each other's company, with Vanya nearby. The nights he was away, they texted or talked on the phone or facetimes. There was almost no moment of the day when he was unaware of what Ilya was doing or where he was.

In between reading *The Locker Room* and whichever book he brought on the plane with him, he'd finally picked up *A Single Man*. Ilya had told him to save it for a bit when he'd given it to him weeks ago, and Shane hadn't been sure why. He still wasn't entirely sure, but he was finding it an interesting mix of boring and painful. Enough so that he hadn't yet told Ilya he'd started it. The loneliness of George was familiar, while the grief was not. The time and place George inhabited was also much harsher about queerness, and maybe that was part of what Ilya was warning him about. He couldn't be himself without judgment. Familiar, very familiar. But some of the things that stuck with him, that made him want to text Ilya things he didn't yet know how to say, were the quieter thoughts George had about his dearly departed.

*The perfect evening...lying down on the couch beside the bookcase and reading himself
sleepy...Jim lying opposite him at the other end of the couch, also reading;
the two of them absorbed in their books yet so completely aware of each other's presence.*

It was a little melancholic because George was describing something that had been taken from him, but for Shane, that still was his perfect evening. He still had it, and he never wanted to let it go.

*Think of two people, living together day after day, year after year, in this small space,
standing elbow to elbow cooking at the same small stove, squeezing past each other on the
narrow stairs, shaving in front of the same small bathroom mirror, constantly jogging,
jostling, bumping against each other's bodies by mistake or on purpose, sensually,
aggressively, awkwardly, impatiently, in rage or in love – think what deep though invisible
tracks they must leave, everywhere, behind them!*

Another thing tinged with grief from George's perspective, but Shane read it with longing and almost desperation. ...*think what deep though invisible tracks they must leave*... Ilya had already done that. Shane already had a hard time imagining life before Ilya, and it had only been three months, not even quite three. The things he was feeling were so big, too big for such a small space of time. But did that matter? His life had grown around Ilya and One Good Memory and Vanya, like a tree grows around a fence. Maybe you could remove it, but you'd have to hack away at the trunk, forcefully remove pieces of it so it would never be whole again.

He'd lain in his hotel bed the night before he'd see Ilya again, wondering when he'd figure out how to solve this problem without having to hack away at his life.

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Ilya was almost dreading Rose's arrival, fearing it would disrupt the comfortable little existence they'd fallen into of late. She arrived at Shane's midday on Friday while Ilya was working. After Mallory got to the store, he basically spent hours straightening books, stocking shelves, and doing anything to distract himself from the way his stomach lurched every time he thought about dinner.

Svetlana got to One Good Memory around 6:30 so they could be picked up at 7. She was wearing a flowy black pantsuit/halter top thing, a black coat over it, hair pulled back with strands framing her face, the picture of elegance as always. The restaurant they were going to wasn't too fancy, but the company was. Ilya had decided on a black cashmere turtleneck, one of his nicest, and black pants. His gold chain gleamed against the material, and his curls were as tamed as they could be without going flat. The two of them looked like they were matching on purpose.

Ilya made sure Mallory was good, told her she could close early for any reason if she needed to, and then they met the car outside at 7. Not just a car...a limo, which opened to reveal Rose Landry in a slinky blue dress and heels, and Shane...Ilya had seen him dressed up, hair styled, in more ads than he could keep track of. Watches, cologne, soda, sports equipment, protein bars...Shane was truly the golden boy of the MLH. He'd also been named Hottest Man in the MLH by some magazine or another, and Ilya certainly agreed with their choice and appreciated their photoshoot. But Shane in person, up close and personal, wearing a silky blue button-down, dark pants, his slightly longer than usual hair perfectly gelled and framing his face so artfully, Ilya could only assume Rose was responsible, was breathtaking.

Shane was sitting on the double seat at the back of the limo, Rose on the longer side-facing bench to Shane's right, across from a mini-bar. Ilya helped Svetlana in and followed, feeling more awkward than he'd ever felt in his life. What were the rules? Was he allowed to sit next to Shane? Everyone here knew, but that didn't mean Shane wanted to be overt about it.

"Hi!" Rose's cheerful voice was familiar but different from what he was used to hearing on the screen. "Sit, sit. Wherever you want."

Ilya's eyes were on Shane, looking for any sign of what he wanted, and when Shane patted the seat next to him and Ilya quickly moved into it, the relief that hit him was immeasurable. Svetlana settled next to Rose, an amused little smirk on her face.

“Hi,” Shane said softly. “You look amazing.”

“Mm, so do you.”

Louder, Shane said, “Rose, this is Ilya, and this is Svetlana.” He gestured to each of them in turn. “And this is Rose Landry.”

“I’m so excited to meet you both.” Rose reached a hand out to him, and Ilya shook it, still trying to wrap his head around being in a limo with Shane Hollander and Rose Landry.

“Nice to meet you too.”

Rose turned to Svetlana. “And you as well. I’m in love with your earrings.”

Svetlana and Rose seemed to hit it off immediately and fell into conversation while Ilya was still trying to figure out what to do with his hands, which were itchy to touch Shane.

“How was your day?” Shane asked as the limo started to roll.

“Just the usual. Did you have a nice time catching up?” Ilya nodded toward Rose, who was talking very fast. Svetlana was laughing, so he assumed it was fine.

Shane nodded. “Yeah, it was fun. I got a very long rundown about some drama on the set of X-Squad 2. Very educational.”

Ilya laughed. “Sounds like it.”

He still felt awkward. He never felt awkward with Shane or anyone. He was not an awkward person. As if he knew, Shane reached over and took his hand. “Is this okay?”

“Of course,” Ilya said, relaxing into the seat.

The rest of the short ride was filled with conversation that highlighted the fact that Ilya was surrounded by people obsessed with hockey. Rose’s brothers were all involved in one way or another, and she and Svetlana quickly realized their common interest while Shane interjected here and there. Ilya was entirely outnumbered, but he enjoyed listening anyway.

When they arrived at the restaurant, Mamma Maria, they were immediately whisked up to the second floor and into an intimate little room with a single table set for four against a window overlooking North Square. The light was low enough to make it feel like it was set for a date, and there were two candles on the table, adding to the ambiance. Ilya and Shane ended up on one side of the table, Ilya next to the window, across from Svetlana and Rose across from Shane. Someone was there pouring glasses of wine and asking if they needed anything while they perused the menu.

Once their server had their orders, the energy at the table shifted. Rose’s eyes immediately landed on Ilya, and he felt another little pulse of nervousness run through him. She was smiling, but he could feel the intensity.

“So, Ilya,” she said, “tell me all about you.”

He let his usual confidence slide back into place. Ilya did not get nervous. He said, “What would you like to know, Rose Landry?”

“Hmm,” she hummed thoughtfully. “What’s the last book you read? What’s your favorite color? And what are your intentions with my friend?”

Ilya’s eyebrows went up comically at the last question, a mix of surprise and maybe annoyance. He decided to ignore that one...and the way Svetlana’s head tilted and eyes narrowed.

“I finished a book called *The Nix* just last night. And my favorite color...” he glanced over at Shane, who was watching him with interest, the low light of the candles and streetlamps reflecting like burning ore in his shiny doe eyes. “Is brown.”

“Okay, we’re going to come back to the one you skipped, but I’ve just thought of something else. Have you read a book called *The Diviners*?”

Ilya flipped through the endless list of books in his head. “Do you mean the YA one? I’ve sold a lot of it. *Supernatural*, New York, roaring 20s?”

“That’s the one. I’m reading it right now for *reasons*. Which are that I’m being talked into doing my Jennifer Lawrence turn with the YA book adaptation route. What do you guys think, can I pull off playing a teenager? Maybe a 20 year old if they age up.”

“If Olivia Newton John could do it at 30, you’ll be fine. Wasn’t JLaw in her 20s when they filmed *Hunger Games*?” Svetlana said, though Ilya could tell she hadn’t entirely moved past the ignored question.

“Exactly,” Rose said, pointing at Svetlana. “Anyway, it’s still top secret, so please don’t let that out of this room.” She turned back to Ilya. “Now. Your intentions. With my friend.”

“Rose,” Shane said from his right. “Drop it.”

“Why? Are we not all in the know here?”

“Yes,” Shane said. There was the slightest lilt at the end, and Shane glanced at him, eyes darting briefly to Svetlana. Ilya nodded. He continued, “But we don’t need to talk about it like that, do we?”

Rose gave him an exasperated look. “I’m just being a good friend. And it’s all in good fun. I feel like I’m so behind on everything that isn’t stupid super hero movie drama. I want to know about you two.”

Ilya didn’t say anything. This was Shane’s friend, and he didn’t want to overstep. He also didn’t like the way Rose’s question made him feel because he wasn’t sure it mattered what his intentions were. Shane was the limiting factor here.

“I’ve told you,” Shane said. He was holding his glass of wine and swirling it nervously.

“Yes, but I want to hear from him.” She was looking at him again.

“I ask again, what would you like to know, Rose Landry?” Ilya said with a smile and the same tone he used with Shane when he wanted to get a straight answer from him while maintaining the slight tease.

“I just want to make sure you’re not going to break his heart.”

Before Ilya could even think of how to respond to that, Svetlana was saying, “Then maybe I should be asking *your* friend the same?”

Rose looked at her curiously. Ilya could see her face shift from interested and playful to confused and disbelieving, as if the thought hadn’t even occurred to her. And Ilya understood it...Shane certainly didn’t seem like the type of person to break anyone’s heart. But he was holding Ilya’s hostage, even if Ilya was a mostly willing participant.

“Okay,” Rose said, dragging the ‘ay’ out. “Why do I feel like I just stepped in something messy? I was under the impression you two were serious.”

Ilya licked his lips, picked up his glass of wine and took a sip, put it back down. He did not look at Shane.

“Rose,” Shane said again. “I don’t—” he stopped and inhaled deeply. Ilya’s heart was sinking so fast he had to grip the table with his left hand. Shane continued, his voice gone quiet. “We are, I think. But...can we talk about something else?”

Though he was still carefully not looking at Shane, Ilya could feel the exact moment when Shane looked at him. And not a moment later, Shane’s left hand was enfolding his right one under the table between them, and Ilya’s heart stopped sinking. Before Rose could respond, there was a knock on the door to their little room, and it opened for servers to enter with plates of food. Shane quickly dropped his hand, and Ilya tried not to let the warmth flee with it.

Once the food was served and the room was empty again except for the four of them, Rose picked up the conversation like there hadn’t been a pause at all.

“We can talk about something else, but it seems like maybe you two,” she wagged her finger between them, “need to talk.”

Shane sighed and picked up his fork. “Yes, thank you. I think we’ve all figured that out actually,” he said wryly.

Ilya snorted. Rose was biting her lip in amusement too.

“Alright. So, are you both from Russia?” she asked, now looking between him and Svetlana.

“I was born here, grew up between Moscow and the states,” Svetlana said.

“I was born in Moscow. Moved here for college.” Ilya took a bite of his pasta.

“To study literature?”

Ilya nodded. “Yes.”

“Why did you choose that?” Rose asked before taking a bite of her own. She seemed genuinely curious at least.

“Ah, well...I have always loved reading and writing. My mother read me fairytales and then classics before I was old enough to understand them. But I wanted to, so I did.”

“What was your favorite?” Shane asked. Ilya looked over at him. He wasn’t even holding his fork, his black bass still sitting untouched.

“When I was very young, Tsarevna Frog, or um...The Frog Princess. Not the same as the western Frog Prince. And my other favorite was Vasilisa the Beautiful. It is about Baba Yaga. But later, sometimes my mother would read pieces of Dostoevsky and others. I just liked listening to her read, it didn’t matter what it was or that I could barely follow.” He paused, realizing he was talking quite a lot for a simple question, and looked up. Three pairs of eyes were on him. Svetlana’s soft with fondness and sadness because she too remembered Ilya’s mother. Rose’s interested and polite. Shane’s...like he was being read his favorite book and taking it all in with awe. Ilya cleared his throat and straightened the cross around his neck. “Anyway, Dostoevsky stuck with me.”

“The bookshop is named for it,” Shane said to Rose, his voice holding a smile and something that might be pride if Ilya thought that was possible.

“For Dostoevsky?”

“Yeah. From The Brothers Karamazov. Am I saying that right?” Shane looked over at him.

Ilya nodded. “Yes, correct.”

“I love it. Shane said we can come by while you’re open tomorrow. Can’t wait,” Rose said and then turned to Svetlana. “Do you work there at all?”

Svetlana waved a hand. “Not often. It’s not really my thing, I’m just here for moral support. Sometimes if Ilya needs help with something I’ll pop in.”

“I wouldn’t have the shop at all without her. She’s too modest,” Ilya said.

“Yes, yes. But you’re in there doing the actual work. I just get to say I’m the co-owner of the best indie bookstore in Boston.”

Ilya laughed. “You’ve been lying to people again?”

“It’s the truth and everyone knows it.”

“I agree with her,” Shane interjected, and Ilya reached over without thinking to rest a hand on his thigh. He started to pull back as soon as he realized, but Shane’s left hand dropped into his lap and covered Ilya’s, holding it there for a moment.

The conversation slipped into hockey again after that, with an invitation from Rose for Ilya and Svetlana to come to Shane’s game with her the next evening. She had a private suite, so it wouldn’t even be Shane’s seats this time. Svetlana was of course immediately in, and Ilya

couldn't and maybe didn't want to decline. Shane was just listening quietly with a little smile on his face.

They sat and talked well past dessert, the conversation comfortable and fun, loosened a little by wine. When the last of their plates was removed, no bill was mentioned. Ilya assumed Rose and/or Shane had taken care of it already, and he was certainly not going to argue with a couple of millionaires about who was paying for dinner.

Back in the limo, Rose and Svetlana were swapping numbers and Rose was promising to send her a dress and Svetlana was telling Rose about a shop in New York City that she needed to visit while she was there and that eventually turned into gossiping about a reality show star that Rose had met recently. Ilya was glad to see that whatever moment of tension passed between them earlier on his behalf had blown over.

"Are you coming over tonight?" Shane asked from beside him, their thighs pressed together on the seat.

"You want me to?" Since the last time they talked about this had been mid-sex, he wasn't going to hold him to it.

Shane nodded. "Will Vanya be okay?"

"He's fine until morning. I fed him before we left, and he has a new scratching post thing from Sveta. He was very happy."

"Good. I'd rather go there, but...it's only a couple of days."

Ilya knew Rose would be leaving for New York on Sunday morning. Which is why, after they dropped Svetlana off at her place and made it back to Shane's, he was surprised to hear Rose say, "I'm pretty tired. I think I'll go to bed early."

Ilya wasn't buying it. Rose looked like she could talk for hours more, and almost certainly would have if not for whatever strange little thing had been hanging between them all evening since she'd made her declaration that the two of them needed to talk.

"Are you sure?" Shane asked as he kicked his shoes off. "Do you need anything?"

"No, I'm great. It's just been a long week." She had her heels off, hanging from her fingers by the straps. "I'll see you two tomorrow." She hugged Shane and whispered something in his ear that had him smiling his crooked little half smile, and Ilya hated the rush of jealousy that surged through him before he tamped it down.

Rose let Shane go and immediately turned and wrapped her arms around Ilya. He was surprised for a second, arms stiff, before he hugged her back.

"I'm so glad I got to meet you. I hope we get to spend a lot more time together," she said. "After tomorrow, I mean."

"Me too," he said and meant it. Because that would mean he was still in Shane's life. And because he genuinely liked her, which made the jealousy part all the more humiliating.

“Okay. Goodnight, you two.” She had a devilish smile on her face as she turned and went down the hall in the opposite direction from Shane’s bedroom, and Ilya was suddenly grateful that Shane’s apartment was so fucking huge because he hoped to have Shane under him soon, without having to muffle his favorite sounds.

That hope was dashed as soon as Shane’s bedroom door shut behind them. Ilya could see in his posture that he’d gone all tense. His face was suddenly nervous and Ilya counted three times he licked his lips before Ilya had even crossed the room.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, stopping a couple feet away.

“So, uh, we should talk, right?”

Ilya tried to ignore the free fall sensation in his stomach. “Just because Rose said so doesn’t mean we have to.”

Shane let out one breathy laugh and then his face was serious again. “I know, but she was right.” He shook his head, a nervous little tic, followed by pulling at his eyelashes, another one. They were making Ilya nervous.

“I think...” Shane started. “I think maybe I haven’t been doing a good job with the honesty rule.”

“Okay. How so?” Ilya didn’t know what to brace for, but then Shane smiled.

“You’re the one who’s good with words, not me,” Shane said. “But...hold on.” He went to his nightstand and picked up a book. “Here.”

Ilya took the book from him. Walt Whitman: The Complete Poems. One of those Penguin Classics editions with the black border on the bottom half. It was clearly new.

“You read more Whitman? When did you get this?” Not that Shane reading things he recommended was new, but it still made Ilya feel special.

“I saw it in the airport bookstore a couple days ago. But uh, open it.”

Ilya opened the book, and it naturally fell open to a dog-eared page. There were a few lines highlighted in yellow. He looked up to see Shane watching him nervously, tongue darting out to lick his bottom lip again.

“Read it,” Shane said.

Ilya looked down at the book again. The dog-eared page contained When I Heard at the Close of Day. He’d certainly read it before, but it wasn’t one he had total recall of. His eyes slid down to the last three lines, the ones highlighted in yellow, and he didn’t dare to wonder why Shane had made him read this. His brain was refusing, sliding past the lines, back to Shane’s face, taking in the anticipation, the nervousness, something riding the line between joy and terror.

He looked back down and read the poem from start to finish, not out loud, aware that it was leaving a lengthy space of silence between them, but he needed to remember what this poem was, what it meant, what it might mean right now.

When I heard at the close of the day how my name had been receiv'd with plaudits in the capitol, still it was not a happy night for me that follow'd,

He read and read, until he got to the first highlighted line, and he slowed down, let each word sink in so he didn't misinterpret what was happening here.

*For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night,
In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me,
And his arm lay lightly around my breast—and that night I was happy.*

The words on the page started to distort. Something was burning in his nose up to his eyes, and now he was the one licking his lips, sucking the bottom one in, trying to regain some control over his face before he looked up.

"So, um," Shane started when he finally did. "Turns out Walt Whitman is much more eloquent than I am."

Ilya laughed, a disbelieving sound. "Well, I wouldn't take that as a moral failing." He was stalling, still not sure what to do with this.

Shane rolled his eyes before the nervousness settled in again. "It's true. All of that."

Ilya shook his head, still not wanting to assume.

"I know we haven't known each other that long, and I don't know. Maybe this is crazy. I feel crazy sometimes, like...like I'm living one of these books we've been reading. And I know it might just be me, you don't have to say anything." Shane stopped and swallowed. Ilya could see his throat work as he did it, like it was painful. "I hope...I don't know. Honesty, right?"

Ilya was standing so still. "You have to say it."

Shane nodded slowly, neck stiff, a few jerks of his head, like he too didn't have complete control over his body. "I love you."

Both pairs of eyes in that room were shiny, both hearts beating too hard.

"You don't have to say it back," Shane said, and Ilya knew he'd taken too long to respond. "Like I said...it's too soon. I'm just—"

Ilya cut him off by pulling him into his arms in a crushing hug. Shane's arms went around him with no hesitation.

"I love you too," Ilya said. His lips were against Shane's ear, and while that always got a reaction from him, this time it was a full body melt. Shane went soft and heavy in his arms, leaning into him like a trust fall, and maybe that's exactly what it was.

“Fuck,” Shane whispered, voice heavy with relief.

“I call you my Shane and you think I don’t love you?”

That time the reaction was familiar, Shane shuddering against him.

“Is this crazy?” Shane asked quietly.

Ilya shrugged in his arms. “Love is crazy. It doesn’t have to make sense. *‘it is most mad and moonly and less it shall unbecome than all the sea which only is deeper than the sea’.*”

Shane pulled back to look at him, eyes still shiny and wet. “What’s that from?”

“More poetry. E.E. Cummings. I don’t think I can recite the whole thing now, later maybe.”

Shane leaned in and kissed him, and it was everything. It made the bombastic, overwrought declarations of love he’d read a million times over suddenly feel hollow, unadorned, like they had only imagined love and never felt it. Words were not enough.

Their nice dinner clothes came off, only a little frantic, and Shane made sure they were neatly laid out on the chair instead of the floor, which made Ilya smile fondly and pull him back into his arms. They made it onto the bed without fully separating, Ilya against the headboard and Shane in his lap. His hands were on every inch of Shane, dragging through his hair, down his back, hooking around his waist, dipping between his legs. One of Shane’s was permanently tangled in his curls, the other making its way from the side of his neck, down his chest, to his cock, and back up, until they were both rocking against each other, needing more.

“Lube,” Ilya finally said, his voice so wrecked equally with emotion and pleasure.

Shane leaned over to grab his fancy black bottle from his nightstand and pushed it into Ilya’s hands, then he muttered, “Fuck,” and leaned over again to get a condom. “I want you without these. Can we do that one day?”

Ilya was already pushing a finger into him, but he stilled his hand. Though he knew Shane wasn’t with anyone else, though they just said the all-important words, it was still a declaration of exclusivity, something he hadn’t ever wanted before Shane, and now he needed it. “We could do it now.”

Shane’s mouth started to form words and then fell open as Ilya crooked his finger. “Really?” he managed.

“I would not have let you suck my cock,” Ilya said, using his other hand to brush Shane’s bangs back, “if I hadn’t been sure it was safe.” He stopped moving his finger inside of him, wanting his brain to be fully tuned in while they talked about this. “I already get tested regularly, and I have been with no one but you since we met.”

“Oh. Me too. I got tested after...well, even though I hardly did anything with anyone after Rose. I still wanted to be sure.”

“Do you want to wait? Until I can show you?”

Shane shook his head. "I trust you. I love you."

Ilya snaked his free hand around Shane's waist and started fingering him again, adding another. "I love you too. *'I look at you and suddenly the sonnets make sense.'* You sent me that one, you remember?"

Shane smiled. "I remember. Still true."

Ilya kissed him, never wanted to stop kissing him.

"Ilya," Shane breathed against his lips. "Need you."

Ilya freed his fingers, slicked his cock, and pulled Shane into place without moving, letting Shane take him like that, in his lap, straddling him, as close as they could be. Shane was not patient tonight, he held Ilya's cock still and sank down onto him in one smooth motion. He was so tight and warm and slick without the condom between them, Ilya moaned into his neck, dug his fingers into Shane's back and his waist and tried to let Shane set the pace.

Shane moved on him, making good use of his muscled thighs, his body stretching and arching as his hips rolled. He was a sight to behold, and Ilya could only press kisses to his chest and his neck and his lips when he could catch them.

"You feel so good like this," Shane murmured. "So deep. I can feel you...so different." He cradled Ilya's jaw with one hand, dragged his thumb down his cheek and over his lips, pulling on his bottom one until Ilya sucked his thumb into his mouth. Shane moaned, pushed against his tongue, and Ilya's whole body pulsed with pleasure at having Shane in his mouth while he was inside of him. His control was slipping, his orgasm building, slow but overwhelming.

"I have never felt anything as good as you, Shane Hollander," he said honestly when Shane's hand dropped to his neck.

Shane was smiling, his lips parted and red and kiss-swollen, his eyes dark and hazy, beautiful and perfect, and Ilya was smiling back and leaning in to run his teeth along his jaw .

We were like gods at the dawning of the world, and our joy was so bright we could see nothing else but the other.

When he knew he couldn't last much longer, he reached between them to stroke Shane's cock, his own hips pushing him up, meeting each movement of Shane's hips. He watched his face as his body tightened, clenching around Ilya's cock and curling inward, one arm circling Ilya's back while he buried his face in Ilya's hair and said his name over and over like a chant, a prayer.

"Ilya, Ilya, Ilya, fuck," as his release splashed over Ilya's fist.

Ilya felt his name like silk flowing over his skin, and he spilled himself deep inside of Shane, nothing between them, while Shane's weight held him down and kept him from floating away entirely.

Shane nuzzled into his neck, both of them sweaty and still breathing hard. “Fuck, that was perfect.”

“Yes, perfect.” Ilya tightened his arms around him.

They stayed wrapped around each other long enough for their sweat-slick skin to start cooling and things to get uncomfortable. Ilya eventually helped Shane shift off of him and went to clean up in the big en suite bathroom. He wet a washcloth for Shane, knowing he would probably be uncomfortable considering.

Shane was laid out on his bed, eyes closed, still smiling, and Ilya leaned down to kiss his lips before he gently wiped him clean, then he pressed a kiss to his inner thigh. When he got back into bed, Shane immediately rolled into him, cuddling close.

“I love you,” Shane said again. “I like being able to say that out loud.”

“Me too.” He said it in Russian, then translated, then kissed the top of Shane’s head.

“You’ll have to teach me that properly one day. I doubt my brain will retain it tonight.”

Ilya laughed. “We have time.”

Shane stiffened a little against him. “I’m sorry that we still can’t be public. I know that’s not fair. But...I want to. I just...I’m not ready yet. You deserve better though.”

Ilya shook his head. “No. You should come out when you’re ready. For you. Not for me.”

“I know. But it’s not just me anymore. We’re together.”

Ilya’s heart soared, even as he carefully ignored the other feelings stirring. “Yes. We will figure out the rest, okay?”

Shane nodded, and Ilya felt him relax, going pliant and soft. “Should we read?”

“Mhm. Always.”

Shane rolled over to pull *Call Me By Your Name* out of his nightstand. They’d read from it several times now, moving through the book out of order but always finding just what they needed. Ilya took the book from him and flipped to what he thought was a fitting page, considering this was the book that set everything in motion, even though they’d read this part before.

“‘Call me by your name and I’ll call you by mine,’ which I’d never done in my life before and which, as soon as I said my own name as though it were his, took me to a realm I never shared with anyone in my life before, or since.”

Ilya paused and turned so they were face to face. “Maybe we should try it. Call me by your name and I’ll call you by mine.”

Shane smiled skeptically, then nodded.

“Ilya,” Ilya said and immediately grimaced.

“Shane.” His voice was so disgusted, Ilya laughed out loud.

“That was terrible, and I’m never doing it again. Why would I say my name when I can say yours,” Ilya laughed and leaned in to kiss him. “My Shane.”

Shane’s eyes fluttered, even while he was smiling and shaking his head. “Ilya. I love saying your name. Since the first time you told me.”

Ilya closed his eyes, which were stinging suspiciously, and kissed him again until he had himself under control. Then he rolled onto his back again, pulled Shane against him, and began to read again, from a different page entirely.

“Maybe it was the alcohol, maybe it was the truth, maybe I didn’t want things to turn abstract, but I felt I should say it, because this was the moment to say it, because it suddenly dawned on me that this was why I had come, to tell him ‘You are the only person I’d like to say goodbye to when I die, because only then will this thing I call my life make any sense. And if I should hear that you died, my life as I know it, the me who is speaking with you now, will cease to exist...”

Ilya stopped there because while those words were real and true, the ones that followed were too sad for a night when they were both so joyful about finally having shared truths laid bare between them. He set the book aside, and they spent the rest of the night talking quietly and touching each other like they’d hadn’t already been doing so nearly every night for months. It was a perfect moment, a perfect night, and before they went to sleep tangled together, Ilya finally recited the entirety of [love is more thicker than forget] while Shane’s fingers gently tugged the curls at the back of his neck.

love is more thicker than forget

more thinner than recall

more seldom than a wave is wet

more frequent than to fail

it is most mad and moonly

and less it shall unbe

than all the sea which only

is deeper than the sea

love is less always than to win

less never than alive

less bigger than the least begin

less littler than forgive

it is most sane and sunly

and more it cannot die

than all the sky which only

is higher than the sky

Chapter End Notes

The books mentioned in this chapter are mostly already in the doc.

But mentioned in passing:

The Nix by Nathan Hill

The Diviners by Libba Bray

Poems mentioned in this chapter:

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock by T.S. Eliot

When I Heard at the Close of Day by Walt Whitman

[love is more thicker than forget] by E.E. Cummings

"I have so much to say to you that I am afraid I shall tell you nothing." - The Brothers Karamazov by Dostoevsky

"We were like gods at the dawning of the world, and our joy was so bright we could see nothing else but the other." - The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller

I feel like I should apologize for the lack of Vanya being a menace in this chapter...he'll be back at it soon.

Oh, and Mamma Maria is a real Boston restaurant! I've never been, but maybe next time I'm there.

[Book list doc](#)

Chapter 12: I ain't gonna face no defeat

Chapter Summary

Let them be in love.

Chapter Notes

An evergreen reminder: this fic is about the reading and the vibes and them falling in love and figuring out how to live with that. Maybe "nothing" is happening outside of that, but that is kind of the point. There is some light angst on the horizon, nothing too catastrophic. For now, they're just figuring out their shit. This is a bookstore au, it's supposed to be cozy and low stakes.

****This chapter contains spoilers for *This Is How You Lose the Time War* by Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone, but not for the actual end of the story. Shane and Ilya's commentary doesn't reveal the fates of the characters.

Also, Boston plays in Montreal again in this chapter, and I need you all to know that's based on real life. I've been using the real Boston Bruins calendar as a reference (deviating where I need to, but it helps me to not have to make up a schedule or teams they're playing bc I just genuinely don't know hockey that well). In 2016, they played in Montreal on Nov 8 and Dec 12.

Lastly, there are a few books mentioned in this chapter that do not fit the timeline (i.e., released after 2016), including *This Is How You Lose the Time War*, and a few mentioned during a convo with Rose. For the latter, I just find it easier/more authentic to mention books I've actually read than to randomly pick some based on release dates. And *This Is How You Lose the Time War* is a favorite of mine, and you will soon see why I so badly needed to use it for Hollanov.

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

Shane woke with a warm body pressed against his back and an arm around his waist. He could feel Ilya's breath tickling the back of his neck and he never wanted to be anywhere else. Ilya stirred behind him, lips replacing the tickling breath, and his whole body lit up.

"Morning," Shane said, turning his head to see Ilya's face. His eyes were barely open, curls sticking out all over, the gel from the night before finally giving up. He smiled a sleepy smile, and Shane said, "I love you," and wondered how he had held off saying that for as long as he did.

Ilya's arm tightened around him. "I love you too."

"I wish I didn't have a game today. I want to stay in bed with you all day."

"Mm, me too. But even if you didn't, Rose is here."

Shane groaned. "I know. And I leave tomorrow night for four days. The timing sucks."

"Yes. We should make good use of our time today," Ilya said, his hand moving down Shane's stomach, stopping to drag his fingers along the surprisingly sensitive skin there, then down to encircle his already hard cock.

Shane moaned and pushed back against Ilya, his cock just as hard and nestled against Shane's ass. "I haven't even brushed my teeth," he said weakly, making no move to stop Ilya.

"Don't care. Hand me the lube."

Shane grabbed it from the nightstand and passed it back to him. He was expecting Ilya's fingers, but instead his hand was back on Shane's cock, this time to slick him with lube before disappearing again. Shane took himself in hand for a moment, but then Ilya was pushing insistently between his thighs with his lubed hand.

"Open up," he said against Shane's ear. Shane lifted his thigh, making space between them while Ilya squirted more lube there.

"Hey," he laughed. "That's cold."

"Sorry. Won't be for long, I promise." He pushed Shane's leg back down, then his cock was pushing through his thighs.

"Is this okay?" Ilya asked.

"Fuck...yes."

Ilya was sliding in and out of his thighs, the lube making it smooth and perfect against taint and balls, and Shane looked down to see the tip of Ilya's cock pushing out the front of his thighs on every thrust. It was so fucking hot, Shane was worried he'd come already. Then Ilya's hand was back around his cock, stroking in time with his thrusts, and he had to exercise all of his self control. He moaned and rocked his hips, tightened his thighs even more.

"Your thighs are so fuckable. I don't know why we haven't tried this already. How many fucking squats do you do?"

"A lot."

Ilya laughed. "Keep doing them."

Shane reached over his head with one arm, fingers finding the back of Ilya's and raking through his curls, which were a little more tangled than usual. He settled for just pulling Ilya's face closer, lips right above his ear, breathing harder and harder against him.

"I wish I could mark you," Ilya's rough voice said, his teeth scraping the side of Shane's neck. "Mine." Then he was lightly sucking the skin behind Shane's ear, but he stopped quickly, clearly avoiding actually leaving a mark.

"Do it. Just uh, not there." Shane wanted it too, but he also didn't want to answer any questions from his nosy, asshole teammates, even though they'd all assume it was Rose. Maybe that was also the reason. He didn't want anyone assuming anyone but Ilya had marked him.

"Where? Here?" Ilya moved his face down, kissed along his shoulder, then nosed against Shane's armpit, which was on display because his arm was still up, hand still in Ilya's hair.

Shane squirmed and laughed, but then Ilya was using his teeth again, and he moaned. "Yes. Don't tickle me though."

His teeth scraped against the soft skin just outside his armpit, but his nose was pushing fully against it, making him squirm again.

"Ilya," he said through his teeth, "I haven't showered." He was feeling self-conscious, even though it was cold outside and he'd worn deodorant and Ilya was clearly enjoying it if the way his hips sped up was any indication.

"I know," Ilya practically growled. His mouth latched onto the skin at the crease of his arm, which also kind of tickled at first, but then Ilya's tongue was flicking against him, then he was sucking on the skin there, and his cock was still sliding perfectly between Shane's thighs and his hand was stroking his cock, and Shane was so overwhelmed with sensation, his eyes were screwed shut and his mouth was hanging open and he had no control over whatever noise was coming from his throat.

"Ilya," he moaned. "Fuck, I'm too close."

Ilya kept sucking at his skin and thrusting between his thighs, but he loosened the hand around Shane's cock for a few moments, letting him come back from the brink.

"Not yet."

Ilya was kissing up his shoulder again, back to his neck, then his jaw. Shane finally let his arm down and turned his face so their mouths could connect, toothbrushing no longer a thought in his mind, just Ilya's warm, soft lips against his.

"Did you do it?" Shane asked when Ilya pulled back. He raised his arm again, but he couldn't see from that angle.

"Yes." Ilya moved to lick the crease of his arm again. "Right here. Mine." He bit down lightly, making Shane moan and rock back against him hard.

"Fuck. I need to see."

"After," Ilya said, kissing that spot again before his face was back at Shane's neck, nuzzling into him while his hips moved hard and fast. Shane tightened his thighs again. "Fuck, Shane."

You feel so good in every way.”

The praise made his cock twitch in Ilya’s hand, and Ilya started stroking him faster, in time with his increased thrusts, his warm breath coming quicker against Shane’s neck. Shane looked back at him again, and Ilya was watching him with what could only be described as reverence.

“Gonna come,” Shane said, his body already tightening with it.

Ilya shifted just enough that his cock hit Shane’s taint more forcefully, sending him immediately over the edge and coming over Ilya’s fist, and a moment later, wetness between his legs as Ilya moaned into his ear.

Ilya’s forehead was pressed against the back of his neck, his hand still wrapped gently around his cock. “That was…” Ilya started, then kissed his neck. “Hot.”

Shane let out a breathy laugh. “I’m a mess.”

“Worth it, yes?”

“Yes. You have time to clean up here?”

Ilya lifted his head to look at the clock. It was still early, only a little past 6:30am.

“I have time. Can we get in your fancy tub?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Ilya sat up and climbed out of the bed. He walked around to the other side until he was facing Shane.

“Jesus, look at you.”

Shane looked down at himself. Cum on his stomach, dripping from between his thighs. He swallowed hard, his body wanting to react even though it was spent. He felt debauched and loved in equal measure as Ilya leaned down to kiss him, running his fingers along Shane’s thighs and up his stomach, and then to the spot he’d sucked in the crease of his arm.

“I get to see you like this, covered in cum and with my mark on you,” Ilya whispered against his lips. “And then later I get to watch you outskate everyone and be the best hockey player in the world.” Shane shuddered and pulled Ilya into a proper kiss. When they separated, Ilya pressed his forehead to Shane’s. “I love you.”

“I love you too. But I’m not the best in the world.”

Ilya laughed and then straightened up. “Oh? Who is better then?”

Shane couldn’t come up with anyone. Maybe some equals, but better…not quite.

“Mhm. Thought so. You love being the best, I love that you’re the best. No need to be humble.”

“Shut up,” Shane said, but he couldn’t hide his smile. He stood up and pressed himself against Ilya, making a mess of him too. Ilya squeezed him tight.

“I can’t wait to watch you in person later.”

“I’m glad you’ll be there. You’ll have fun in Rose’s suite. Fancy food and drinks, comfortable seats. Won’t be as nice when you use my tickets.”

“That’s okay, I don’t care about that. I only want to see you.” Ilya pressed the pad of his thumb to Shane’s bottom lip, then moved it and kissed him there.

Shane felt off kilter in the best way. He led Ilya into the bathroom to start filling the jetted tub that was big enough for two, even them. While it was filling, he stood in front of the mirror above the sink and half turned so he could see the mark Ilya had left on him. It wasn’t too big, just a pinkish, reddish blotch on the outer skin of his armpit, mostly hidden when his arm was down. It was fucking hot, and Shane bit his lip looking at it. Ilya stepped up behind him and pressed his mouth to it again.

“Mine.”

Shane nodded. “Yes. Fuck, I like that.”

“Me too. Come, tub’s full enough.”

Ilya stepped into the hot water first and held an arm out to pull Shane in after him. Shane settled his back against Ilya’s chest, Ilya’s arms going around his middle.

Shane moaned at how good it felt. “I wish we could stay in here for a while.”

“Mm, me too. But I think you probably need to check on Rose soon, and I should check on Vanya.”

“Yeah. I know Rose mentioned it last night, but we’re going to come by the store later if that’s okay. She wants to see it.”

“Of course. Come anytime.”

“I also need something to read while I’m out of town.”

“I have some things. A couple of suggestions for stuff you can read on the plane, and one you might want to read alone. And we still have one of the gay mystery romance books left. The one with Adrien English. I hope you know I’ve spent too much time looking up these books on reddit. I feel like I know who all the popular leading men are.”

Shane laughed. “I appreciate that, but you really don’t have to.”

“I don’t mind. Adrien English has a lot of fans. The author is very well liked too. I ordered some of her books to stock.”

Shane turned around in the water until he was face to face with Ilya. “Thank you.”

Ilya put his thumb on his bottom lip again and pulled it down a little, then he leaned in to kiss him, which eventually turned into more kissing and more touching, and when their bodies had clearly recovered enough, they made sure to take advantage of that before they dried off and Ilya left, after a few more *I love yous*.

-

After Ilya was gone, still no sign of Rose, Shane went for a long run. He felt like he was running on air, his whole body light and warm, despite the cold Boston morning. He was pretty sure he was smiling the entire time.

When he got back upstairs, Rose was sitting at the kitchen island sipping coffee.

“Hey, you,” she said cheerfully.

“Hey, good morning. Did you sleep okay?”

“Sure did. Did you?” she asked, eyebrows going up suggestively.

Shane laughed. “Yes. I’m going to take a shower, then we can get breakfast if you want?”

“Yes, please. And I also need to hear just how well you slept.”

Shane shook his head and headed for his bedroom. “You’re too nosy for your own good,” he said over his shoulder, and her laugh followed him down the hall.

When he was clean and dry and dressed in regular clothes, he met Rose in the living room.

“There’s a cafe down the street that has good coffee and breakfast, and it’s only a few blocks from Ilya’s store,” he told her. He figured by the time they were done there, it would be close enough to 10am when One Good Memory actually opened.

“Sounds perfect to me.”

Coats on, they made their way down to the cafe, chatting idly about Rose’s upcoming schedule and his upcoming away games.

“Here it is,” Shane said, stopping in front of the door and holding it open for her.

The cafe was a little busy, as it usually was on Saturday morning, and the girl at the counter recognized Rose immediately. She smiled and took a selfie with her, and they managed to order. Shane was a bit relieved that it was Rose receiving the attention on her own, leaving him out of it for once.

Coffees and breakfast in hand, they managed to snag a two-seater table in the corner, Rose's back to the rest of the cafe in hopes they wouldn't be bothered. Shane sipped his coffee and took a bite of his avocado toast while Rose fiddled with her phone. She sighed quietly and turned her phone screen toward him, a gossip site pulled up.

Rose Landry and Shane Hollander spotted on double date in Boston. Rumors of the couple's split may have been greatly exaggerated.

Shane rolled his eyes. There was a picture of the four of them leaving the restaurant, and he couldn't argue that it looked like a double date. Ilya and Svetlana were both wearing all black, looking chic and almost otherworldly beautiful, and he and Rose were both in a similar shade of blue, his face turned toward her, each of them smiling.

"Fuck," he muttered. "Sorry. Tonight isn't going to help." They would almost certainly be noticed in Rose's box, and it would look like Svetlana and Ilya were a couple accompanying Rose to see him play.

"You know it doesn't bother me at all. But I do wonder how Ilya will feel about us being labeled a couple still."

She looked sympathetic, and those words and that expression made his stomach drop unpleasantly. He wished it didn't have to be this way. He wished he could respond and tell them they were wrong about who his date was. He wanted it so bad.

"I'm going to text him."

Shane: So there are pictures from last night.

Ilya responded right away.

I.R.: I saw

I.R.: Sveta sent them to me

I.R.: she's very pleased they commented on her style and her looks

Shane laughed. "Apparently Svetlana is happy with them at least."

"She looks great. She could get a modeling gig like that." Rose snapped her fingers. "Ilya too honestly." She was giving him a pointed look.

"I know." He was smiling like an idiot. His boyfriend...were they boyfriends?...was hot.

Shane: You look amazing. I'm sorry I can't correct them.

I.R.: it's fine

I.R.: probably good right? no one will suspect if they think you two are still together

God, he hated that.

Shane: Yeah, I guess. We're at the cafe right now. Planning to come by after.

I.R.: come whenever, door will be unlocked

Shane: Thanks. Love you.

He couldn't help it. He had to say it. He wanted to keep saying it. *Forever and forever and forever.*

I.R.: I love you too

Shane looked up from his phone to find Rose watching him with a smile on her face, biting her lower lip like she was barely containing it.

"Something happened last night," she said. "I need to know."

Shane looked around the cafe. No one was paying attention to them at the moment, and there was a low buzz of chatter and the espresso machine and some very low volume music coming from somewhere.

He nodded at her, sure that he was still smiling stupidly. "I told him I love him," he whispered.

Rose squeaked. It wasn't terribly loud, but enough that Shane startled and looked around. A couple of people glanced up and then went back to what they were doing.

"Rose," he said through gritted teeth.

"Oh my god. Sorry, sorry. But holy shit! I'm so happy for you," she whispered, clapping her hands soundlessly. "I really am. He seems great."

"He is. He's so smart and funny and..." he trailed off, realizing he was being one of those annoying people who can't do anything but gush about it as soon as they're in a relationship. But he didn't have anyone else he could tell, and that made his chest hurt.

"You forgot attractive."

"Well, that one is obvious."

"What are you going to do about hockey?" she asked.

Shane sucked in a deep breath, smile fading. "I don't know. You know what it's like. I'd be treated like a sideshow freak. There are enough people who think I don't deserve what I've achieved already..." he sighed. "Just thinking about it is exhausting."

"I know," she said, reaching across the table to squeeze his hand. "And I understand. You should do whatever you think is best for you. But...I think you might be surprised. There will be some loud voices of dissent, but I bet there will be a lot of support too."

"What if they trade me? And no one wants me? I could effectively be ending my career. End up benched until I retire."

“Shane,” she said seriously. “No team in the league would bench you. You’re literally the best player. They care about cups more than having a—” she cut off and looked around. “You know what I mean.”

He nodded slowly, sucking in his bottom lip. “The team might reject me. What if they don’t let me in the locker room.”

“Don’t think they could get away with that.”

“But just knowing it’s what they want would be...fuck,” he said quietly. “I’m just not ready to deal with it yet.”

“I know. Is Ilya pressuring you to?”

“No,” he said quickly. “Never, not at all. He told me last night I should do it for me, when I’m ready. Not him.”

She smiled sadly. “He’s a good one.”

“Yeah. He deserves better.”

“Hey...he loves you. You love him,” she said quietly. “You’ll figure it out. And you know I’ll be by your side no matter what.”

“I know. Sometimes I’m not sure what I’d do without you.”

“You’d be absolutely fine, I know it. But you don’t have to find out.”

They finished their coffee and breakfast with only one more selfie request for Rose, who happily obliged. Shane looked at his phone as they left the cafe, seeing it wasn’t quite 10 yet.

“Ilya said we can come now,” Shane told her as they made their way to the bookshop.

When they arrived, Shane pulled the glass front door open and was immediately greeted by Vanya, who ran up to him in a more dog-like way than usual.

“Oh my goodness, who is this?” Rose squealed. “The famous Vanya?”

Shane laughed. “Yep, this is Vanya. He’s a menace if you ask Ilya, but he loves me, so I won’t speak on that.” He bent down to scoop up the menace.

“I love him,” Rose said, scratching behind Vanya’s ears. “You can come home with me.”

“You can have him,” Ilya said, appearing from the back storeroom. “He will drive you crazy though.”

“No,” Rose said disbelievingly. “Look at him.”

Vanya was making a show of rubbing his face in Rose’s hands and purring like a vacuum cleaner.

Ilya laughed and put a hand on the back of Shane's neck tentatively, the question clear on his face. They were far enough from the front door now, store empty, and Shane leaned into it. Ilya's face relaxed, a soft smile on his lips.

"Here," Shane said and shifted Vanya into Rose's arms. "We'll be right back."

Shane grabbed Ilya's hand and dragged him to the back of the store, behind the last shelf, and kissed him hard. His hand landed in Ilya's curls, clearly freshly washed and soft again.

"Missed me already?" Ilya whispered against his lips.

"Yes. So much."

"Me too."

Ilya pulled him in again for one more kiss, then let him go and made their way back to where Rose was cooing at Vanya.

"Do you two need to go upstairs?" she asked teasingly.

"No," Shane said. "I'm just here to buy books."

Rose and Ilya both laughed.

"I do have books for you," Ilya said, going behind the counter. "Okay." Ilya pulled out two books. "This one is post-apocalyptic. I have a particular fondness for those. There are several I could recommend, but this might be a good one for you. It's not universally loved, so if you hate it, that's okay. Or I can suggest something else?"

Shane picked up the dark blue paperback: *The Dog Stars* by Peter Heller.

"No, I like that genre too, and I haven't read this. I'll probably read it on the plane tomorrow."

Ilya nodded. "And this one...might be safe for the plane too, but up to you. It's queer but not men. And it's science fiction...still some romance but not erotic."

Ilya sounded nervous. Shane wondered why but decided not to ask while Rose was in earshot. He looked at the book: *This is How You Lose the Time War* by Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone.

"This one is very new. My own copy, I've already marked it," Ilya added. "You're welcome to add to it if you want, or you can just read it and we talk about it after."

Shane nodded. "Thank you. This is perfect."

"Is it my turn?" Rose asked, stepping up beside him. "I need some recommendations."

"Of course," Ilya said. "You tell me what you want, I will find it."

“He’s really good at this,” Shane said proudly.

Ilya gave him a pleased little smile.

“Okay, well, I like romance for sure. Christmas romance would be amazing. I have some free time for the next couple of weeks up through Christmas, and I plan to do a lot of reading. I want to be in the holiday spirit.”

“What kind of romance? Straight only?”

“No no, I literally love it all, whatever you’ve got.”

“Anything else?”

“I could also use a good fantasy series. Duology or trilogy preferably. I don’t know if I can commit to anything longer right now, but sometimes I just need a break from the real world. I really like the Green Rider series, if that helps. ”

“It does. Okay, give me a few minutes.”

Ilya disappeared between the shelves, occasionally weaving in and out, books in hand.

“He should charge more for this service,” Rose said, still holding Vanya, who appeared to be napping in her arms now.

“That’s what I said. You should hear him with his customers, they love him.” Shane knew he was smiling stupidly.

“You two are disgustingly adorable. I hate it. And love it.”

Shane laughed. “Sorry.”

But he wasn’t. He couldn’t have possibly put into words how it felt to be here in Ilya’s store, kissing him and talking to him about books and just existing with the person he was in love with in front of someone else. Even if Rose—and maybe Svetlana—was the only person in the world he could do that with right now, it was everything.

“Okay,” Ilya said, walking back behind the counter. “Christmas romances. I admittedly have not read any of these, but plenty of my customers have.” He plopped a stack of books on the counter, then took the first one and laid it in front of Rose. “In a Holiday by Christina Lauren, a time loop story, Groundhog Day-esque. Some mixed reviews, but one of my favorite customers liked it, so I will recommend it.” He grabbed the next one. “The other two are indie published. I’m trying to stock more of those. This one is Lovelight Farms by B.K. Borison, small town, fake dating. Have heard it’s very cute, and there are more in the series.” He put his hand over the last book in the stack. “Blame it on the Mistletoe by Eli Easton. Cute gay holiday romance, or so I’ve heard from reviews. I clearly need to find more queer holiday romance books to stock though.”

Rose was grinning at him. “Holy shit, you are good at this. That took you like, less than 5 minutes.”

Ilya shrugged, but he was clearly pleased. Shane was having a hard time looking anywhere but at his mouth. Watching him be so good at his job and so impossibly full of book knowledge was a turn on he didn't know existed for him before meeting Ilya.

"It's my job," Ilya said. "Now, fantasy. Are you okay with some," he stopped and waved his hand, palm up, looking for words, "emotionally traumatic, we'll say, stuff in your fantasy books?"

"I can handle it," Rose said. "What is it?"

"Robin Hobb. Have you read her?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Well, if you like fantasy, especially written by women, these are a must, even though the main character is male. This is a good place to start: The Farseer trilogy. And the good news is, if you like it, and you will," he said confidently, pushing the three books in front of her, "there are several other series set in the same world."

"Sold. I'll take all of these, I trust you. But I'm going to browse too, so don't ring me up yet," Rose said. "Alright, you precious little thing, I'm going to let you down so I can go look." She set Vanya down, and he immediately made his way to the front window display to settle in his usual spot.

"You didn't tell me Rose was a big reader," Ilya said to him when she wandered off.

"Oh yeah, it's one of the things we had in common. She likes to read when she has downtime. She's the one who told me to read *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*."

"Mm, yes, a good choice. *We accept the love we think we deserve*," Ilya said, and the tone of his voice made Shane want to give him everything there was to give. He looked out the windows, finding no one in sight, and reached up to put a hand on the back of Ilya's neck and pull him in for a kiss over the counter, quick but full of the things they were finally saying out loud.

There was a wolf whistle from the other end of the store, and Shane pulled back and rolled his eyes.

"Don't stop on my account," Rose said loudly. "I was enjoying the show."

Ilya just laughed. "Probably best to stop anyway. It's after 10 now."

"Yeah," Shane sighed.

Vanya was back, jumping on the counter between them and rubbing against Shane, who was still leaning on the counter.

"Hey, buddy. Sorry we can't stay with you again tonight." He looked up at Ilya. "You could bring him over, but he'd probably hate that huh?"

“Probably. He likes having his usual spots to curl up in. And don’t feel too bad for him, he doesn’t mind having the whole place to himself.”

“Okay,” Rose said, joining them again. “I think I’m done for now.” She plunked several more books on the counter.

“You know you don’t have to buy this much stuff from me, right?” Ilya asked, brows up.

“I’ll happily buy all my books from you forever,” she said. “You can add Shane’s to mine too.”

Ilya glanced at him. Shane shrugged, nodded. One paperback book really wasn’t going to make even the slightest dent in Rose Landry’s bank account. That was one thing they’d never had to worry about with each other.

Ilya rang everything up, eyes going wide at the total. “You’re my new favorite customer.”

“Better be, I’m not going anywhere. I have your website saved so I can order online.”

“Thank you, Rose,” he said quietly, and Shane wished he could read exactly what Ilya was thinking just then.

When both he and Rose had bags in hand, Shane reluctantly gave Ilya a quick one armed hug.

“So, I’ll see you after the game?” he asked, already knowing the answer, while he went to pet Vanya goodbye.

“Yes. If Rose doesn’t mind, I’ll stop here after, then we’ll head back to your place.”

Shane nodded. “I’ll give Rose the extra keycard for the elevator.”

“You sure? Those rumors would be pretty crazy,” Ilya said with a laugh.

Shane groaned. “It’ll be late, it’s fine.”

“Okay. Love you, good luck.”

“Thanks. Love you too.”

“I love you both, my god,” Rose said, half exasperated, half amused. “You’re making me feel very insecure about my love life.”

Shane laughed and led her out of the store before he gave in to leaning across the counter and kissing Ilya again.

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Shane was in the locker room before the game, getting his gear on and trying to keep his mind focused. They were playing Toronto, and there were several reasons he needed to be on

top of his game, the worst being Dallas Kent, notorious asshole who always had a slur ready to hurl when things weren't going his way. There was also Troy Barrett, not a big name, but he was a solid up-and-coming forward, especially when playing with his buddy Kent. And lastly, they had a good team this year who would give the Raiders a run for their money.

Shane's mind was wandering a bit, to the suite where his friends would be watching. His boyfriend—he made a mental note to have that conversation with Ilya soon—his friend/ex-girlfriend, and his boyfriend's friend. What would all the guys sitting around him in this locker room think if they knew who was really here to watch him tonight?

“Hey, man. Rose is here, right?” Cliff asked, scooting down the bench to sit closer to him.

“Yeah, she is. She got in town yesterday.”

“We should go out tonight. Would she want to come to the club?”

Shane let out a long breath, stalling. “Um, I don't think so. She's leaving early tomorrow, and we were planning to just catch up tonight.”

“Alright, fine, maybe next time she's here. No games Friday and Saturday next week though, so we're going out. You're coming. Invite Roz. Everything cool with him?”

Shane looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

Cliff shrugged. “Nothing, just asking. I like the guy.”

“He's here tonight too,” Shane said before he could stop himself.

“No shit?”

“Yeah, he's in Rose's box.”

Cliff was looking at him like he was trying to solve a fucking mystery, one brow up, thinking hard. “Huh, okay. Cool. He seems like a good friend.”

“He is, yeah,” Shane said, hoping it sounded casual. “Hopefully Rose doesn't talk his ear off.”

Cliff laughed knowingly. He'd been the object of Rose's attention a few times. “Nah, he'll be fine.”

The first period of the game was pretty uneventful, other than Shane scoring once and Kent scoring once. He was irritated about the latter, but their goalie had been in a tough spot.

Back in the locker room during the intermission, Shane was about to pull his phone out to ask Ilya if he was having fun when Cliff slapped him on the back.

“Hollz, who is the babe with Roz and Rose?”

“What? How can you even see them up there?”

Shane had been able to make them out, but not that well. Maybe he needed glasses for more than reading.

“She might as well have a spotlight on her from heaven itself.”

“Wow, dude.” Shane laughed and gave him a look. “She’s Ilya’s friend, Svetlana.”

“But not his girlfriend right?” He sounded sure of himself.

“Marly, fuck off. Just friends, but he’ll probably still kick your ass.”

“I can fight.”

“Relax. She’s out of your league.”

“Fuck you,” Marly said with a laugh, “you’re supposed to be on my side.”

“Which is why I’m telling you the truth.”

“You have to invite her out next week. With Roz. Come on, I’ll behave.”

Shane thought about it. Maybe if Ilya and Svetlana both came, it wouldn’t seem as weird. People would probably assume they were together, especially if they’d seen the double date article. It was the simplest explanation, no one would even consider the truth. Maybe he could see Ilya dance. The thought certainly appealed, even if knowing it wouldn’t be with him did not.

“Yeah, maybe,” he said, and Cliff seemed pleased.

They were ushered back to the ice before Shane could text Ilya.

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“He once told me I had bedroom eyes while I was eating a bag of cheezits between takes,” Ilya heard Rose say behind him.

“Ugh, I’m never watching that show again,” Svetlana said.

Ilya was sitting in one of the seats at the front of the suite while they stood behind him, sipping fancy cocktails, gossiping about this and that. When the teams made their way back onto the ice, Ilya leaned forward, elbows on his knees. The suite was nice, but he would have preferred being closer. He could make Shane out and follow him across the ice with no problem, but he couldn’t really see his face between the distance and his helmet.

He was grateful Svetlana and Rose got on so well...it meant he didn’t have to be a fully engaged participant in the conversation, which was good because he felt weird. He always felt weird watching hockey, especially in person. It was a feeling he had no words for, almost *deja vu*, but not quite. Maybe closer to *jamaica vu* because he did know places like this very well for a period of his life, if not this exact one, but even that didn’t quite capture it. He was almost waiting for Jacob Marley and the ghosts of past, present, and future to appear in front

of him and show him what his life could have been if he'd made better choices. Maybe he'd see himself down there, standing in front of Shane Hollander at center ice for a faceoff. Maybe he'd see himself winning the Stanley Cup. Maybe he'd have already gotten a career ending injury. Maybe he was an idiot and he would have never been good enough to be drafted anyway. None of it mattered either way, and it would have meant no One Good Memory, no Vanya, no BU and all his friends. Maybe no Shane. So many things he'd have been trading, just for the slim chance that his father might have had an ounce of respect for him.

"Fucking hell," he muttered to himself, trying to push it all away. Dickensian ghosts be damned, he didn't feel like playing *what if* tonight. And the feeling of sitting here, breathing in the cold air, the buzz of the crowd all around him, was very different this time. Still unsettling if he was being honest, but he felt a little like he was meant to be here now. Like everything he needed might be just right there, flying across the ice. Like he couldn't be anywhere else even if he wanted to be. Ilya didn't want to feel like that in this place of all places, but it wasn't about the place. And maybe it wasn't up to him anymore.

Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition.

During the break between the second and third periods, his phone buzzed in his pocket.

Shane: Are you having fun in the suite?

Ilya: not as much fun as these two gossips

Ilya: but yes, it's very nice

Shane: Rose will give you the rundown on the entirety of Hollywood if you give her time.

Ilya laughed...he had no doubt that was true.

Ilya: luckily Svetlana actually cares

Shane: I'm glad you're here, even though I can barely see you up there.

Ilya: wish I was closer

Shane: Me too. Gotta go, love you.

Ilya knew he was smiling like an idiot, he didn't need to be told, but that didn't stop anyone.

"What is he saying?" Svetlana asked, dropping into the seat next to him with a knowing look.

"Who?"

"Don't even. You should see the look on your face."

Ilya ignored her and watched the rest of the game. They were tied 2-2 going into the third period, and Shane had scored both goals for Boston. By the middle of the third, they were tied 3-3, not Shane's goal. Both Rose and Svetlana were sitting now too, focused on the game. The clock was running down, and Shane had the puck, pushing through Toronto's

defense when he passed it to Marlow and that fucker Kent checked him after the puck was well out of his range. The whistle blew and Ilya could see Kent saying something and Shane looked like he was ready to drop gloves. Marlow pulled him away, but Ilya could tell, even from way up in their stupid fancy seats, that whatever Kent said had bothered him more than the usual on-ice chirping.

Whatever happened, it also seemed to fuel him, because Shane scored again not long after, securing a hat trick and the win. The crowd was roaring, and Shane skated directly in front of their box and raised his right arm to wave, presumably up at them, but then his left hand came up and rubbed very obviously over the outer area of his armpit, right where Ilya left the hickey. To anyone else, it would probably look like he was rubbing a sore spot, but Ilya knew.

He was smiling and biting his lip. It was, unfortunately, an automatic, uncontrollable response.

“Was that for you?” Svetlana asked, staring at him, clearly noting the grin.

He looked over at her, not even bothering to fix his face. “Yes.”

“What does it even mean?”

“None of your business.”

She laughed and turned to Rose on her other side, who was leaning forward to look at him.

“Is that some kind of weird sex thing via sign language?” she asked.

“You’re both very annoying.”

“Hey, I dated him and he never did that to me. I barely got a plain old wave,” Rose said with mock offense.

Ilya just kept smiling.

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After the Toronto game, Shane had gotten home to find Rose and Ilya sitting on his couch, talking and laughing, and his heart swelled. Even more so when he dropped his gear and immediately went to greet Ilya and ended up in his lap, Ilya’s arms around him, and Rose smiling at them with nothing but joy and acceptance. Shane’s mind had tried to wander, to remind him again that he couldn’t do this in front of anyone else, and he’d pushed it away. He knew he’d have to face it one day, but not now, right after he’d told Ilya he loved him and then won a game against the biggest asshole in the league. He wasn’t sure when it would be time for that, but not yet.

The next afternoon, he was on a plane to Montreal, wishing he was still in Ilya’s lap. Leaving him behind was somehow both easier and harder than before. There was a permanence to them now, built on love and exclusivity. The memory of Ilya inside of him bare made him shiver in his seat. It also reminded him that the permanence still needed a label. The flight to

Montreal was short, no more than 90 minutes, so while he had The Dog Stars in his bag, he pulled out his phone instead, making good use of the in-air wifi.

Shane: How's your day going?

I.R.: it's okay

I.R.: miss you already

Shane: Miss you too. I think it's harder to leave now. And easier. If that makes sense

I.R.: yes, I feel the same

I.R.: but now I know you will come home to me

Shane rubbed his chest.

Shane: I was already coming home to you.

He waited to see if Ilya would respond, but when the typing bubble didn't appear right away, he decided to push ahead.

Shane: Knowing my boyfriend is waiting for me is nice though.

Shane: Can I call you that?

He put his phone facedown on his thigh and looked around. Cliff was sitting across the aisle, noise-canceling headphones on, eyes closed. Connors was sitting in the window seat, watching something on the seat-back screen. Reid was in the row in front of them snoring. He could see the very top of Ham's head in the seat directly in front of him. No one near enough or paying attention to see the nervous smile on his face when his phone buzzed against his leg.

I.R.: yes, Shane Hollander, you can

I.R.: I like that word

Shane: Me too.

Shane: Call you later?

I.R.: I'll be waiting

A few minutes later, his phone buzzed again, and the excitement that had risen dimmed when he saw who it was from. Not that he wasn't happy to hear from his mom, but it was not quite the same.

Mom: Hey honey, did you land in Montreal?

Shane: Hi mom. No, still in the air.

Mom: Well, I just wanted to check in and see if you have your flight booked for Christmas yet?

Shane sucked in a breath and looked over at his teammates again, this time to stall. He hadn't made plans for Christmas. He could say it was because he'd been busy and hadn't had time to think about it yet, but that would be a lie. He really didn't have much time off anyway. He'd get home from an away game on the morning of the 24th, and he'd have to leave again on the evening of the 26th. If he went home, he wouldn't get to spend any time with Ilya. Maybe Ilya wouldn't want to anyway. He didn't even know if Ilya celebrated Christmas. Maybe he celebrated with Svetlana. Maybe he'd go to Russia. Shane figured that was unlikely, considering what he'd mentioned about his father, but he really didn't know.

He opened his texts with Ilya again. They weren't dancing around things anymore.

Shane: Hey, do you celebrate Christmas?

I.R.: sometimes, if I'm with other people who do

I.R.: and I close the store on the 25th

Shane tapped his fingers on the armrest, trying to decide what he should ask next, but his phone buzzed again.

I.R.: why are you asking?

Shane: Do you want to spend it together?

Shane: I'll get home from North Carolina early on the 24th and have to leave again late on the 26th

I.R.: of course I want to

I.R.: what about your family?

What indeed, what indeed, Shane thought. He needed an excuse his mom would buy, which for Yuna Hollander meant hockey.

Shane: I can see them another day.

I.R.: only if you're sure

I.R.: I'd be fine on my own

Shane: Would you spend it with Svetlana or your other friends?

I.R.: no, Sveta will be in Moscow

I.R.: not really to celebrate Christmas, Russians celebrate in January, but she gets time off work for American Christmas

Shane realized he didn't know anything about how Russians celebrate Christmas, but he'd wait until he was home to ask Ilya more about it.

Shane: We're spending Christmas together. We don't even have to do anything Christmasy.

I.R.: I will be happy to spend it with you

Shane: Me too.

He exited out of that text thread and opened the one with his mom again.

Shane: I'm not going to make it to Ottawa for Christmas. Our schedule is too tight this year.

It was almost true. He could have easily flown to Ottawa on the 24th and back to Boston early on the 26th, but that would be pretty exhausting and she knew it. Before she could respond, he hurriedly texted again.

Shane: There are a couple of other times in January that would be much easier for a visit. We can decide tomorrow.

Mom: Okay, we understand, even though we hate not seeing you for the holidays.

Shane: I know, but we'll figure something else out, promise.

Mom: Alright, have a good night. We can't wait to see you tomorrow.

His parents usually came to the Montreal games since it was only a couple hour drive for them. Knowing he'd see them tomorrow made Shane feel a little less guilty about skipping Christmas.

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They arrived in Montreal and had a team dinner, then Shane was ushered into someone's room with a bunch of the guys to play Super Smash Bros on the Wii U they'd hooked up. Shane was always Yoshi, and he usually won, or at least came close.

"I hate that fucking green dinosaur," Connors muttered as Shane swallowed him and laid him as an egg.

"Maybe you should pick someone besides Kirby then. You're not even using him to his full potential."

Cliff laughed and used his Bowser to grab Connors out of the air as soon as he hatched and ground pounded him.

"Fuck all of you," Connors said. "I'm going to be Samus next round, and you're all going to wish you were nicer to me."

"Nah, I'm out after this," Shane said quickly. He'd been counting down the minutes until he could escape to his own room and call Ilya without being rude.

"What? It's early, Hollz. What the fuck are you leaving for?" Cliff asked.

"I'm tired, and I want to rest before tomorrow. You should try it."

On the screen, he made Yoshi swallow Bowser because he was just standing there. Shane glanced over, and Cliff was looking at him, eyes narrowed in suspicion, before he quickly turned back to the game.

“Well, fuck,” he said as Bowser went flying off screen after getting knocked out by whoever had Link.

Shane won the round and passed his controller to Reid before standing up and telling everyone not to stay up too late. He had to be captainly some of the time. He left them to it and went back to his blessedly empty room and immediately pulled his phone out to call Ilya. He didn’t pick up, so Shane figured he was probably in the middle of something and decided to crack open *This Is How You Lose the Time War* until he heard back. He purposely didn’t flip through to see the annotations that Ilya mentioned, wanting them to be a surprise.

By the time Ilya called him back, he’d gotten through two chapters, presumably since they weren’t labeled that way, and two letters, one each written by the two characters Red and Blue.

“Hey,” he answered happily.

“Hi.” Ilya’s voice didn’t sound the way he expected it to.

“What’s wrong?” Shane asked.

“Hm? Oh, nothing. Sorry I didn’t answer before, got distracted. What are you doing?”

Shane decided not to push. “I started the time war book, and I’m gonna be honest, I wasn’t expecting it to actually be about a time war.”

Ilya laughed. “What did you expect?”

“I don’t know. I thought that was going to be like...a metaphor.”

“Ah, not this time. What do you think so far?”

“I kind of feel like I got dropped into the middle of something and I’m trying to catch up.”

“Hm, yes, this is the correct feeling, I think.”

“It’s good though. The writing is...I don’t know how to describe it. One of the last lines I read was *‘Will you cut off, leaving my note to spin its fractal math inside you?’* It’s very...I don’t know, but I like it, I think.”

“I found it intriguing. I get very excited about writing that surprises me.”

“Yeah? I’m excited to read more then. Their letters remind me a little of us. Passing books back and forth...not quite the same, but you know what I mean.”

“Yes, reminded me of that too. And now parts of their letters are also for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You will see my thoughts about some of them. Little notes just for you.”

“You highlighted stuff for me?” Shane asked, his fingers now dying to flip the pages and find them.

“Yes,” Ilya said, and he didn’t elaborate.

“Oh. Well I’m excited to keep reading then.”

“I will let you go read now if you want.”

“No, later. I’ve been wanting to talk to you all day.”

He heard a little snuffle on the other end of the phone and wanted to ask again if anything was wrong, but Ilya quickly distracted him by asking, “Want to jerk off for me?”

Shane laughed. “Maybe. If you will.”

“Hm, no. I will just listen to you and then fall asleep.”

“Fuck you,” Shane said, and it came out an awful lot like *I love you*, as intended, so he added that too. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” Ilya said quietly, voice still sounding too heavy, and Shane thought he heard another muffled snuffle. “Now please get naked and turn on facetime.”

Once again, he let it go and happily obliged.

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They lost to Montreal, and it stung, Shane couldn’t deny it. Hayden Pike and his team were formidable to the mid teams, even the good teams, but not usually to Shane or the Raiders. He was in a sour mood when he got back to his room after the game, but he called Ilya and read a few pages of the book and went to sleep in a good mood.

The following day, they traveled to Pittsburgh. Shane didn’t even bother hiding *This Is How You Lose the Time War* on the plane. He took the dust jacket off, but he still read it in his seat, The Dog Stars forgotten in his bag. He was too eager to get to Ilya’s highlights, to see what little bits of his mind or his heart were presented to him this time. He wanted to roll around in them like Vanya rolled around on his lap, marking them as his and his alone.

The first highlight was: *Tell me something true, or tell me nothing at all.* The one Ilya had spoken in his ear when he made his little honesty rule that Shane was grateful for now. Maybe he would have done it anyway, but telling Ilya he loved him had only been following the rules, only fair. He might have waited too long otherwise.

He came upon another highlight soon after: *There’s a kind of time travel in letters isn’t there? I imagine you laughing at my small joke; I imagine you groaning; I imagine you throwing my words away. Do I have you still?*

Shane supposed what they did, especially early on, was similar to letters, but something in him felt regret that they hadn’t written more, alongside the words that spoke to them, or

altogether separate, just their own words with nothing to hide behind. But maybe their method, little bits of words borrowed, some of their own, altogether building this thing they found themselves in, was what they needed.

It was also different now that they weren't holding anything back. Shane wanted to go back and send Ilya all the quotes and passages he couldn't send before, either because he couldn't admit that he was already feeling those things, or because he didn't know.

Another of Blue's letters had a highlighted line: *Have you ever had a hunger that whetted itself on what you fed it, sharpened so keen and bright that it might split you open, break a new thing out?*

But the thrill of it was the little note in the margin beside it in Ilya's neat scrawl: *This is what you do to me.*

Shane wasn't sure what that meant, but it made him feel all warm and alive inside. He wished Ilya was beside him so he could ask. He could text him, but that wouldn't be as satisfying.

In Red's next letter, *Have you been lonely?* was highlighted with no explanation, and he wondered if Ilya had been thinking of himself or of Shane when he'd touched those words.

In Blue's next letter, *I am glad to know you love reading. Perhaps you should next write from a library—there's so much I want to recommend.* No explanation needed, just a smile curving Shane's lips.

He kept reading, and it seemed like every letter from Red and Blue contained a highlight now. Shane was enjoying the chapters telling the story between the letters, but he found himself almost rushing, needing to get to the next letter, needing to get to the next little piece of Ilya, of him and Ilya together, embedded in this other story that had nothing and everything to do with them somehow.

In Red's next one: *I like writing you. I like reading you. When I finish your letters, I spend frantic hours in secret composing my replies, pondering ways to send them.* And a little further on in the same letter: *I am yours in other ways as well: yours as I watch the world for your signs, apophenic as as a haruspex; yours as I debate methods, motives, chances of your delivery; yours as I review your words by their sequence, their sound, smell, taste, taking care no one memory of them becomes too worn. Yours.*

Yours was underlined. No notes, but just that little black line, that one little word, was enough to make his eyes well up and his heart squeeze. Being in love was making him sappy, and it was a nice thing to be able to feel this at all.

He only had time to read through one more of Red's letters before they arrived in Pittsburgh:

Words can wound—but they're bridges, too. ... Though maybe a bridge can also be a wound? To paraphrase a prophet: Letters are structures, not events. Yours give me a place to live inside.

In Ilya's handwriting beside it: *Like all of your thoughts, SH. I want to wrap myself up in them and never leave.*

He was a little relieved to put the book down for now, his eyes working overtime not to spill over. He was also relieved to see that Ilya also thought what they were doing, had been doing since day one, was similar to letters. Sharing thoughts and words with someone in such an intimate way was more than just ink on a page. It was the most honest and raw he'd ever been in his life, and it gave him the safety he needed to say those things before he could find the words on his own.

As the plane touched down and he had a few minutes before they could exit, he pulled his phone out.

Shane: Halfway through time war. Thank you for annotating this one. I hope you know how much I love seeing your thoughts while I read.

I.R.: that makes me very happy

Shane: I hope you never stop. I'll call you in a little while

They had a team dinner, the usual hanging out in someone's room, this time to watch a movie Shane had no interest in, so he excused himself early with the excuse of prepping for tomorrow's game. It was still before 8 on a Tuesday, and he knew Ilya would still be working.

Shane: Back in my room, call me whenever you're free. No rush.

He took a shower and then dug the book out of his bag, eager to keep reading.

In a letter from Red, he found the next highlight: *But if you hunger, I swell. You have me watching birds, and though I don't know their names like you know them, I have seen small bright singers puff before they trill. That's how I feel. I sing myself out to you, and my talons clutch the branch, and I am wrung out until your next letter gives me breath, fills me to bursting.*

Within the highlight, the second sentence was underlined, and next to it, another note from Ilya: *This is what you have done to me with that cursed sport. I watch only for you.*

He wondered sometimes if Ilya resented that Shane played the thing he walked away from. Like some kind of twisted reminder that never went away. If it were even a little true, that he loved him enough to do it was not something Shane took for granted.

In the same letter, also highlighted: *I dream of you. I keep more of you inside my mind, my physical, personal, squishy mind, than I keep of any other world or time. I dream myself a seed between your teeth, or a tree tapped by your reed.*

There were no notes there, but Shane liked to imagine this was how Ilya really felt, because he did too. The swiftness with which they had filled up each other's lives was frightening and

beautiful, something he thought was only for made-up characters in books and maybe the lucky people who could love without consequences.

He got through one more of Blue's letters before Ilya called. The highlighted line in this one was simple: *I want to tell you something about myself. Something true, or nothing at all.*

A perfect encapsulation of what they were doing.

"Hi," he said when he answered Ilya's call. "How was your day?"

"Pretty good. I hired someone new."

"Really? I didn't know you were looking yet."

"Mm, yes. I put the ad up a couple of days ago. I want someone in before Christmas to help with the holidays, but I also want them to stay, not a seasonal worker. It will make me feel better to not leave Mallory alone so often."

"That's great. So you found someone that quick?"

"There were several applicants. I called a few in yesterday for interviews, but the one I hired is named John. He's a retired teacher who is very bored with retirement. Very knowledgeable. Will be good at helping the customers."

"Sounds perfect. When does he start?"

"Tomorrow. He did not want to wait. I'll let you know how it goes. How was your day?"

"Good. I read on the flight. It's been a good distraction from the Montreal game. For a book about time-traveling lesbians, it's making me feel a lot of things about you."

Ilya laughed. "Yes, me too. But you have to finish it before we talk about it more. I can give you another distraction if you want," he said, his voice dipping low.

"Always."

-

The next night, they beat Pittsburgh. They needed the win after the Montreal loss, and Shane was riding that high heading into their home game the next day. They flew back to Boston in the morning and then had to get ready for an evening game, so he didn't have time to see Ilya beforehand. But he had managed to finish the book on the flight home.

The next highlight he arrived at when he started reading again was: *Sometimes when you write, you say things I stopped myself from saying.*

Beside it, Ilya had written: *You said you loved me when I stopped myself from saying it to you for so long. Long for us, anyway. My brave Shane.*

Marly had dropped into the seat next to him right after he read that. He hurriedly slipped the book back into his bag, not wanting to take a chance that today of all days Marly might decide to poke around in what he was reading. He had also willed his eyes to not appear shiny, and his face to remake itself into his usual casual, ready to bullshit with the team face and not the one that softened at the mere thought of his boyfriend these days.

When Marly finally got bored and moved on to Connors, Shane took the book out again. The next highlight was in Red's letter: *I love you, Blue. Have I always? Haven't I? When did it happen? Or has it always happened?*

Shane laid the book on his chest and looked out the plane's window for a few minutes. How did Ilya always manage to find exactly the right words? His own or others', it didn't matter. Did Ilya also feel like there was something about this thing between them that was fated? Like it was always there, just waiting for them to finally meet so it could snap to the surface and consume them both. It was a silly thought, one he'd had before and decided was a product of reading too many fantastical books. He didn't actually believe in soul mates, but...if he did...he felt very sure he'd found his.

In the same letter, highlighted: *But when I think of you, I want to be alone together. I want to strive against and for. I want to live in contact. I want to be a context for you, and you for me. I love you, and I love you, and I want to find out what that means together.*

No notes, but *I want to find out what that means together* was underlined. Christ, this book was going to kill him. Or make him cry in front of his teammates. He didn't cry, but he did keep reading, almost relieved to find a letter next that had no highlights. But then the letters shifted because Red and Blue were found out, their forbidden love a problem, and why the fuck did that have to be so relevant. In Red's letter spilling that news, only one line was highlighted, and it nearly broke his fucking heart: *I would rather break the world than lose you.* He was only grateful that another soon after was not highlighted: *And we go our separate ways.* Just the thought had his stomach lurching, falling back to earth while he remained in the sky.

Before his stomach even settled, he came upon the next and final highlight: *At the end as at the start, and through all the in-betweens, I love you.*

Romantic when you viewed it as a picture of a lifetime together. Heartwrenching if it meant something being cut short. Shane had the unpleasant thought that it was probably up to him which of those things ended up being true for them, even though he had no plans to make it the latter.

But beside the yellow highlight was also the last note inked in the margin, and while Shane couldn't understand Cyrillic, and even if *I love you* hadn't been underlined above, he would have known the meaning of those words anyway:

Я тебя люблю

-

After the game that night against Anaheim, which they won, Shane went home to take a more thorough shower and grab some clothes. He was practically vibrating out of his skin to see Ilya, who left the back entrance propped open for him. Shane let the door close and lock behind him and made his way upstairs. He'd barely knocked before the door opened to reveal Vanya staring up at him before letting out a wail of a meow and standing on his hind legs.

"Hey buddy, you missed me that much? I missed you too." He picked him up and scratched behind his ears while Ilya closed the door behind him.

"I don't even get a kiss first?" Ilya asked. He looked delectable in gray sweatpants and an old white t-shirt that was probably a couple of sizes too small, stretching temptingly across his chest.

"Trust me, you want me to greet him first. Once I kiss you, we're not stopping."

Ilya's brows went up, a greedy smile on his face. "Well hurry the fuck up then. He is not that important."

"Liar."

Ilya rolled his eyes and sighed dramatically. "Fine," he whined. "Come find me when you are done with this terror."

He walked over to the couch and flopped down, out of sight except for his feet that Shane could see jutting out from the armrest.

"Don't listen to him," Shane said. "You're perfect, aren't you? But now I really need to go see your dad. Kinda urgent if I'm being honest." He set Vanya and his bag down and made his way to the couch to find Ilya stretched out with an arm thrown dramatically over his eyes. He climbed on top of him, letting their bodies meld together from head to toes. "Hi," he said when Ilya moved his arm to look up at him. "I missed you so much." His voice cracked at the end, eyes going a little misty and he didn't even know why.

"I missed you too." Ilya's voice sounded nearly as weighed down with emotion. His arms wrapped around Shane's waist and he nuzzled into his neck, his warm breath sending a shiver through Shane's entire body.

"Maybe I was wrong. Leaving is harder now."

Ilya nodded against him. "But you're back," he said, voice muffled by Shane's neck.

"And no games tomorrow or the next day."

"Mm, so many things we could get up to in that much time."

"Yes," Shane said, his voice going thready as Ilya's lips started moving across his neck. "But really need you right now. Been too long."

"Aren't you tired?"

Shane made a needy, frustrated noise that made Ilya laugh. “Yes, but not too tired for you.”

“Fuck,” Ilya whispered into his ear. “Come on, I will do all the work tonight, my poor overworked hockey star.”

Shane groaned as Ilya pushed him up gently. They made it to the bedroom, and Ilya shut the door just as Vanya started to follow. “You can come back in a little while,” he told him through the door, and Vanya gave a displeased yowl.

Ilya already had his clothes off before Shane had even folded his sweatshirt.

“Let me,” Ilya said. He took the sweatshirt and quickly folded it and set it on top the dresser. Then he pulled Shane’s t-shirt over his head and did the same. Shane pulled his own sweatpants off, but Ilya took them from his hands, laid them on top the others. He pushed Shane gently down on the bed and pulled each of his socks off, tossing them aside. He stopped for a moment, his eyes raking up and down Shane’s body, a pinched look on his face as his hand reached out to gently brush several bruises, some old and yellow, some new and reddish purple. “You are more beat up than usual.”

Shane shrugged. “Pretty normal. The last few games were hard fought.”

“I don’t like it,” Ilya said softly. He pressed his lips to a bruise on his shin, then moved up further to one on his thigh, keeping his touch light, tickling. Then he continued up to one on his side. Shane let him, enjoying the careful way his lips and hands moved, even as he desperately wanted more.

“I’m okay,” he said, brushing the curls off Ilya’s forehead when he moved up to put their faces close together.

“I know. What do you want tonight?”

“You. As close to me as possible,” Shane said, wrapping his arms tightly around Ilya’s back, pulling him down until his weight was heavy on him.

“Like this?”

Shane nodded. He didn’t even want to loosen his arms when Ilya leaned over to get the lube.

“I cannot reach like this,” Ilya said, leaning down to kiss him. “I’ll come back after.”

Shane let him go and Ilya rolled to his side next to him, pushing slick fingers against his hole. Shane let his legs fall open, giving Ilya room, then he pulled his head back down to kiss him while he worked. It was just as good as always, Ilya’s fingers working into his hole, his tongue working into his mouth. Shane was happy to be consumed and taken care of after days away, being knocked around on the ice and trying to keep his mind on hockey when it so badly wanted to be right here, in Ilya’s bed, in his arms. He still loved hockey with the fierceness that made him the best player in the league, but it shared space now, and it was better for it. If anything in the world could have made him better at hockey, it was knowing he had someone to share his victories and losses with when he left the locker room, someone

watching and cheering for him besides his parents, someone waiting at home for him, who looked at his bruises and wanted to soothe them.

“What are you thinking about?” Ilya asked, face hovering above his, lips shiny and red from kissing. “You look very serious.”

Shane shook his head. “I just really love you.”

He could see Ilya swallow hard, his throat moving with it, his eyes blinking a little fast. Shane reached up and swiped a thumb over his eyebrow and down the side of his face.

“I love you too, Shane Hollander. You are going to make me embarrass myself while I’m trying to be sexy and turn you on.”

Shane smiled up at him. “Never. Your rule remember? You’re not allowed to be embarrassed about anything in front of me. Goes both ways.”

“Yes,” Ilya said and kissed him again, his fingers still moving.

“Ilya,” he said when the kiss broke. “I’m ready for you.”

Ilya slipped his fingers free and quickly slicked himself. Before he got on top again, he reached over the side of the bed and grabbed a pillow off the floor.

“Lift,” Ilya said, tapping his hip. Shane did, and he pushed the pillow under his hips. “Will help.”

“Your pillow is going to be ruined,” Shane said, shifting a little.

“It’s an extra. Can be just for this.”

He settled between Shane’s legs and pushed them up, lining himself up. He leaned down to kiss him as he pushed in, swallowing the groan that escaped Shane’s throat as he was stretched, making room for Ilya like he belonged there. It was only the second time they’d done this without a condom, and Shane could swear the difference was still monumental, life changing, earth shattering, universe altering. All the impossible things reserved for silly new love. The kind of love that changed you from your atoms to your smile. And Shane knew his mouth was doing that right now, curving into a smile he had only for Ilya, as he pushed all the way in.

“You seem very happy, my Shane,” Ilya leaned down to whisper against his ear.

“I am. Couldn’t wait to get home to you.”

“You’re doing it again,” Ilya said, voice straining as he started to thrust properly. “Going to make me embarrass myself.”

Shane laughed and pulled him down into a kiss, wrapping his legs as far up on Ilya’s back as he could. The pillow was helping the angle a little too, and each thrust was pushing over the right spot, making him gasp into Ilya’s mouth on a particularly good one.

“Fuck,” he said, voice barely there. “I missed this.”

“I missed you,” Ilya said. “And your ass, yes.”

Shane laughed and pushed his fingers into Ilya’s curls, pulling at them the way he knew would make Ilya fuck into him harder, like he couldn’t help it. But he still wanted more.

“Harder.”

Ilya looked down at him. “You sure?” He moved so he could press his lips to a small bruise on Shane’s left peck.

Shane nodded and let his left hand drift down Ilya’s back to pull at him, urging him on. Ilya picked up the pace, pounded into him harder, the slap of skin on skin getting louder in time with their moans and their ragged breaths. Shane’s whole body was vibrating with it, both the pleasure and the hard movements, and his skin was so sensitive he could feel the chain around Ilya’s neck dangling against his chest, dragging across his flushed, sweat-slick skin, drawing another shiver from him that was lost to the way they were moving together. He could barely think, his body no longer belonging to him, giving itself up to pleasure and safety and Ilya, but he had a moment to wonder if it would always feel this big, like he was trying to shove a whole lifetime’s worth of love into this too-small space. Ilya looked like he was just as gone, his eyes hooded and mouth hanging open, looking at Shane like he’d never seen anything so fascinating in his life, like he was drunk on it.

“I love you,” Shane said, letting his fingers tighten in his curls again, bringing his other hand up to Ilya’s face, to run a thumb over his bottom lip before Ilya sucked it into his mouth, making them both moan.

“I love you too,” Ilya said when he let Shane’s thumb go, and Shane had never heard a voice so full of the thing it was declaring.

As his body finally surrendered to Ilya, his cock twitching between them before he released spilled out of him onto his stomach and he tightened around Ilya’s cock and his curls and said his name in a breathy cry of passion, he had one clear thought: he couldn’t keep Ilya a secret much longer, both because this thing was too big to be contained, and because Ilya deserved to be cherished and loved out loud.

The thought was there, and his renewed desire to see his plan through lingered in the post-orgasm haze, but his attention shifted to Ilya curling around him and pumping into him a few more times before he felt his cock pulse inside him and heard his name and something in Russian brush against his ear while he tightened his arms around Ilya and held him through it.

Ilya’s face was buried in his neck, breathing warm and wet against his skin, and Shane ran fingers through his hair, even as his own limbs had gone heavy with exhaustion. When Ilya finally slipped out of him and sat up, Shane didn’t want to let him go.

“Want to clean up?” Ilya asked him. He gently pulled the pillow from beneath his hips and tossed it back to the floor.

Shane nodded but didn't move, even though he could feel cum dripping from his hole now, which was really having a less than positive effect on the afterglow.

Ilya leaned down to kiss his forehead and said, "Stay, I got it."

Shane would have argued, but his eyes were already falling shut, and he must have drifted off because he was startled back to consciousness when he felt something warm against his stomach and then his cock, and he opened his eyes to see Ilya wiping him clean.

"You are sleepy tonight," Ilya said, smiling softly at him.

Shane yawned. "Sorry, I'm good now."

Ilya pushed his legs apart and cleaned there too, and Shane sighed contentedly. He always had people trying to take care of his every need, making sure he was in tiptop shape to play, but no one had ever handled him so reverently, and he didn't think he would ever get tired of it.

Ilya disappeared for a minute again, and when he came back, he had *This Is How You Lose the Time War* in his hand. He left the door cracked.

"Are you too tired for reading tonight?" he asked, sliding back into bed next to him.

"Never."

"Good. There were a couple of things in here I did not highlight because I wanted to read them to you here."

Shane shifted until his head was on Ilya's shoulder. "Really?"

"Mhm. If that's okay with you."

"Obviously. Now that you mention that, there were a couple of passages that I thought I would have highlighted that weren't. Maybe they're the same ones."

"We shall see."

Ilya opened the book and found the page he was looking for. "*I love you. I love you. I love you. In skies. In my heart. You'll never see, but you will know. I'll be all the poets, I'll kill them all and take each one's place in turn, and every time love's written in all the strands it will be you.*"

Shane lifted his head so he could look at Ilya properly. His eyes were the color of the ocean when the light was low, blue and gray and green, the gold hidden by shadows, but they were a little wet, and maybe a little sad.

"That was one of them. Especially *I'll be all the poets*. Your words are better than all the poets. I can say that with at least a little conviction now, thanks to you."

Ilya smiled his close-lipped, pleased smile and shook his head. “No. You are very flattering, ЛЮБОВЬ МОЯ.”

“What does that mean?”

“My love.”

Shane laid his head back down and pressed a kiss to Ilya’s chest. “I like that.”

Ilya shuffled through some more pages of the book. *“I love you and I love you and I love you, on battlefields, in shadows, in fading ink, on cold ice splashed with blood of seals. In the rings of trees. In the wreckage of a planet crumbling to space. In bubbling water. In bee stings and dragonfly wings, in stars. In the depths of lonely woods where I wandered in my youth, staring up—and even then you watched me. You slid back through my life, and I have known you since before I knew you.”*

“Yes. The last part especially,” Shane said. *“I have known you since before I knew you.* That sounds like something that can only be real in books, but...” He wanted to voice the similar thought he’d had before, from a different quote in the same vein.

“Yes,” Ilya said simply, and Shane felt his lips pressed into his hair. “Maybe everything ever written is a truth for someone.”

Shane turned over more, so he was pressed into Ilya’s side, and Ilya’s hand started moving up and down his back, dragging his nails lightly along his skin. It was making his eyes heavy again.

“I really liked the book,” Shane said, voice thick and slow.

“Me too. You have no idea how happy it makes me that I can share these things with you.”

“I do. This one made me wish we did that even more. Writing, I mean. Like their letters. And your notes. Want to hear every thought.”

He felt Ilya’s chest move against his face, like he’d taken in a deep breath. “Yeah?”

Shane nodded. “Of course.” His eyes wouldn’t open again, so he nuzzled into Ilya’s chest. “I want to know everything.” He also thought briefly that he wanted everyone else to know too, how brilliant and perfect Ilya was, that he was proud to be with him, and the thought jolted him more awake again. “I almost forgot. Marly invited us out tomorrow. To a club. Svetlana too.”

“Svetlana? How does he even know about her?”

“He saw her in the box with you and Rose. I told him to fuck off, but I think he has a crush already.”

Ilya laughed. “She will chew him up and spit him out.”

“Good, but he’ll probably enjoy that. Do you want to go?”

“If you want me to.”

“I do. Want to see you dance.” The desperate partial truth, leaving out the part where he wished it was with him, even if he couldn’t dance to save his life.

“Okay. I’ll text Sveta tomorrow.”

It was the first time in his life he was looking forward to going to a loud club. He might have laughed if sleep wasn’t already dragging at him again. He wanted to talk more, to ask Ilya how his new employee was, to ask him more about Christmas. But he felt a warm weight jump onto the bed next to him and curl up against his legs, and he let that and the slow drag of Ilya’s fingers down his back and the even rise and fall of his chest pull him all the way under.

Chapter End Notes

Books mentioned in this chapter:

This Is How You Lose the Time War by Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone

The Dog Stars by Peter Heller

In a Holiday by Christina Lauren

Lovelight Farms by B.K. Borison

Blame it on the Mistletoe by Eli Easton

The Farseer trilogy by Robin Hobb (Assassin's Apprentice, Royal Assassin, Assassin's Quest)

The Green Rider series by Kristen Britain

"Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition." - James Baldwin, Giovanni's Room

[Book list doc](#)

threads: shadow_lilies1 (most active)

tumblr: shadowlilies1

twtr: shadow_lilies (the account exists, but I'm rarely there)

Chapter 13: Someday I'm gonna be free

Chapter Notes

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

The next morning, Ilya opened his eyes to find a pair of yellow ones staring back at him from only inches away.

“Really?” he said quietly because Shane was still asleep next to him. “It’s too early for this.”

Vanya didn’t care. He was kneading his sharp little claws into Ilya’s chest, which might have been sweet if it didn’t fucking hurt. Ilya carefully extracted himself from the bed and grabbed some clothes before slipping out of the bedroom and shutting the door behind him so Shane could rest. He didn’t have to be at practice until 10.

After he fed Vanya and made coffee, he took his mug downstairs to the shop, Vanya on his heels, to get started on a few things while he waited for Shane to get up. Stock always moved more quickly in December, which was great, but for once, Ilya seemed to have underordered. He’d been able to get some last minute shipments that needed to be shelved before they opened today.

Ilya spent the next 45 minutes putting books on shelves and thinking extensively about the fact that he was going to a club later with Shane and his teammates. And Svetlana. He’d texted her, much too early for her notifications to be on, but she eventually texted him back.

Svetlana: I am both intrigued and worried

Svetlana: But sure, I’ll go party with the Raiders

Ilya knew she would be in for that reason alone. She was going to find one of those empty-headed men to talk to about hockey until their eyes glazed over.

Ilya: I heard Cliff Marlow is very interested in talking to you

Svetlana: Is that so? He’s pretty. Seems to have all his teeth anyway

Ilya: I like him

Ilya: but I will tell him to fuck all the way off if he so much as looks at you wrong

Svetlana: I don’t need you defending my honor

Svetlana: You should worry about yourself and how you’re going to keep your hands off your man all night

Ilya snorted and rubbed his forehead hard. She was right on both counts.

Ilya: see you tonight

A few minutes later, his phone buzzed again.

Shane: Where'd you go?

Ilya: downstairs

Ilya: I'll be back up soon

A minute later, the door to the stairwell opened, and Shane, in gray sweatpants and a Raider's t-shirt and white socks, hair still mussed from sleep, appeared. He looked much too soft and kissable.

"What are you doing?" Shane asked.

"I was just putting out some stock. My new guy is coming in today, and Mallory, but I don't want them to have to worry about it."

"How's he doing? The new guy. John, right?"

"Mhm, really good. Very competent and friendly. Basically exactly what I needed." Ilya walked up closer to him. "He is also gay and has been married to his partner since it was legalized here in 2004," he added for no reason whatsoever.

"Oh," Shane said quietly. "That's great."

"Yes. I like him very much so far. And it means I can be away from the shop more often."

Shane nodded slowly. "Could you leave for days at a time? Like to go on vacation or something?"

Ilya licked his lips, wanting to ask why, maybe not wanting to ask why. "Probably. I already trust Mallory to handle things, I just wouldn't leave her to do it by herself."

"Oh, yeah. Good to have a reliable team."

"Yes," Ilya said, hands landing on Shane's waist. "What are you doing down here?"

"Just wanted to see you."

"Mm, and you couldn't wait for me to come back upstairs? Did you come looking for something in particular?"

"No," Shane said, his arms going around Ilya's shoulders.

"Not even this?" Ilya leaned in to kiss him, tasting toothpaste on his tongue.

Ilya side-walked them fully behind the last shelf, even though someone would really have to be smushing their face against the window to see anything.

"How about this?" Ilya asked, pulling Shane's hips against his and turning them so Shane's back was to the shelf.

Shane only moaned and kissed him again.

“I think you like doing this down here,” Ilya whispered against his lips, and Shane pressed harder into him. Ilya decided to scratch two of Shane’s itches in one go and said, “Get on your knees.”

Shane dropped like a stone. Before Ilya could do more than marvel at how quickly he’d listened, Shane’s hands were gripping the waistband of his pants. Ilya grabbed his wrists.

“Hey,” he said, waiting for Shane’s eyes to meet his. “This is okay?”

Shane nodded and Ilya could see the outline of his hard cock trapped under his sweatpants. He let Shane’s hands resume what they were doing until his own cock was freed and in Shane’s mouth. He used the shelf in front of him to steady himself, hands gripping the wood while his head hung down, both because Shane’s mouth was so warm and wet and moving just right and sucking all the control from his body, and because he wanted to watch him do it. Ilya had thought a lot of filthy thoughts and done a lot of filthy things, but never did he conjure up hockey star Shane Hollander, his boyfriend Shane Hollander, who liked being told what to do sometimes, on his knees in his own bookstore. He clearly needed to do better.

“Go ahead,” Ilya said. “Touch yourself.”

He could see that Shane’s left hand was inching closer and closer to his own cock, while his right was wrapped around the base of Ilya’s. Shane’s eyes were upturned, and his shiny red lips were stretched over the head of Ilya’s cock, and god, had he ever seen anything better in his life? It was hot, sexy, everything Ilya wanted to see when he was about to come. But it was also his Shane, looking at him with desire and love and trust, and Ilya felt his chest squeeze alongside all the pleasure rushing through him. Never before had he wanted to flay himself open just so someone else could climb inside, see him fully with nothing to hide behind, know him in a way that scared him and maybe healed him.

He is half my soul, as the poets say.

He ran his hand through Shane’s hair, let it tangle in the silky strands. Shane had his cock out now too, stroking himself without faltering with his mouth at all. He had learned how Ilya liked it without even having to ask or be told, observing and remembering his every little reaction until he knew exactly how to string them all together and have Ilya crumbling at his feet.

“Shane,” he said in warning, gave his hair a little tug in case he wanted to pull off, but he didn’t. He used his tongue right where Ilya liked it, hummed around his cock, the vibrations pulsing through him until his body went hot and tight, lightning through his groin, spreading and pumping through him until he was coming in Shane’s mouth and moaning his name so loudly half of Boston must have heard. The thought sent another little jolt through him, pushed another spurt of come down Shane’s throat. *Hear me*, he thought, *know that he’s mine and I’m his*. A silly thought, one that nearly pulled him from the warm afterglow before he’d even fully gotten to it. But then he looked down and saw that Shane had come too, wet spots on his sweatpants, panting against Ilya’s thigh. He looked up, and his lips were swollen and wet, and Ilya knelt down with him and kissed him until he forgot, at least for now, that no one could know that he was Shane’s.

Not long after, there was a meow and then black fur rubbing against them, and Shane saying, “Fuck,” while he quickly tucked both of their softening cocks back into their pants and wiped his hand on his shirt.

“He is a cat, he doesn’t care,” Ilya said with a laugh. “He has seen me naked every day.”

“I know,” Shane said, “but still.”

“Come here.” Ilya sat fully on the floor and turned until he could lean against the shelf, pulling Shane with him so they were side by side, with his arm around Shane’s shoulders. “You need to leave soon?”

“In about an hour, so I can run home before I go to practice.”

Ilya reached up and plucked a book off the shelf above Shane’s head. “Okay. Enough time for this, then.”

“What is it?”

“More poetry. I am educating you. If you will let me.”

“Yeah, I want that.”

Ilya brushed a thumb over his freckles, taking in the way Shane was looking at him, still blissed out post orgasm, eyes soft, a little smile on his lips. He wondered again how the universe managed to bring them together, this personification of all the things he was running from and to. Love was turning him mushy and annoying, all this navel-gazing making him sick of himself.

“Good,” he said, taking his hand back. “This is Langston Hughes. You know him?”

Shane nodded. “I think so.”

“He was a very prolific writer, important social activist. And a lot of people believe he was queer. I like his poetry especially. It’s very...rhythmic. Once you hear it, it is very recognizable. This one maybe less so, but I like it.”

Ilya flipped to the one he wanted. Vanya sat awkwardly in front of them, curled forward with one back leg outstretched in front of him so he could lick himself. Ilya rolled his eyes...really adding to the vibes. He started reading anyway.

*“Love
Is a ripe plum
Growing on a purple tree.
Taste it once
And the spell of its enchantment
Will never let you be.*

*Love
Is a bright star*

*Glowing in far Southern skies.
Look too hard
And its burning flame
Will always hurt your eyes.*

*Love
Is a high mountain
Stark in a windy sky.
If you
Would never lose your breath
Do not climb too high.”*

He closed the book and looked over at Shane, who was chewing on his bottom lip.

“Sounds like a warning,” Shane said, leaning into him.

Ilya nodded. “Maybe, yes. But maybe love is a risk. Maybe sometimes it hurts. Doesn’t mean it’s not worth it.”

Ilya believed that. Couldn’t be sitting next to Shane Hollander, hiding from the world while his heart felt like it was being held in a vice grip if he didn’t believe it.

“I like that,” Shane said quietly. “I mean, not about it hurting. I don’t want that. But yeah... it’s worth it.”

Ilya kissed his hair and then opened the book again. He read My Loves, Boogie: 1 A.M, and a couple others before they went back upstairs until Shane left for practice.

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After practice, and after Cliff reminded him for the fourth time about going out that night, Shane went home to grab more clothes and get ready. He’d told Cliff that both Ilya and Svetlana would be joining him, and Cliff had pretty much ascended. He was thinking about that dynamic while he was in the shower. Would Svetlana dance with Cliff? If so, who would Ilya dance with? Just any random person? While Shane sat and watched. He wanted to see Ilya out in that setting, and even if Shane could dance, even if he could dance with Ilya, he probably wouldn’t. So there was nothing to be jealous about. He thought about it while he was answering emails and checking his calendar, took a break while he called his mom about a brand commitment, and went back to it while he packed a bag to stay at Ilya’s.

He’d nearly talked himself into believing he wasn’t going to be jealous at all by the time he got to Ilya’s, heading through the back alley. Mallory might have been both oblivious and safe, but he didn’t know if John was. He might be a Raiders fan. Ilya had already anticipated that and offered to leave the back door open for him. He made his way up the stairs and into Ilya’s apartment, only to stop dead in his tracks when it wasn’t Ilya standing in the living room.

“Hey,” Svetlana said, turning to face him, a friendly smile on her face.

“Hi,” he said, only a little awkwardly. They were basically friends now. “Thanks for coming with us tonight.”

“Well, who am I to turn down a chance to party with the Raiders.”

Shane laughed. “I should warn you, Marly, uh Cliff Marlow, knows you’re coming and is very much looking forward to meeting you.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ve already been warned. He seems nice though, right? Should I run?”

“No, he is nice. He’s my best friend. A little loud, but he’s a good guy. And he takes the word no very seriously.”

“Well, that’s refreshing. I will grill him about hockey. If he can take it, maybe we will be friends.”

Vanya came prancing out of the hallway then, followed closely by Ilya, who crossed the room and wrapped him in a quick hug.

“I’ll take your bag,” he said, pulling it off Shane’s shoulder. He disappeared back down the hall for a moment, and when he came back again, Shane got a better look at him. He was wearing dark, tight jeans, slightly faded around the knees, and a short-sleeved button-up silk shirt, top two buttons undone, that was just tight enough around his biceps and chest to make Shane’s mouth water. Thankfully Vanya was demanding his attention, so he didn’t make a fool of himself in front of Svetlana, who also looked gorgeous, but definitely did not make his mouth water.

They spent some time sitting around Ilya’s living room. Shane listened to Ilya and Svetlana talk about the store for a little while, about how it was doing this December compared to last, his plans for scheduling John and Mallory now that he had two employees. Shane leaned into Ilya’s side while Vanya sat next to him, rubbing his face into Shane’s hand every time he stopped petting him. Eventually talk turned to hockey, and he and Svetlana took over while Ilya mostly ran his fingers lightly along Shane’s upper back and chimed in occasionally. Shane continued to be impressed by Svetlana’s knowledge and insight. She didn’t just know her stuff, she could give the popular sports analysts a run for their money.

Mostly, though, he was just happy to sit around and be normal with both of them. Ilya’s arm around him, no need to hide. Svetlana talking to him like they’d been friends for years. He could get used to this...just existing as himself without having to carefully measure out how much he could show and how much he had to keep tucked away.

When it was close to 10, Ilya asked, “Are we ready?”

“Yeah,” Shane said. “I’m parked on the side street.”

He’d offered to drive since he wasn’t planning to drink much. They made their way to the jeep. Ilya offered Svetlana the passenger seat, and she rolled her eyes and got in the back.

“So, how many of your teammates will be there?” she asked, leaning on the center console.

“Probably 5 or 6. A lot of the guys have families and young kids, so they don’t come out much. Marly and Connors will be there, probably Ham and Carmichael. Maybe Noisy.”

“And will they be surprised to see *Hollz* there with two friends?” Ilya asked, emphasizing his nickname.

“Probably yeah. I never bring anyone. And don’t call me that.” He reached over to dig his fingers into Ilya’s side until he squirmed away.

“Why not? Everyone calls you that.”

“Only hockey players. And commentators. When I was a rookie, some of the older guys called me Hollzy, but Marly dropped the ‘y’ and it stuck. Mostly. Some people still say Hollzy.”

“Hollzy,” Ilya said slowly, dragging the word out. “You didn’t like it?”

He shrugged. “Just doesn’t feel like me.”

“No,” Ilya agreed, “it doesn’t.” He grabbed Shane’s hand and brought it to his mouth. “Not my Shane,” he said quietly. Svetlana was leaning back in the seat, scrolling on her phone, and Shane doubted she heard over the low music coming through the speakers. But Shane heard, and it sent a warm shiver down his spine, reminding him that he was about to spend the next several hours not touching Ilya.

Cliff and Connors were already there when they arrived, pulling him into a shoulder bump. Then they did the same to Ilya, and Shane had to work overtime controlling his face. Not for long, though, because Cliff immediately turned to Svetlana, and he was so simultaneously ridiculous and smooth, Shane had to stifle a laugh.

“The famous Svetlana,” he said like an idiot. “I’m Cliff. You can call me that or Marly or anything you’d like really.”

Ilya was watching too, an eye roll barely contained. But Svetlana seemed amused if not a little charmed.

“I will call you Marlow until you impress me,” she said, taking his offered hand.

“This is Connors,” Shane interrupted before Cliff gave him secondhand embarrassment he couldn’t come back from.

Svetlana shook his hand too before her attention was stolen by Cliff again. Shane offered to grab everyone a round of drinks. He opened a tab and made sure Ilya and Svetlana knew to use it for the duration of the evening. He stuck with beer for himself and made his way back to their table, which was a few steps up from the dance floor and bar area, on a platform with raised partitions between each booth, giving them at least the illusion of privacy.

Shane handed them their drinks and sat next to Ilya.

“How’s it going?” Shane asked, nodding to Svetlana, who was talking at Cliff while he looked on in awe.

Ilya shook his head. “Pathetic. He is already gone and there’s no saving him now.”

Shane laughed. “This is the first time I’ve seen him like that. Are you okay with it?”

Ilya tilted his head. “She can handle herself. I promise she will let him know if she’s done.”

“I know, but…” he took a sip of his beer because what he was thinking would sound silly out loud. And if it wasn’t silly, he didn’t want to know the answer anyway.

Ilya nudged him. “But?”

“You’re not like…jealous or anything?”

Ilya let out a breath and leaned in a little closer. “You know the answer to that. The only thing that would make me jealous is if I have to watch you flirt with someone else.”

“Well, you’re in luck, I can’t flirt to save my life.”

“Mm, that’s not true. You got me, didn’t you?”

“Not by flirting.”

Ilya rocked his head from side to side. “Agree to disagree.”

Svetlana leaned toward them. “We’re hitting the dance floor. You two coming?”

“Not me,” Shane said quickly. “I’ll watch your drinks and hold down the table.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hollander,” she said playfully, making her accent more posh than usual. “And you?” she said to Ilya.

“Give me a minute.”

She nodded and followed Cliff and Connors out of the booth.

“Hey,” Ilya said, and he started to lift a hand, maybe toward Shane’s face, before he quickly snatched it back. “Do you mind if I dance with Sveta? You can say no.”

Shane shook his head without hesitation. “I don’t mind. I want to see you dance.”

“You sure you don’t want to join us?”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay. Be back soon.”

Shane watched Ilya join them, and Ham and Noah Wilson, who had been affectionately dubbed Noisy even though he was the most soft-spoken kid on the team, showed up soon

after.

The guys mostly fanned out, easily picking up one or more women to dance with. Even if they weren't recognized on sight, as soon as word spread that the Raiders were there, people would flock to them. Shane just wanted to stay out of the conversation so he could watch without having to fend anyone off.

His eyes were glued to Ilya, but that also meant he had a good view of Svetlana, who was talking to and dancing with both Ilya and Cliff. As he watched, Ilya and Cliff laughed at something, and Cliff shoved Ilya's shoulder. Ilya was giving him his amused, real, eye-reaching grin, and Shane ran a hand down his own face, feeling the corners of his mouth pulled up in response. Ilya fit into his life like he was meant to be there, like he'd always been there, and maybe like he always would be.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, his eyes burned, and he was reminded of something from A Single Man that felt so out of place in this club that was thumping with loud music and voices trying to be heard over it, the smell of cologne and perfume and sweat mingling into something that felt so alive, a scent full of sex and desire and adrenaline. Not a place for tears, but as he watched Ilya's hips moving, his sweaty curls sticking to his forehead, his smile that made Shane's whole body light up...he was overwhelmed with the thought, the desire, the *need*, for Ilya to always be there.

A few times in my life I've had moments of absolute clarity. When for a few brief seconds the silence drowns out the noise and I can feel rather than think, and things seem so sharp and the world seems so fresh. It's as though it had all just come into existence.

For a few brief seconds, the world around him disappeared, and only Ilya was left, his body moving in time with the music that Shane was no longer hearing, and he looked ethereal and perfect and Shane wanted to go to him and press their sweaty bodies together in front of everyone. He'd never wanted anything more in his life, like he was possessed and his skin was vibrating and his fingers were reaching like they could feel Ilya from there, wrap themselves into his curls and never let go. Show everyone that Ilya was his and he was Ilya's and there was nothing and no one in the world that could convince him that it was wrong.

But the sharp clarity, the overwhelming need, the raging fire in him was doused when Ham slid into the booth next to him and downed the rest of his beer.

"Some cocksucker just started making out with the chick I was dancing with, and she left with him," he said glumly, setting the glass back on the table harder than necessary.

Shane made a sympathetic noise and sipped his beer. He was used to that word. *Cocksucker* was ubiquitous in the locker room and on the ice and probably every other place in the world where straight men congregated. Most of the time, he barely noticed, and he didn't even think most of the guys meant it in any way other than how most people said *idiot* or *asshole*, just a generic insult. But tonight it grated. It deflated his little bubble, the wishful one where he and Ilya could be here with his friends and not have to hide. It reminded him of why the hiding was necessary.

It did not, however, dim the desire that was coursing through him as his eyes followed Ilya's movements, the need to touch him still overwhelming. He looked good. He moved like sex incarnate, so confident and easy, matching Svetlana, the two of them making a mockery of everyone else in the place. He wanted to be there instead, to feel Ilya against him under the dim lights, the thump of the bass vibrating through them.

Shane was shaken from his musings by Svetlana standing in front of him.

"Shane Hollander, will you dance with me?" she asked. Shane looked over to see that Ham had disappeared already.

"Um, I really don't dance."

"He said you'd say that and to tell you to get your ass out there anyway. He also said he promises not to touch you." Her lips twisted like she hated saying that last part, and Shane understood because he hated that Ilya felt the need to say it.

"I know he won't. But I just don't know how to dance," Shane said, wishing for once in his life that he did.

"You don't have to do much. I will show you if you let me. I promise I'm a good teacher. And you can at least be close to him." She smiled at him and held out a hand. "Come on."

He rolled his eyes and smiled back, took her hand and let her lead him to the dance floor, where Ilya, Cliff, and one redhead were dancing near each other, though Cliff looked much more bored than usual as the woman leaned in to say something in his ear.

"Okay," Svetlana said. "Put your hands here so you can feel how I move. It'll help." She guided his hands to her waist. Ilya was watching them with a small smile, and Shane wanted to grab his waist instead. He let out a breath and tried to focus on Svetlana's instructions, moving his hips the way she told him to and feeling like an idiot.

"Look at you," Ilya said quietly enough that only he and Svetlana would hear it. "You're a natural."

Shane laughed. "Fuck off, I'm terrible."

Which was true, but he managed to settle into a rhythm with Svetlana, moving only the minimal amount needed to keep him from simply standing still on the dance floor. His eyes were trained over her shoulder, watching Ilya, and he knew he was being too obvious, that if one of his teammates decided to pay him even a bit of attention, they'd see how intently he was watching another man's hips and lips.

Ilya was enjoying it, clearly. He leaned into Svetlana, practically grinding against her from the back, but his eyes stayed on Shane's. Svetlana leaned into him, a familiar reaction, before she pulled Shane more solidly against her to whisper in his ear.

"You two are not being very subtle right now."

Shane nodded and took a small step back, letting his eyes fall to her face.

“I like your friend,” she said. “He’s a much better conversationalist than I expected.”

“Yeah, he’s really smart. The goofball thing isn’t an act, but it’s just the surface.”

“I wonder if you will be upset if I take him up on his invitation to dinner?”

“Me?” Shane asked, head nodding forward in surprise. “No, why would I?”

She shrugged lightly. “Might be getting into dangerous territory. Not that I will tell him anything of course. But spending more time with me puts him in closer proximity to Ilya.”

Shane looked away from her, his eyes finding Cliff not far off, already looking at them. He gave Shane a nod and a smile, and Shane nodded back. Cliff didn’t seem bothered that he was dancing with Svetlana at least...if anything, he looked happy. Probably because he was always trying to get Shane to dance with women, and he almost never did. Perhaps that outweighed any perceived threat, which of course didn’t exist.

He turned back to Ilya, who looked divine. He was beautiful, face slightly flushed and a little severe, a light sheen of sweat on his brow, damp curls a bit wild. Shane wanted him so bad. He was suddenly overly aware of his body, skin overheated and tingling with it. His whole body was reacting to Ilya being so close, so perfect, so untouchable. His *whole* body was reacting. He needed air, could hardly breathe in this thick, humid room with too many bodies when he only wanted one. But his cock didn’t care...Ilya was right there, and nothing else mattered.

“I’ll be back,” he said to Svetlana and made his way off the dance floor and away from the press of bodies, in search of some relief.

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Ilya was dying. He was falling to pieces in the middle of the club, watching Shane dance with Svetlana two feet away from him, and all he wanted to do was push her, nicely and gently, out of the way and grind against his boyfriend while Gucci Mane thumped from the speakers. His skin was going to set itself aflame, his heart was going to beat out of his chest. It didn’t, but he did let out a frustrated noise that was lost to the music. When he looked up again, Shane was gone. He was halfway across the dance floor, moving purposefully toward the back.

“Where is he going?” Ilya leaned in to ask Svetlana.

She shrugged. “Probably air. He looked spooked.”

“I’ll be back. Keep your new friend Marly busy, will you?”

She rolled her eyes and then walked over to Marly, saving him from the overly friendly redhead who was starting to cling.

Ilya made his way toward the back of the club, barely thinking about each step, like his body knew exactly where the object of its desire was. And he did desire it. He still felt like he might die if he didn’t touch Shane soon.

Down the hallway where the bathrooms were, people were making out against the wall, someone was yelling into a cell phone, and right as he passed by, Shane Hollander stepped out of the men's room and walked right into him.

"Hey," Ilya said, putting his hands on Shane's waist briefly to steady him before pulling them back to his sides. "You okay?"

"Yeah, just needed a break."

"Me too. Follow me," Ilya said, and he kept walking down to the end of the hallway, where it turned to the right, a door at the end that said 'Employees only', and one to the left that was unmarked, no one in sight.

He pushed the unmarked door open and pulled Shane inside. It was a bathroom with just one toilet and a sink, rarely used, and mostly for sex.

"How'd you know this was here?" Shane asked.

"Not my first time here." He pulled Shane against him, finally letting himself do what he'd been wanting to do all night and pressing their lips together. It was hungry and messy, and Shane's hand was already tight in his hair and he was grinding his hard cock against Ilya's. Ilya had thought he might die if he didn't touch him before, but now he thought he might die from it, so much heat was pumping through his body, and he couldn't touch enough of Shane's skin to soothe it. He pulled back to look at him, and Shane was just as gone, eyes unfocused and lips parted and waiting. But Ilya wanted more. He dropped to his knees, just like Shane had that morning.

"We can't..." Shane started to say as Ilya unbuttoned his pants.

Ilya paused and looked up at him. "Tell me to stop."

Shane looked like he was going to come already, his chest heaving and mouth open. He shook his head and ran his fingers through Ilya's hair again, settling at the back of his neck and pulling just enough to let him know he wanted it. Ilya unzipped him and pulled his underwear down enough to free his cock, which, Ilya was delighted to see, was already leaking, a wet spot obvious on the gray material.

"How long have you been hard?" he asked, then licked the tip of Shane's cock, making his hips jerk.

Shane's fingers tightened in his hair. "A while."

"Mhm. Leaking all over. From dancing with Sveta?" He couldn't help himself.

"What? No," Shane said, his voice trying so hard to be defensive, but Ilya's tongue was swirling around him now, and he was succumbing to the sensation.

"No?" He licked down to the base of his cock and back up. "Then why?"

"Ilya," he said, and let his head fall back against the wall.

He would never get tired of Shane's breathy voice, almost whiny but in the cutest way, saying his name.

"Oh...me? I did this?" Ilya said before swallowing him down as far as he could.

Shane made a noise of agreement, strangled by a moan, his hips bucking forward before he stopped himself.

"I did this to you? Without even touching you?" he asked and pressed his lips to the underside of Shane's cockhead, letting his tongue flick there while Shane groaned and tightened his fingers around Ilya's curls.

"You know you did," Shane said, his voice so low Ilya almost didn't hear him over the little bit of music leaking through the door.

As much as he didn't mind kneeling on this filthy bathroom floor for Shane, he figured they were pushing their luck. He took Shane's cock into his mouth again, as much of it as he could, then cupped one of his hands against Shane's ass and pulled forward, urging him to move. He let Shane fuck his mouth for a bit, enjoying the press of hot, smooth skin and salty precome against his tongue while Shane moaned and massaged the back of his head, probably without realizing. He kept his tongue pressed up and slipped one hand past the pulled down waistband of his boxer briefs so he could squeeze Shane's balls until his hips started to lose their rhythm. Then Ilya held him still and sucked him off with as much skill as he possessed, just how Shane liked it, focusing his mouth on the head of his cock and pulling his hand from his balls to the base of his cock to work him faster.

It didn't take long before Shane was coming down his throat with a loud moan, and Ilya hoped no one was outside the door. When Shane was done, Ilya pulled his underwear back up for him and zipped and buttoned his pants. He stood and let himself have just a moment to take in Shane's slightly flushed face, still slack with his orgasm, lips parted and waiting for Ilya's. Ilya kissed him and pushed his tongue into Shane's mouth, still coated in his cum, because Ilya thought it was hot and he knew Shane did too, evidenced by how hungrily Shane kissed him back despite having just come. Shane's hand snaked down to cup Ilya's cock and then started to unbutton his jeans.

"No," Ilya said, grabbing his wrist and bringing it up to his mouth to kiss.

Shane looked at him in question. "What about you?"

Ilya leaned in so he could whisper against his ear. "Later. I want to be inside you when I come."

Shane let out a shaky breath and a little moan, and Ilya wanted to drag him out of the club right then and fuck him in the back of that silly jeep. Instead, he adjusted himself in his jeans and kissed Shane once more.

"I'll go out first. Wait a minute and then come, I'll make sure no one is around," Ilya said. He brushed Shane's slightly damp bangs off his forehead, but he couldn't do anything about the fucked out look on his face. "You look like you just came," he said against his lips.

Shane laughed. “Fuck.” He moved to the sink to splash water on his face while Ilya slipped out the door. That part of the hallway was thankfully still empty, and the longer section leading back to the main club contained people who were too busy to pay attention to a random person heading out. Shane would be fine.

Ilya made his way back to Svetlana, who was still with Cliff, talking to Connors and a few other Raiders. As soon as Ilya approached, Svetlana narrowed her eyes at him.

“Fix your hair,” she said out of the corner of her mouth.

Ilya quickly patted his curls down, trying to make them look like someone hadn’t just been holding them in a death grip. “Better?”

She sighed and reached up to apparently do a better job. “There. As good as I can do under such conditions. You’re an idiot.”

Ilya laughed. “I don’t remember you saying that when it was you messing up my hair in the backroom of a club.”

“Maybe I’d be in a better mood if someone took me in the back now,” she said, eyes flicking over to Cliff.

“Oh? So he impressed you, huh?”

“Maybe,” she said. “I’m still deciding.” Then she nodded to something behind him, and Ilya turned to see Shane making his way over, the flush in his face mostly gone.

“Back to dance more?” Svetlana asked him.

“Oh, um...maybe for a little bit.”

Svetlana wasted no time before grabbing Shane by the hips and pulling him in close enough to make it look like they were dancing together again, and Ilya was delighted to see that while Shane was still doing no more than slightly moving his hips in time with the beat, he looked much looser than he had earlier. Ilya let himself be distracted by the music and the press of bodies around him, and mostly the way Shane’s eyes couldn’t keep from sliding to his, his lips turned up in a small, soft smile that made Ilya’s whole chest warm.

“I think I’m going to go sit,” Shane said eventually, and Ilya wanted to follow and wasn’t sure if he should. Svetlana and Cliff were dancing again, and she did seem to be enjoying herself.

“Sveta,” he said, putting a hand on her back to get her attention. “You want to stay?”

Because Ilya was ready to go. He needed to get out of this club before his self-control fled entirely, and he did something that would ruin everything.

“I think my new friend Cliff will make sure I get home safely, won’t you?” she asked Cliff, who looked like he’d get on the floor and suck her toes if she asked. He nodded enthusiastically.

“You heading out Roz?” Cliff asked him.

“Mm, probably. Shane is my ride, and I think he’s done.” Ilya nodded to their booth, where Shane was looking like he was ready to make a break for it.

“Yeah, Hollz has surpassed his usual club allowance...I’m surprised he lasted this long. We’re good here,” Cliff said, giving Svetlana a smile that at another time in his life might have had Ilya feeling some type of way. Not because Sveta couldn’t fuck whoever she wanted, but that smile was a little too serious and neither of them had ever dabbled in serious before. Now he was in the most serious thing that had ever happened to him, so he had no stones left to throw from his glass house. “Have a good night, man. See you next time,” Cliff said and winked at him and Ilya suspected that wink knew too much, but he left it alone, gave Svetlana a quick hug, told her to text him when she made it home, and then went to give his boyfriend the good news.

“Ready to go home?” he asked when he got to the table. “Sveta is staying.”

Shane was on his feet so fast he almost knocked Ilya backwards. “Yes, please.”

Shane didn’t even say goodbye to any of his teammates, he just led Ilya quickly out of the club and to the jeep. On the way home, Shane’s hand grabbed his and didn’t let go except when he needed it for steering. They drove to Shane’s parking garage and then walked back to One Good Memory. It was late, the street was empty, but Ilya was still surprised when Shane entwined their hands again the whole walk. They talked quietly until they got to the store, both seemingly pretending they weren’t two seconds away from jumping each other's bones.

They made it upstairs, and if it wasn’t for his meddling cat, they might have got to the fucking much quicker. But Vanya greeted them with a too loud meow and then tried to climb Ilya’s jeans.

“Vanya,” he muttered. “What could you possibly want? You have been fed, you have water, your litter box is clean. You are so dramatic.”

Shane laughed. “Maybe he gets it from you.” He bent down to pick Vanya up. “He just missed us.” Shane held him while Ilya took his coat off and then slipped Shane’s off for him while he shifted Vanya from one arm to the other.

“I’m not dramatic,” Ilya said. “I am horny. Remember how you got a blowjob at the club and I didn’t?”

“Your choice.”

“I was trying to keep you from getting on your knees in two places of business in one day,” Ilya said, walking up behind him and wrapping arms around his waist. He put his chin on Shane’s shoulder and looked down at his spoiled cat splayed in Shane’s arms. “Even though I think you very much like doing that.”

“I do not.”

“Honesty, remember?” Ilya kissed his neck, and he wasn’t sure if the purring he heard was Shane or Vanya.

“I’ll let him down and get naked if we can skip that conversation,” Shane said, turning until his mouth was against Ilya’s cheek. It was sweet, and he wanted Shane naked, so he nodded.

“Yes, but don’t think I’ll forget. Shoo Vanya. We’ll see you later.” But he reached down and gave him an affectionate head scratch.

Shane set him down and followed Ilya to the bedroom. “We should probably shower first. I feel gross.”

“No,” Ilya said. “After. I plan to make a mess of you.”

Shane pulled his shirt off and sniffed while his arms were up.

Ilya laughed. “What, you think you smell?”

“I mean, compared to after practice and games, no. But it was hot in the club.”

“Come here.”

Ilya reeled him in so he could press his nose against the crease of Shane’s arm. He smelled like clean soap and deodorant, with just enough of his natural musk to make Ilya’s cock even harder. Shane pushed at him, so Ilya bit his shoulder and let his teeth scrape down the side of his arm.

“Hm, no. You smell delicious. Now get in the bed.”

Ilya finished undressing while Shane pulled his pants and underwear off and sprawled in the bed. Ilya climbed in after him, covering Shane’s body with his and kissing him like he’d wanted to all night. He managed to get the lube and start fingering him open while they kissed and Shane gasped into his mouth and writhed beneath him.

“Did you have fun tonight?” Ilya asked.

Shane nodded. “I got to watch you dance.”

“You danced too.”

Shane huffed a laugh and then pushed his head back against the pillows while Ilya pushed harder with his fingers.

“I don’t think that could be considered dancing,” Shane said, voice strained.

“It was. Your hips were moving. Your ass looked very good. If I had been pressed up against it, I think you might have been more enthusiastic.”

Shane laughed again. “Well, yeah, probably.”

Ilya slipped his fingers free, added more lube, and then pushed his cock against Shane's hole.

"Sveta is a good teacher, but not as good as me," he said and pushed in, watching Shane's face go tight and then slack as he sucked in a breath and let it out slowly.

"One day I'm going to dance with you in a crowded club," Shane said, voice gone all soft and thick as molasses, eyes fluttering. "With your arms wrapped around me, while everyone watches."

Ilya wrapped himself around Shane as tightly as he could right then. Shane's legs were hooked together at the ankles behind Ilya's back, Ilya's cock buried as deep in his ass as it could go, his weight heavy on Shane's body, warm skin pressed together, and he kissed him, his tongue searching the heat of Shane's mouth. They couldn't be more connected, but Ilya managed to get one hand under Shane's head, cradling him and holding on for dear life, Shane's words sending him into the stratosphere. It was too much, the way he wanted to crawl inside Shane's skin, the way his throat had gone tight, and he wanted to scream from the rooftops, a barbaric yawp that Walt Whitman would be proud of, all because Shane said he wanted to dance with him one day.

I feel like I could eat the world raw.

"I love you," Ilya whispered as he thrust into Shane, hard and claiming, but still sweet, keeping their faces close.

"I love you too," Shane said, voice wavering with every thrust. "So much. Watching you out there was making me lose my mind, you looked so hot."

"Fuck," Ilya murmured, still trying to meld their bodies together. He pressed his face into Shane's neck, breathing him in, licking his salty skin, and pressing lips against him.

They were both breathing hard, noises of pleasure and the smack of sweaty skin loud in the air. Ilya was getting close, and he wondered if he should shift so he could reach Shane's cock, but it was unnecessary. Shane's hand pulled hard at his hair, his other on digging into Ilya's upper back, legs tightening around his waist as his cock spurted where it was trapped between them, and he squeezed around Ilya's cock until he joined him. Ilya's body pulsed with heat, Shane infiltrating every inch of him as he spilled himself deep inside. It was exactly what Ilya needed physically, and Shane's declaration about dancing with him one day at least temporarily soothed whatever else was gnawing at him.

They disentangled enough to make it to the shower, where they quickly washed each other clean. Ilya took a few minutes to deal with his hair after so it wouldn't be a disaster in the morning, while Shane leaned against the counter and watched him, a blissed out, affectionate little smile on his face.

"Ready for bed?" Ilya asked.

Shane nodded. "Read first?"

“Of course.” He leaned in to kiss him, then led him back to bed. He grabbed *The Song of Achilles*, feeling like that was more where they were tonight than poetry.

Shane snuggled against him, and Ilya turned the pages until he found the spot he wanted.

“I reached down to stroke the wisps of hair at his temple. He closed his eyes. I watched his face, tipped up to meet the sun. There was a delicacy to his features that sometimes made him look younger than he was. His lips were flushed and full.

His eyes opened. ‘Name one hero who was happy.’

I considered. Heracles went mad and killed his family; Theseus lost his bride and father; Jason’s children and new wife were murdered by his old; Bellerophon killed the Chimera but was crippled by the fall from Pegasus’ back.

‘You can’t.’ He was sitting up now, leaning forward.

‘I can’t.’

‘I know. They never let you be famous and happy.’ He lifted an eyebrow. ‘I’ll tell you a secret.’

‘Tell me.’ I loved it when he was like this.

‘I’m going to be the first.’ He took my palm and held it to his. ‘Swear it.’

‘Why me?’

‘Because you’re the reason. Swear it.’

‘I swear it,’ I said, lost in the high color of his cheeks, the flame in his eyes.

‘I swear it,’ he echoed.

We sat like that a moment, hands touching. He grinned.

‘I feel like I could eat the world raw.’”

His voice had gotten lower as he read. The sentiment he’d earlier felt had now turned into him feeling raw. Maybe he should have been more forthcoming with his own words instead of hiding behind those, but Shane, his Shane who didn’t always pick up every cue but certainly read enough of Ilya’s, propped himself up on one elbow and stroked a hand down his chest.

“I swear it,” Shane said quietly. Then he laid his head on Ilya’s shoulder, hand still moving. Ilya didn’t ask what he meant. He knew. He knew, and he wanted to believe it, for Shane’s sake. He deserved to keep his career exactly how it was and still be himself and happy. He hoped Shane’s story, their story, would be better than the story of Achilles and Patroclus. That Shane would choose to be famous *and* happy...that he could be both. And maybe Ilya would be part of the reason.

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Over the next 7 days, Shane had two away games, two home games, and three days with no games. He spent all the nights he was in town at Ilya’s, and when he was away, they talked on the phone as usual.

He read *The Dog Stars* on the plane, and he wondered briefly why Ilya recommended this, then remembered what he’d said about his fondness for the genre. The book was sad, and it was hopeful, and Shane had to look up a few times to make sure no one was watching him while his eyes became a little misty.

If he'd been prepared, there were a few things he might have highlighted. He even thought about texting them to Ilya, but they were too heavy.

*Is it possible to love so desperately that life is unbearable? I don't mean unrequited, I mean being in love. In the midst of it and desperate.
Because knowing it will end, because everything does. End.*

He didn't want to think about endings right now, at what was still only the beginning, and he had a long way to go, maybe a lot of work to do to make sure nothing ended. But he would get there one day. He hoped. He'd sworn it.

On the way to Florida, Cliff had joined him on the plane, plopping into the seat next to him.

"Hey, you ready for tomorrow?" Cliff asked.

"I think so. Everyone's playing well, no major injuries, knock on wood. Florida's good, but I think we've got them this time. Tightened up defense."

Cliff nodded. "So um...I asked Svetlana to dinner when she gets back from Moscow."

"Oh, yeah." Shane remembered her mentioning the invite, but had forgotten she was headed to Moscow this week. "Did she say yes?"

"Yeah. That's what I wanted to talk to you about. You're cool with it, right?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Shane asked, his mind already zipping through all the reasons he shouldn't be. He'd been too distracted at the club to properly consider. If his best friend and Ilya's best friend dated and it went wrong, that was bad. If they dated and it went well, that was also bad. Because how could he and Ilya stay a secret if Cliff was always around Svetlana? It might work for a little while...

"Well, I know you're friends with her, too. And Roz is like your...bud. So I just want to make sure it's not going to be weird. I really like her."

Shane looked over at him. He'd rarely seen Cliff so...soft. Shane could tell he really wanted it to be okay. "It's fine. Just uh, don't treat her like a hookup, okay?"

Cliff held his hands up. "Fuck no. She's not a hookup. I want to get to know her. She schooled my ass about hockey, and she's really into some of the same bands I like. She gave me her number, so we've been texting a bit."

Shane made a mental note to ask Ilya how he felt about this. "That's great, Marly. She's really cool."

"Yeah. Thanks, man. So how's Roz doing?"

"He's fine, I think. Busy you know, with his store."

"Yeah, One Good Memory. Svetlana was telling me about it. She's part owner. I'm going to have to stop in sometime."

Fuck. “Oh, um really? You don’t read much.”

“Yeah, but I gotta support my new friends.”

“Sure.”

This was not good. Nothing about this was good. One Good Memory and Ilya were one part of his life, Cliff Marlow and hockey another. They needed to stay separate until he figured out how they could coexist. He’d already flown too close to the sun bringing Ilya to basketball and the club, clearly. But he needed things to remain where they were until his plan was more solid. Until he could figure out how to publicly be Shane Hollander, captain of the Raiders *and* Ilya Rozanov’s boyfriend. He spent the rest of the flight distracted.

On the way from Florida to North Carolina, he finished reading *The Dog Stars*, or it finished him. He found another quote that stuck with him. One that brought him back to his current problem, reminded him that there was some urgency to it. He’d been waiting long enough, hiding long enough. If he waited too long, everything he wanted might end up just out of reach.

*Funny how you can live a whole life waiting and not know it. ... Waiting for your real life to begin. Maybe the most real thing the end.
To realize that when it’s too late. I know that I loved him more than anything on earth or off it.*

-

On the morning of Christmas Eve, they flew back to Boston. Shane went home, showered, and took a nap. Ilya would have the store open until 4, with both Mallory and John there to help with the last-minute shoppers.

Around 5, Shane got ready, packed stuff to spend the next couple of nights, gathered the Christmas-related stuff he wanted to bring, and then made his way to One Good Memory. The street was still a little busy, but more with car traffic than foot traffic now, as people headed to their Christmas Eve plans. Shane had pulled a toque low over his head, zipped up his puffy jacket, and was mostly unrecognizable. He also had handfuls of bags and probably looked like any other last-minute shopper as he turned down a side street and then up the alley to the back entrance of the bookshop.

He made sure the door closed and locked behind him and made his way upstairs, leaving the biggest bag on the landing outside of Ilya’s door as he knocked briefly and then stepped into the apartment.

Two things registered: the apartment smelled delicious, a mix of savory and sweet, and there was a string of colorful Christmas lights draped atop the bookshelf on the opposite wall, making the whole place glow.

“Ilya?” he called out as he kicked his shoes off.

“In the kitchen.”

Before he'd even gotten his shoes lined up neatly, Vanya was there rubbing against him and then standing up on his hind legs to stick his head in one of the bags.

"Vanya," he said. "No, sir. That's not for you. But don't worry, I did bring you something for later."

He pulled the bag up higher and went to the kitchen to find Ilya stirring something in a pot.

"Hey," Shane said, wrapping an arm around Ilya's waist. "What is all this?"

Ilya turned his face until their lips met briefly, then said, "Pelmeni. I told you I'd make them for you one day, and this seemed like a good day. I also made cookies. Kind of boring, but I didn't have time for anything fancy."

"You didn't have to make anything at all," Shane said. "This is perfect. I brought some groceries, but we can save them for tomorrow."

Shane put everything away while Ilya finished up and plated the pelmeni and some roasted vegetables and potatoes for both of them.

"God, this is good," Shane said after several bites. "You really didn't have to do all this after working all day."

"I didn't mind. It was a pretty easy day for me. Mallory and John had everything under control, I just helped people find books for picky family members."

They chatted and finished dinner, and after the kitchen was clean, they made their way to the living room. The only light was coming from the Christmas lights and the faint glow of streetlights through the window. It was cozy and perfect, and any guilt Shane was harboring for not going to Ottawa was quickly forgotten as Ilya pulled him down onto the couch next to him. There was nowhere else he'd rather be.

"Should we watch a Christmas movie?" Ilya asked.

"Only if you want to. Doesn't have to be a Christmas movie."

"Hm, if not Christmas...there is an adaptation of Maurice that is pretty good."

"Oh, yeah, let's watch that."

Ilya started the movie, and Shane leaned into him for a while. Eventually Ilya got up and brought the cookies into the living room to share, and they ended up on opposite sides of the couch, legs stretched in front of them, toes touching. Vanya settled on the back of the couch between them and curled up. The colorful glow of the lights, Ilya's bare feet against his socked ones, Vanya in arm's reach...Shane wondered how he'd lived without this for so long and hoped he'd never have to again.

When the movie ended, Ilya turned it off and crawled over to lay on top of Shane.

"Did you like the movie?" he asked from inches away.

Shane nodded. "Even though I knew the ending, I was almost waiting for it to be sad. I'm glad it wasn't."

"No sad movies today. It's Christmas."

"Do you even celebrate today?"

Ilya shrugged. "I do now. Russians make more of New Year's, though, and then a quieter Christmas on January 7th."

"I'll be away then," Shane said, wondering if Ilya would have wanted to celebrate then instead.

"That's okay. Been a while since I've worried about Russian traditions." His voice was a little empty when he said it, but Shane could feel the weight anyway.

"Well...if you don't mind some other traditions, I got you something."

"You did, huh?" Ilya asked. "Is it this?" He pushed his hips into Shane's.

"No, but you can have that later anyway. Get off," he said and pinched Ilya's side hard enough to tickle but not hurt.

Ilya wiggled against him but didn't move. "Big strong hockey player, if you want me to move, you can make me."

"Ilya," he whined. "You weigh as much as me. And I'm tired." Ilya started to relax against him, as Shane thought he might, and he used the opportunity to wrap his arms and legs tightly around him and roll them to the side, toward the back of the couch, so no one would fall.

"Cheater," Ilya said, but all he did was pull Shane closer and kiss him. They just barely fit that way on the wide couch, but they were making it work until paws landed on him. Vanya's back feet were on Ilya's side, and his front on Shane's. They both looked up at him at the same time.

Ilya let out a breath that was almost a raspberry. "You were being so good."

"He knows I have a present for him," Shane said, gently shifting Vanya off him so he could get up.

"Fine, fine. I have something for you, too."

"You do?" Shane stopped in front of the door.

"Of course. It's Christmas."

"You didn't have to get me anything."

“Well, I did. And you are very hard to buy for, Shane Hollander. What am I supposed to get a famous, rich hockey player?”

“Which is why you didn’t have to.”

“Too bad. Don’t worry...you will like it.”

Shane wondered what Ilya could have possibly gotten him. Probably books. He opened the apartment’s front door to retrieve the very large bag he’d left on the landing earlier.

“What the fuck is that?” Ilya asked as soon as Shane had it inside the doorway.

“Uh...well. It’s kind of silly, and if you don’t like it, you don’t have to use it.”

He brought it further into the living room, where Ilya was still standing near the couch.

“Sit,” Shane said. Ilya sat and took the giant gift bag from him. He pushed the tissue paper out of the way and then pulled out a bespoke wooden shelf. Shane had custom ordered it, making sure the dimensions were just right and the shelving compartments big enough.

Ilya looked at the shelf in surprise, turning it right way up and running his fingers over the dark, polished wood. Then he looked up at Shane in question.

“It’s for your front window display. It’s always a mess, and the books are in a random pile, so no one can see all the titles. This way you can shelve them, some with the spines out here,” he pointed to a couple of the compartments, “and some with the covers facing out,” he moved his hand to the more shallow ones with solid backs. “And of course, for Vanya.” He didn’t need to point at it, but he did...the little attached box on the bottom left that lay flat against the floor, a cat bed already fitted in it. “So he can still lay in the window.”

“Wow,” Ilya said softly. “You insult me and give me the nicest gift all in one.”

Shane laughed. “Sorry...but it *is* a mess. If you don’t like the shelf though, you don’t have to use it. It’s just an option.”

“I love it,” Ilya said. He set the shelf down and stood up again, pulling Shane into a tight hug. “It’ll look perfect. And he already loves it.” Ilya nodded down to where Vanya was climbing into the attached bed. “He gets final say.”

“I got him a catnip toy too. Maybe we can give it to him later when we need him to leave us alone.”

Ilya laughed. “Yes, please.”

“I wanted to get you one other thing, but I wasn’t sure...I thought I should probably ask you first.”

Ilya cocked his head. “Okay. Ask.”

Shane was feeling a bit embarrassed now that he was going to say it out loud. “Well...I wanted to get you something you can wear. Like um...jewelry? But something subtle, not showy. I just like the idea of you wearing something from me. Is that dumb?”

“No, not dumb.” Ilya sat on the couch and pulled Shane down on his lap. “I’d wear anything you get me.”

“Really? Anything?”

Ilya snorted. “Why, are you going to make me wear some giant pink gemstone or something? I don’t think Shane Hollander’s taste in jewelry will scare me.”

“No, definitely nothing like that. I thought something gold, to match your necklace,” he said, dragging a finger along the delicate chain around Ilya’s neck.

“I’ll make you a deal,” Ilya said. “We will both get something to wear. To match. I wear something from you, you wear something from me.”

Secretly, that’s what Shane wanted. He’d been hesitant to say it because it sounded very much like a promise...a proposal...a ring. Something they were not ready for yet. But the allure of seeing something he picked out on Ilya was undeniable.

“I like that,” he said finally. “We can pick something out later.”

“Yes. Now, do you want your presents?”

“Multiple?”

“Mhm. Three things. One is a regular gift. One is a naughty gift. And one is...maybe the most intimate thing I will ever give anyone.”

Shane swallowed hard, mind drifting back to proposals and rings already, but he shook that away and focused on the rest of what Ilya said.

“Which one do I get first?”

“Hm, boring regular gift first. Get that one out of the way.”

Shane moved off his lap, and Ilya got up and disappeared down the hall. He came back with a small stack of books and one plain cardboard box.

“Okay. Boring gifts first. I got you a few books of poetry, some that we’ve read and some we haven’t. Classics.”

Shane took the books from him and went through the stack: The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes, The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara, and The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson.

"Thank you. I think I've read some Emily Dickinson, but I can't remember them. I've never heard of Frank O'Hara. This is perfect.

“Good. Maybe I will read some to you. Here. Naughty gift next,” Ilya said, and handed him the box.

Shane opened it and then immediately closed it. “Ilya, what the fuck,” he laughed. It was a sex toy. A sleek, black prostate massager in a box still shrink-wrapped in plastic.

“It has an app. I can control it from here even when you are all the way in California.”

“Oh my god,” Shane muttered. “I’ve never even used one of these before.”

“Hey,” Ilya lifted his chin with one finger. “Only if you want to, yes? Might be fun though, for when you’re on the road.”

“I definitely want to,” Shane said, his cock swelling at the thought. “I just wasn’t expecting that.”

“We can test it later.”

Shane nodded, trying not to let himself be derailed by that. “So, what’s the last thing? The most intimate one.” He was dying to know, enough to override his dick.

Ilya picked up the last thing. It was a black book, or a journal maybe, made of some kind of soft leather-like material, but otherwise a plain, unadorned cover. Ilya held it in both hands, like it was something fragile, but Shane could see how the tips of his fingers were white with pressure, from how tight he was holding it.

Ilya’s throat bobbed, and he sniffed, scrunching his nose. He was uncomfortable. Shane stood up and put a hand on the back of his neck. “What is it?”

Instead of answering, Ilya pushed the black book into his hands and then guided Shane back to sitting on the couch. Realizing Ilya wasn’t going to tell him, Shane opened it to a random page. He sucked in a breath and looked up at Ilya, who still looked nervous, eyes blinking a little too quickly, bottom lip sucked in.

The page he’d turned to was full of text in Ilya’s familiar handwriting. His eyes couldn’t quite stay still long enough to read the words, but he flipped through a few more pages, all in Ilya’s neat hand. Some contained only a sentence or two, some blocks of text. He paused long enough to read one page: *Sometimes I am adrift at sea, and the only thing that keeps my head above water is the brush of fur and the smell of old books and the softest fingers holding tight to my hair.*

Shane looked up again, still not knowing what this was. His fingers flexed involuntarily. He flipped a few more pages and read another line: *I couldn’t remember what she sounded like today. I thought for hours, read to myself passages I know her voice once uttered, and I couldn’t remember.*

“Ilya,” he said softly. “What is this?”

Ilya sat heavily next to him. “When I was in college, I had a writing professor who made us write something every day. Whether it was a single sentence or 30 pages, a random detail

about an object in the room or something that happened that day or a piece of fiction...didn't matter, we just had to write. I kept it up for a while, then I started writing other things. And then I stopped writing altogether." He paused and shifted. "A few months ago, I started doing it again."

Shane looked at him. A few months ago. They met a few months ago. Ilya started writing again a few months ago. Ilya was a writer.

"I didn't know you wrote at all," Shane said. "How did I not know that? Of course you write." He laughed. "I feel like an idiot."

Ilya smiled at him. "No. No one really knows. Not even Svetlana. I've never shared my writing with anyone outside of classes where I had to."

"What else have you written?"

Ilya shrugged. "I've written some...I don't know what to call them. Essays maybe? Just memories of my mother and some things from my childhood. A few pieces of literary analysis just to get the ideas out of my head. I uh..." he trailed off for a moment. "I started writing a novel a few years ago, but I haven't gone back to look at it in a long time. Kind of embarrassing, really."

"What? No...why embarrassing? I'd read anything you write. This is for me to read?" Shane held up the black notebook.

Ilya nodded stiffly. "It's random stuff. Some of it will make no sense, I'm sure. But I wanted to share it with you. Something no one else gets to know."

It wasn't proposals or rings or other things that shouldn't even be a thought in his head, but it was something better, infinitely more intimate and perfect and Ilya, who could wield words in a way Shane had never considered outside the pages of books.

"It's perfect," he said. He opened it from the first page, and written there, still in Ilya's handwriting: *I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear. -Joan Didion*

"That one is a quote I've always liked from her essay 'Why I Write'," Ilya said. "But everything else in here is mine. Please don't read it now."

Shane had started to turn the page, but he closed the journal and set it on top the stack of books on the coffee table instead.

"Thank you. For sharing this with me." He wasn't sure if he wanted more to curl up with the journal or the man himself. It was an easy decision once Ilya's arm was snaking around his waist and pulling him in. The words would wait. "You're a writer," Shane said again, delight obvious in his voice. "Fuck, Ilya. You even mentioned it the other day, when we went to dinner with Rose. I didn't really think about it, but I should have known even before that. I want to read your novel."

Ilya laughed. “No. It’s not even done.”

“What was it about?”

He looked embarrassed, so Shane put a hand on his jaw.

“Fine. I will tell you if you promise not to laugh.”

“You know I won’t.”

Ilya nodded. “It was kind of a post-apocalyptic survival story. About a man who survives alone for a while and then falls in love and has to make hard choices. I was probably too influenced by popular books and movies from a few years ago. And I started writing it when I was maybe 20 or 21. But it’s not like...young adult chosen one type drama. More about how far someone will go for their own survival and for the person they love. It was not very good. But I think maybe it could be.”

“You did say you had a fondness for those types of stories,” Shane said, smiling.

“Yes, well...I like stories about people persevering, even when everyone and everything has abandoned them.”

Shane nodded, wanting to think more about that, but not here in front of Ilya. Instead, he said, “So, did he fall in love with a man or a woman?”

“Hm?”

“In your book. The man who survives.”

“Ah...you know I wrote that before I met you, yes?”

“So it was a woman?”

Ilya smiled and leaned in. “No, Shane Hollander. It was a man. You know how I feel about queer books. But I had never fallen in love with a man before. Or a woman, to be fair. Now that I know...” he kissed Shane’s neck. “Maybe I can write something better.”

“I want to read it.”

“I know. I want you to, if I ever write more of it. Or anything else I write.”

Shane kissed him, deep and slow and reverent. He knew Ilya was giving him something special, and he couldn’t imagine wanting anything more than to know him, all of him, in such a different but just as intimate way than what they were doing in that moment. But he wanted that too, especially when Ilya stood up and moved the coffee table up against the TV stand, clearing the floor in front of the couch. Then he moved the shelf and Vanya, still curled in the bed, to the other side of the room. Vanya looked up, briefly miffed, but then settled back down and rolled around the soft little nest.

Ilya pulled his shirt over his head, dropped his sweatpants and underwear, then pulled Shane off the couch to strip him too. They ended up on the rug in front of the couch, the colorful Christmas lights making Ilya's skin glow, warm and familiar. Ilya kissed him from head to toe, stopping to give his cock just enough attention to have it aching for more, before he kept kissing his way across his body. He eventually returned to swallow him down, making Shane moan, hands settling in his hair. But before Ilya could take him apart completely, Shane told him to turn, so he could suck him at the same time, wanting nothing more than to have some part of Ilya in his mouth while his hands grasped at warm, soft skin.

They both ended up on their sides, each with one knee drawn up, mouths wrapped around each other's cocks. It was a first for Shane, and it was harder than it looked. He was trying his best to keep his mouth tight and moving on Ilya, even though Ilya's mouth was making him lose his focus and gasp and moan around him, needing his hand to keep Ilya's cock steady. But fuck, it was good. He was already floating, just from spending Christmas with the man he loved, but then being given something so precious...he was so in love with Ilya he could hardly contain it. He wanted to go back to his offer of something for Ilya to wear and just give him a fucking ring right then and there. It was a crazy thought. It was too soon, and Shane wasn't really going to do that. But the enormity of his feelings *was* crazy, nonsensical, something that shouldn't exist in the real world. He didn't care though. Who got to decide what should or shouldn't be real...what he should or shouldn't do or love or be.

His body was going molten, fire shooting through him from the tip of his cock where Ilya's tongue was laving against him, to the tip of his tongue where it pressed against the underside of Ilya's cock, tasting the saltiness of precome and pushing against the smooth, silky skin as he moved up and down. He could barely even warn Ilya when he was about to come. He made a low noise around his cock, knowing it would feel good and get his attention, and he squeezed one perfect ass cheek under the palm of his hand. Ilya hummed back, acquiescence and warning all in one, as Shane's cock erupted in Ilya's mouth, followed very quickly by Ilya spilling himself down Shane's throat. It was a perfect moment of shared pleasure, but as soon as Shane let Ilya's cock slip from his mouth and vice versa, he turned and plastered himself against Ilya, bringing their mouths and chests together, feet touching and knees pushing between each other.

"I love you," Shane said quietly into the crook of Ilya's neck. "I'm glad I get to spend Christmas with you."

"Yes. I love you too. Should we watch another movie or read something?"

"Read. You pick."

Ilya got up, and Shane followed enough to sit on the couch instead of the floor. Ilya plucked a book from the shelf and then sat next to him, leaning back against the armrest and stretching his legs out, pulling Shane down to lay against him. He reached up and pulled a folded blanket off the back of the couch and spread it over them both.

"There is a part of this one I like that we haven't reread together yet," Ilya said, holding up *Call Me By Your Name* in front of him.

“I’m not wise at all. I told you, I know nothing. I know books, and I know how to string words together—it doesn’t mean I know how to speak about the things that matter most to me.”

“You sent me that one,” Shane interrupted. “You said it was relatable, and I couldn’t figure out how.”

“Yes, I remember. You were making me fall in love with you even then.”

Shane smiled and nuzzled into his chest. “It worked.”

“Mm, yes. Too well.” He held the book up and started to read again.

“But you’re doing it now—in a way.”

“Yes, in a way—that’s how I always say things: in a way.”

Staring out at the offing so as not to look at him, I sat down on the grass and noticed he was crouching a few yards away from me on the tips of his toes, as though he would any moment now spring to his feet and go back to where we’d left our bicycles.

It never occurred to me that I had brought him here not just to show him my little world, but to ask my little world to let him in, so that the place where I came to be alone on summer afternoons would get to know him, judge him, see if he fitted in, take him in, so that I might come back here and remember. Here I would come to escape the known world and see another of my own invention...”

Shane was listening, he was in Ilya’s arms, he was under the twinkling Christmas lights, but he was also somewhere else. And suddenly, more than anything in the world, he wanted Ilya to be there too.

“Ilya,” he said, interrupting again. “Will you come with me to my cottage this summer?”

He felt Ilya shift against him, felt his chest rise and fall a little harder. “What?”

“I have a cottage, a couple hours from where I grew up, a few minutes from my parents’ cottage. It’s really beautiful and relaxing. And I know it’s still months away, but I always go there during downtime in the summer.”

“I know about the cottage. I have seen you in your little documentary, doing yoga in short shorts.”

Shane laughed. “I can’t believe you’ve seen that. But yeah, that’s the cottage. I don’t know how long you can leave the store, but Vanya is invited, of course. You can even write there, if you decide to do that. It’s quiet and peaceful. It’s one of my favorite places in the world. I’d love to share it with you.”

One of his favorites...maybe it used to be his very favorite, outside of a roaring arena. Now he thought this might be his very favorite place. But he wanted Ilya in all of his favorite places.

I want to meet you in every place I ever loved.

Ilya let out a long breath. It tickled the top of his head, his temple. He ran fingers down Ilya's chest, his own breath held in anticipation.

"Maybe," Ilya said quietly. "Maybe."

Chapter End Notes

I did put a final chapter count, but no promises (it'll stick close to that, but it's always possible it'll go up by 1).

The movie they watch is Maurice from 1987. It's a pretty good adaptation.

Okay, so if you follow me on threads you know I said Ilya had another title coming besides bookshop owner, cat dad, and english major. He's a writer 🥺 and the reason I was nervous about this and have been waffling about keeping it in since I started writing this is because Ilya being a writer means *I* have to do the writing parts for him!!!! And look...Ilya would be a muchhhh better writer than I am, so let's all just pretend, okay. I cannot do you justice my sweet Ilya, who is so very good with words. But I think he would use writing as a way to remember, keep those memories alive, and also just write about things that he's grappling with, even if that means putting them in a post-apocalyptic survival novel (I also love those because they're excellent for exploring some really gritty humanity). Anyway, thanks for reading about my precious bookish Hollanov, whom I love with my whole heart.

Books mentioned in this chapter:

The Dog Stars by Peter Heller

The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes

The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara

The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson

Poems mentioned in this chapter:

Love Song for Lucinda by Langston Hughes

My Loves by Langston Hughes

Boogie: 1 A.M. by Langston Hughes

He is half my soul, as the poets say. - The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller

A few times in my life I've had moments of absolute clarity. When for a few brief seconds the silence drowns out the noise and I can feel rather than think, and things seem so sharp and the world seems so fresh. It's as though it had all just come into existence. - A Single Man by Christopher Isherwood

I feel like I could eat the world raw. - The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller

I want to meet you in every place I ever loved. - This is How You Lose the Time War by
Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone

[Book list doc](#)

threads: shadow_lilies1 (most active)

tumblr: shadowlilies1

twtr: shadow_lilies (the account exists, but I'm rarely there)

Chapter 14: But everybody wants to put me down

Chapter Notes

Did I add a chapter count when I posted the previous chapter? Yes. Did I already change it? Yes. 🙄 Let me live.

Slight content warning: typical homophobic locker room slur (just once) and a little blood in this chapter.

And the angst is at the door. It's knocking. But everything will be fine. It's minimal (which apparently some people don't like and have complained about, but sorry, I did tag accurately...you were warned that there would only be *light* angst).

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

Ilya woke on Christmas morning thinking about the cottage. Maybe he'd been dreaming about it. He felt warm and content, Shane's back to him, but pressing along the length of his arm and leg. It was early still, just the very faint glow of almost-sunrise coming through the window. Vanya was sitting at the end of the bed, happily licking himself, which was at least more polite than doing it on top of them.

The longer he lay there thinking about the cottage, the less content he felt. He should have said yes last night...wanted to, needed to, but couldn't. Saying yes meant he was sure that there would *be* a trip to the cottage for him, and if there wasn't...how was he supposed to live with that. There had been enough I love yous and nights spent tangled together and talks about everything and nothing. All those things were spelling out forever, but Ilya didn't even know what that word meant. Did it mean Shane choosing him if he ever had to pick? Did it mean fighting for it while a shitstorm of pro sports bullshit rained down on him? The built-in people who were supposed to always choose him hadn't even done so. He'd long ago come to terms with his mother's death, had put aside his own hurt to try to understand why she'd done it. But he'd only been a child, and thinking you weren't enough for your own mother was something that stuck with you, even if you didn't want it to, even if you'd made peace with it, even if you knew the world wasn't black and white and neither were people.

Maybe he wouldn't be thinking about this so hard if he didn't have 3 missed calls from Alexei in the last 24 hours, wanting to yell at him about someone else who had never once chosen him. He looked at his phone screen, let out a long, frustrated breath, cleared the latest notification away, and put his phone back down.

Shane stirred beside him, and Ilya turned to his side so he could put an arm around him, bury his nose in the nape of his neck and breathe him in.

Shane turned his head, blinking sleepily. “Hey. Merry Christmas,” he said, voice a little gravelly with sleep.

“Merry Christmas.” Ilya didn’t care about that, but he did care that they had an entire day together, neither of them with anything else to do or anywhere else to be...a rarity. “What did Santa bring me?”

“Hmm,” Shane turned over until they were face to face. “I don’t know. Maybe you’re on the naughty list.”

“Ah, better earn my spot then.” He leaned in, bypassing Shane’s face to kiss his neck, eliciting a soft, very sexy moan from him.

“Yes, but can I have a minute?” Shane asked, sitting up and pushing the covers off himself.

“Fine, but only because I need to go feed him,” Ilya said. Vanya had finally decided to join the party and was walking up the bed between them.

Ilya followed Shane out of the bedroom and fed Vanya, then took his turn in the bathroom. When he got back to the bedroom, door firmly closed, he found Shane spread out in the middle of the bed, arms bent at the elbows above his head, one knee drawn up, looking like he was ready to be devoured.

“This is the kind of present Santa brings for people on the naughty list?” Ilya said, crawling onto the bed, landing on top of Shane, one thigh pushed between his legs. “Maybe I will stay naughty then.”

“I won’t stop you.”

They kissed until every trace of minty toothpaste was gone and their bodies were pushing together with urgency and they were both moaning and grasping and coming against each other's thighs. Ilya had a towel waiting to wipe them off, then wrapped himself around Shane, and they both drowsed for a while. Ilya might have dreamed about the cottage again, but he let it drift away, dissolving into some half-formed thing that he didn’t have to think about yet.

They eventually dragged themselves out of bed, and Ilya made coffee while Shane started breakfast.

“Are you planning to run or workout today?” Ilya asked.

“I really should. But I’d rather spend the entire day with you.”

“Hm, you can ride me later. Give yourself a workout.”

Shane laughed. “Not sure that’s going to cut it.”

“I bet I can find a position that will be plenty strenuous.”

“Or we could run together?”

Ilya stopped mid-pour and turned to face him. “Outside?”

Shane shrugged. “Most people are inside doing Christmas stuff. And it’s cold enough out that I can wear a hat so I won’t be very recognizable.”

“Okay. If you’re sure. If not, I’ll stay here...I don’t have any mandated exercise goals.”

“I know. But...it’d be more fun with you. And we don’t get to do stuff like that often.”

Ilya nodded and resumed what he was doing. Going outside to run with your boyfriend while it was 30 degrees on Christmas morning sounded kind of terrible under normal circumstances, but when your boyfriend was Shane Hollander, you had to take what you could get.

They took their time but eventually made it downstairs, Shane in a toque pulled over his head for the extra concealment, and set off together. Ilya didn’t love running, but doing it with Shane was certainly an improvement. They kept up a steady pace, making talking a little difficult but not impossible.

“You only run twice a week?” Shane asked after Ilya complained, mostly for fun than for real.

“If that.”

“How do you stay in such good shape?”

“I make good use of weights. I go up and down the stairs at home a lot.”

Shane laughed. “If you say so.”

They stopped for a minute in a little green space, like a mini park with benches and a few paths that would be lined with flowers during spring. It was pretty even in the winter, some evergreens around a small pond. It made Ilya wish he could be somewhere like this on a regular day. He wanted to reach out and take Shane’s hand. His fingers ached with it, so he shoved them in the pockets of his joggers instead.

“Do you ever skate?” Shane asked as they turned to head back home.

“Not really, no.”

“Have you though? Since you quit?”

“A few times.”

“Hockey?”

Ilya ran his tongue across his teeth a few times before answering. “I played with some guys in college a couple of times.”

“Oh. Why only a couple?”

Ilya let the pounding of his feet against the pavement distract him momentarily. Then he looked over at Shane's flushed face, hair tucked under the hat. He glanced over when he felt Ilya's gaze on him and smiled.

"I left hockey behind for a reason. Playing dragged up too many things I didn't want to remember," he said finally.

Shane was quiet for a minute, just the sounds of their ragged breathing and the occasional car engine passing on the street.

"I'm sorry," he said eventually. "Does watching me play bother you?"

"No," Ilya said quickly. This time he did reach over and brush his hand against Shane's briefly. "Watching you makes me remember why I liked it back then. And you are very fun to watch."

"I was going to ask if you and Svetlana wanted to come to the New Year's Eve game, but..."

"Shane," Ilya said and slowed down on the sidewalk. Shane stopped and turned back toward him. "Those things...that hockey is tied to...I don't associate them with you at all. Okay?"

Shane nodded. "You can tell me if it's ever...not good."

"I know. Sveta won't be back from Russia until the 10th. She took extra time off," Ilya said. "Maybe we can come sometime later in January?"

"You can still come on your own if you—" Shane cut himself off and shook his head. "Sorry, never mind. Of course you don't want to go to a hockey game alone."

Ilya wasn't even thinking about the actual experience of going alone. What did he care, he'd only be there to watch Shane anyway. But the original invitation had been made with the condition that he and Svetlana had to go together.

"I didn't think you'd want me there without Sveta."

They were walking now, only about a block from One Good Memory.

"Oh, well. I think it's fine, right? Some of my teammates know you now. They think we're friends."

"Are we not friends, Shane Hollander?" he teased.

Shane huffed a laugh. "You know what I mean."

"If you want me to come, I will. At least then we will get to spend some of New Year's Eve together."

"Yeah, I'd like that. And after too, right?"

Ilya smiled at the worry that had crept into Shane's voice. "Of course. We have to kiss at midnight."

"I've never kissed anyone at midnight on New Year's Eve."

Ilya felt a little pull in his chest that he'd be the first. And even though it didn't really mean anything, it still felt special.

They reached the back door to Ilya's stairwell, and as soon as it closed behind them, he pulled Shane into a quick kiss.

"You will this year."

-

After lunch, Shane had gone into the hallway to call his parents. Ilya tried not to feel anything at all about why Shane felt the need to leave the apartment to do that and instead busied himself with texting Svetlana.

Ilya: how's it going?

It would be early evening in Moscow, and Ilya knew she might be out and busy. He was happy to see the typing bubble pop up immediately.

Svetlana: The usual. I'm meeting Sasha in a bit to go out

Ilya: how fun for you

Sasha brought up a lot of things Ilya would prefer to forget, but much like hockey, it was the association rather than the thing itself, and he tried not to hold it against Sasha.

Svetlana: Be nice

Ilya: anything new about my father?

Ilya: Alexie has been calling again

Svetlana: Just that he's getting worse

Svetlana: My father says he no longer has any lucid moments

Ilya nodded to himself, ignoring the burn behind his eyes. He suspected that's why Alexei was calling more. That and to ask for money that Ilya didn't have to give.

Svetlana: Is there anything you want me to do while I'm here? Tell Alexei to go fuck himself?

Ilya snorted.

Ilya: no, no...thank you though

Ilya: I'll talk to him eventually

Svetlana: Tell your cute boyfriend I said Merry Christmas and that his friend continues to be a delightful idiot

Ilya: fine

Ilya: careful with these hockey players or you'll end up like me

Svetlana: Happy and in love? Woe is me

Ilya smiled to himself. He was indeed in love, and happy as long as he didn't let himself think too hard about the future.

Ilya: have fun with Sasha

Ilya: talk to you later

Ilya was laying on the couch when Shane came back inside.

"Hey," Shane said, stepping around the couch. "What are you doing?"

"Waiting for you."

Shane knelt on the couch, one knee on either side of Ilya's, straddling him upright. It was a nice view as Shane set both hands on Ilya's chest.

"Sveta said Merry Christmas and that your friend continues to be, and I quote, a delightful idiot."

Shane groaned and let his head fall back for a second. "Is that going to be a problem you think?"

Ilya cocked his head. "Probably not. Maybe they will hookup and then be friends."

Shane grimaced. "I don't want our best friends to hook up and then be awkward."

Ilya waved a hand. "It will be fine. As long as Marly isn't an asshole, Sveta will not be weird about it."

"Yeah. Okay. I'm sure it's fine." He leaned down and pressed his forehead to Ilya's, and Ilya melted and wrapped his arms around Shane, holding him tight. Shane continued, "So, um... my parents are coming to visit January 25th through 28th. It's easier than me going there, and they were planning to come in for a game anyway. We play here on the 24th and 26th, so they'll come to the game on the 26th."

Ilya searched Shane's face as best he could, considering how close it was. "That will be nice," he said tentatively.

"Yeah. I'm going to tell them while they're here. I want to do it in person." Shane sat back up and let out a long breath.

"About you?"

Shane nodded and bit his bottom lip. Ilya could see his throat bob nervously. “And about you. If you’re okay with it?”

All Ilya could do was suck in a breath and pull Shane back down, arms going around him so tightly that Shane let out a little whuff of air.

“So, um, I’m taking that as a yes?”

Ilya laughed. “Yes, it’s okay. I get to meet them?”

“Yeah, I’d like that. I’m already really fucking nervous, and it’s still nearly a month away.”

“They love you. It will be okay.” Ilya rubbed his fingers against the back of Shane’s head, through his hair that was getting a little long. “I like your hair like this,” he said, giving Shane the option to change the subject if he wanted.

Shane lifted his head to look down at him. “I have an appointment to get it cut next week.”

“Nooo,” Ilya whined playfully. “I like it too much.”

“Really?”

“Mhm. Looks sexy. Gives me more to grab. What’s not to like?” He tugged on it a little, and it made Shane moan, which made Ilya laugh. “You like it too.”

“Maybe I’ll cancel my appointment.”

“Mm, yes,” Ilya said against his lips, then kissed him until they were both breathless.

“Do you want to look at jewelry?” Shane asked when they parted.

They rearranged on the couch until they were sitting pressed together, Shane with his phone held out in front of them. Vanya, clearly sensing their desire to concentrate, came strolling into the room and jumped up to walk across their laps.

“I was thinking bracelets,” Shane said, petting Vanya until he laid down on their touching thighs. “Since you already have a necklace.”

And we’re not ready for rings, Ilya thought, ignoring the stupid little wave of disappointment because they certainly were not.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s see.”

“Is that something you’d want to wear though? A bracelet?” Shane pulled up a website for a brand Ilya associated with celebrities and millionaires.

“Yes.”

“What about this?”

“You’ve been thinking about this already.” Clearly, he had since he’d navigated to the page so quickly.

“Maybe, yeah. I really wanted to get you something like that,” he said, finger pressing against the the little picture.

The listing he pulled up was for a simple gold box chain bracelet, but the boxes were a little rounded, and it looked very high quality. And it fucking should because it was over \$4,000.

“Shane,” Ilya said quietly. “This is too much.”

Shane looked at him. “I thought it was really nice and simple. Maybe too plain if anything.”

Ilya snorted lightly. “I meant the price.”

“Oh. Don’t look at that.”

“How can I not?”

“Hey.” Shane moved the hand that was petting Vanya to cover Ilya’s hand on his thigh. “I mean it. That part doesn’t matter, okay?”

“Okay,” he breathed out.

This was part of being with Shane, and he would have to get used to it, even if it made him a little dizzy.

“So...do you like this one?”

“I love it. What do you want?”

“I was thinking we could match. Would that be too lame?”

“No, not lame, but...” Ilya said, wondering if he could bring up the price again already.

“I’m buying both,” Shane said quickly. “Like...as a set. You’ve already given me multiple gifts, my turn. And what you gave me is priceless, so the price doesn’t matter here.”

Ilya laughed and grabbed Shane by the chin and kissed him. “Fine, you win. I love it, and I think it will look very good on both of us. Like cute little friendship bracelets girls tried to give me in primary school.”

Shane scoffed and elbowed him in the side.

“Except solid gold and very sexy,” Ilya amended.

“Mhm. I’ll measure your wrist later so I can get the right size.”

Shane had a satisfied smile on his face, and Ilya snaked his arms around his waist and kissed his neck. He wondered if Shane had ever given anyone jewelry before. Rose was the only person Ilya remembered seeing gossip about, meaning he probably hadn’t dated anyone else

very seriously throughout his professional career at least. Ilya had certainly never given or received jewelry, and this felt meaningful. And coming right on the heels of Shane planning to tell his parents.

Ilya sighed a happy sigh against Shane, let one hand drift down to pet Vanya, and thought this might be the best Christmas of his life.

-

Shane had never wanted to board a plane less. The day after Christmas, he said goodbye to Ilya and Vanya, went home to pack, and then met his team for their flight to Columbus. He'd gone back and forth for a while about whether to bring Ilya's writing journal. He had visions of his bag being lost and never found, or someone finding it and reading it. But he knew if he waited to read it while he was home alone, he'd either be waiting a long time or he'd be giving up time with Ilya himself...neither appealed.

He placed it carefully in his backpack and vowed not to take his eyes off it. He also brought the prostate massager, which should have been the more nerve wracking item here. What if someone went through his bag. It was the same reason he hadn't wanted to travel with certain books in the past. Unfortunately, the chance to use it while Ilya dirty talked in his ear was too enticing. They hadn't gotten around to testing it, but they did make sure the app worked and the toy was charged. Shane felt a little thrill knowing what his plans were for later in the evening.

"Hey, how was your Christmas?" Cliff asked on the plane.

"It was good. Quiet. You?"

"Great, got to hang out with the family. Ate too much, but at least we're playing tomorrow. When did you get back from Ottawa?"

Shane cleared his throat. "I stayed in Boston this year."

"Oh yeah? Your parents came in?"

"No, they couldn't. They're coming in a few weeks instead."

Cliff lifted his head like he was going to nod and then lowered it slowly. Shane tried to think of anything else to say to keep the conversation moving. "But they'll be in Boston for the Pittsburgh game. Should be a good one," he added.

"Fuck yeah, it will. So who'd you spend Christmas with?"

Shane almost said it. He was tired of not saying it. But he had to tell his parents first, and he couldn't just say it right there on the plane surrounded by everyone. Spending Christmas with one male friend was a little too "my uncle and his lifelong roommate." No one would buy it, and he wasn't ready for that.

"No one," Shane said, not looking at Cliff directly. "I spent the day relaxing. Really needed it."

“You? relax? You feeling okay?”

Shane laughed. “Fuck off, Marly.”

“Yeah, yeah. So, Svetlana has been texting me while she’s away.”

Shane almost said he’d already heard that but caught himself. “How’s that going?”

“Really good, I think. We have a lot in common, even besides hockey and music. I can’t wait until she gets back stateside.”

“Yeah, let me know how your dinner date goes.”

“I will. Did you hear about Connors’ Christmas? Epic family drama.”

“No, I haven’t talked to him yet.”

“Connie! Get over here,” Cliff yelled, and eventually Connors was in the row in front of them, kneeling and talking to them over the back of the seat, distracting Shane for the rest of the flight.

-

After dinner and some games and shooting the shit with his teammates, Shane went back to his room, took a shower, and called Ilya.

“Miss me already?” Ilya answered.

“You know the answer to that.”

“Yes. How was your evening?”

“Pretty good. Everyone is in a good mood from the holiday.”

“Including you?”

“Obviously. It was a very good Christmas.”

“It was. Now are you going to make use of your gift or what?”

Shane laughed. “Impatient. You’re not even the one using it.”

“Even better, I am controlling it. I have the app ready to go.”

“Alright, alright. Give me a minute.”

“What are you doing?”

“Getting the...gift. And lube.”

“Are you going to ask me what I’m doing?”

“I’m sure you’re going to tell me anyway. What are you doing, Ilya?”

“Thank you for asking, Shane. I’m laying in bed naked.”

Shane laughed. “Shocking.”

“This app is fancy. I’m putting you on speaker so I can use it. I can control the part that goes inside and the part that rests on your taint, separately.”

“Jesus,” Shane murmured as he put a towel on the bed and settled on it.

“You don’t seem very excited.”

“I am,” Shane said quickly. “I’m just overly aware that I’m in a hotel room by myself down the hall from my teammates.”

“Ah, ignore that. Just you and me now. Get yourself ready and tell me when you have it in.”

Shane probably didn’t need to tell Ilya because he was sure Ilya could hear it in his voice, which got increasingly strained, but especially when he started to push the toy in. It was soft to the touch, a nice matte, rubber, but it was solid and lacked the warmth and slight give of Ilya’s cock.

“Fuck,” Shane muttered as the widest part pushed in. “I thought this would be easier.”

“Take your time. It’s smaller than me.”

“Yeah. But you feel better. And you always make sure I’m ready,” he said quietly, voice barely there, both because of the fondness that warmed him and the fact that he finally had the toy in place. “Okay. I’m ready. I think.”

“I’m going to start it.”

Shane was expecting something more explosive, but it started off pleasant and only had his hips rocking a little.

“How is it?” Ilya asked.

“Good. You can do more.” Shane adjusted it slightly, finding the right spot just as Ilya increased the vibration and his hips bucked off the bed and he moaned. “Fuck, oh my god.”

“That was only the internal part. How is this?”

Shane’s whole body curled, pleasure shooting through him, the buzz against his prostate and taint made his cock twitch and his skin hot and his moans wild.

Just as fast as it came on, it stopped. “Shane,” Ilya said, his voice tinged with laughter. “Are your teammates next door?”

“What?” Shane’s brain was trying to catch up still. “Yeah.”

“I think you need to find something to put over your mouth.”

“Oh fuck. How loud was I?”

Ilya laughed fully now. “Very. And very hot, I’m already leaking over here, but one of us needs to be responsible, hm?”

“Yes. Shit. Okay, I’m good. I have a t-shirt here to shove in my mouth if I need it.”

Ilya laughed and the toy started vibrating again, low at first. “I have something better to shove in your mouth,” he said. “Right now it’s only in my hand.”

“Yeah...I prefer it in my mouth too.”

“Are you touching yourself?”

“A little. I’m worried I’ll come now if—” the vibrations increased against his prostate and he had to use the shirt. “Fuck,” he groaned.

“Yes, stop touching. I want you to come handsfree. Okay?” Ilya’s voice was sounding increasingly strained, which only made Shane wish he could see what he was doing.

“Yeah. Tell me what you’re doing.” Shane’s hips were rocking involuntarily on the bed now, his moans still at an acceptable volume, but he knew he sounded desperate, voice gone high and breathy.

“Fucking my hand, wishing it was you.”

The vibrations kicked up again and Shane covered his mouth with the shirt as quickly as he could to muffle whatever sound he’d made. He couldn’t even hear it. All he could do was let the pleasure ride him, emanating from the two points of contact from the toy, but it may as well have been his whole body.

“Shane,” Ilya rasped into his ear. “Is it good?”

“Mhm,” he moaned. “Too good, fuck.”

“Want me to stop?”

“No, don’t stop.” His hand holding the phone was barely managing to stay up. “Switching to speaker.”

He pressed the button and set the phone next to his head and used his now free hand to run down his chest and stomach, both soothing and fanning the flames by brushing his oversensitive skin. He realized when he got close to his cock that he was still moaning, but it was low, almost a whimper, and he could hear Ilya’s little noises of pleasure echoing from the phone.

“Shane,” Ilya said, and Shane tried to answer, but the toy kicked up again, and Shane reared up off the bed, hand going to the toy and shifting it enough so that he wouldn’t come yet.

“Oh god, that almost did it,” he breathed. “I’m close.”

The vibration lowered a little, and Shane settled back down against the pillows.

“Switch to facetime, I need to see you.”

Shane fumbled for his phone, his thumb clumsy on the glass screen, but eventually he got Ilya’s face, which was a little flushed, his eyelids low and his lips parted, looking nearly as gone as Shane.

“Fuck, look at you,” Ilya said. “I don’t know if I like how well this toy is working.”

Shane laughed, but then Ilya was looking at the screen intently and suddenly the toy was vibrating harder, and Shane’s hand flew to the bed, phone with it.

“Shane,” Ilya said loudly. “Hold the phone up please, I want to see.”

“Fuck, Ilya, I’m going to come,” Shane gritted out, but he managed to get the phone back up.

“Hold it up higher so I can see your face and your cock.”

“Oh god, I can’t concentrate.” He did his best though. “Can you see? I can’t—”

“Yes. Come for me, Shane.” Ilya’s voice had gone low and rough and Shane knew he must be close too, but he couldn’t have stopped to ask even if he wanted to. His whole body was pulsing, his eyes were closed, and he had just enough wherewithal to push the t-shirt against his mouth again before he was coming hard. It lasted long enough for his vision to go white and spotty and his toes to curl and his hand that had been holding the phone to drop it again and tangle in the sheets.

Some unknown amount of time later, he heard Ilya saying his name from somewhere down the bed. He patted the sheets around him until he had the phone again and lifted it to his face.

“I thought you passed out for a second there,” Ilya said with a satisfied smile.

Shane snorted. “I might have, not sure.” He realized the toy had stopped vibrating, thank god, and he eased it out. The immediate emptiness was much worse when he didn’t have Ilya to wrap around him.

“Let me see the aftermath.”

Shane held the phone up so Ilya could see his stomach, precome glistening in the dim lamplight, cum streaking up his chest and neck, more than usual.

Ilya laughed. “Fuck. You dropped the phone before I got to see.”

“Well, you only have yourself to blame. You were controlling the toy.”

“Yes, and next time we are doing it here so I can watch.”

Shane nodded. "I'd like that." He let his head drop back against the pillows, body feeling heavy, his sweat-slick skin prickling in the cool air of the room.

"You okay?" Ilya asked, voice soft now.

"Yeah. That was intense though." He was feeling a little too drained and needy, wishing Ilya was there.

"Go in the bathroom and clean up. The toy too, so you can put it away before you sleep. And bring the phone," Ilya said, and Shane could see he was also getting up out of his bed.

Shane slowly sat up and scooted off the bed, grabbing the towel and the toy. He felt a little shaky, but he knew Ilya was right...he wouldn't be able to rest if he didn't clean up and put the toy well out of sight. He set the phone on the counter in the bathroom, giving Ilya a view of the white ceiling while he cleaned himself and the toy.

"You good?" Ilya asked eventually. "I can't see you."

"Yeah, I'm done."

He grabbed the phone and made his way back into the main room.

"Turn out the light and get under the covers."

"Why are you giving me directions?" Shane asked, though he was smiling and didn't mind.

Ilya was back in his bed. "Because I'm not there to take care of you, and I think you want it tonight. Am I wrong?"

Shane swallowed before answering. "No. But...I can take care of myself."

"Yes, любовь моя, I know. But you like when I do it sometimes, don't you?"

Shane nodded but didn't answer. Some part of him was feeling like he shouldn't.

"Shane," Ilya said, bringing the phone closer to his face. "If you want that sometimes and I want that, it's fine, you know? Is it because we are both men?"

"Maybe."

Maybe it was because he'd just left his teammates, who all looked up to him as captain. Where he was supposed to be the picture of strength and poise, ready to make decisions for the whole team, no weakness allowed. What would they think of him if they knew? It was a stupid thought, built on years of listening to hockey players shit-talk in the locker room, commentators point out weaknesses with thinly veiled prejudice, spectators decide what he was worthy of or not for things he had no control over. He rarely worried about this when he was with Ilya, warm in his bed or relaxed on his couch or even on his knees in One Good Memory. It was so far away there, so nearby here. His worlds not quite colliding, but existing too close.

“Taking care of each other is not a bad or weak thing,” Ilya said, as if he could read his mind.
“And our relationship only has to make sense to us.”

“I know.”

He turned the lamp off and got back in bed on his side. There was enough light coming through the window to illuminate his face on the screen.

“Good. I’m going to read something and then you’re going to go to sleep, yes?”

“Yeah, that sounds nice.”

It was late, and he was exhausted, but he needed Ilya to do that first.

“It was your birthday, we had drunk and dined

Half of the night with our old friend

Who'd showed us in the end

To a bed I reached in one drunk stride.

Already I lay snug,

And drowsy with the wine dozed on one side.

I dozed, I slept. My sleep broke on a hug,

Suddenly, from behind,

In which the full lengths of our bodies pressed:

Your instep to my heel,

My shoulder-blades against your chest.

It was not sex, but I could feel

The whole strength of your body set,

Or braced, to mine,

And locking me to you

As if we were still twenty-two

When our grand passion had not yet

Become familial.

My quick sleep had deleted all

Of intervening time and place.

I only knew

The stay of your secure firm dry embrace.”

Shane was feeling more settled, Ilya’s voice almost but not quite as good as being curled around him. The words were comforting, sending a rush of affection through him, making him wish his brain wasn’t so sluggish and sleepy so he could say something worthwhile.

“Which is that?” he managed.

“It’s called The Hug by a poet named Thom Gunn.”

“It’s nice,” Shane said. To be loved like that was nice, he thought, and he wanted to think about it some more when he was fully awake...about why it was so effectively pushing away his earlier thoughts.

“Yes,” Ilya said. “Close your eyes and think of me. I love you. Good night.”

Ilya’s words were a warm hug. “Love you too, g’night,” he mumbled, barely managing to set his phone down before he drifted off.

-

Shane was in a good mood the next day. During the little bit of downtime he had before the game that evening, he managed to steal a few minutes to read some of Ilya’s journal. He wasn’t sure what to expect based on the little he’d read on Christmas Eve, but he found it to be a mix of funny and poignant and maybe a little sad as he flipped from page to page. Ilya distilled into words.

Vanya woke me at 2am by jumping on my stomach. I cannot be expected to write under these conditions.

Someone came in today and bought Atlas Shrugged, The Jungle, and The Grapes of Wrath. Capitalism-induced existential crisis? He seemed nice.

I have no words today, and the ones I scrounged up were sent through cell towers to Detroit for the only person I feel like talking to.

Today I saw

Brown eyes lit from behind

*By a sun I'll never see
I think I looked too long
And n*

After that piece of writing cut off abruptly, scribbled in the same but messier handwriting was: *You're not a fucking poet. Stop doing that.*

Shane laughed even as he wished there was more and firmly disagreed with the last sentiment.

There were a few pages with Cyrillic writing only, and he wondered if maybe Ilya would teach him one day. For now, he had to pass those by.

The last page he had time to read before he had to get moving was: *I think I love him, and I have no idea what to do about it.*

It wasn't dated, so Shane had no idea how long ago Ilya had written that, how long before they'd said it out loud. Though he couldn't discern the tone through writing, it felt sad to him. Like Ilya thought it was one-sided. A problem he needed to solve and send on its way. It made Shane's chest ache so much that he pulled out his phone.

Shane: Hey, getting ready to head to the arena. I love you. And I can't wait to get home.

He wouldn't be back in Boston until the 30th. Tomorrow they would travel to Buffalo for a game the following day. Four days away used to feel like nothing, a blip compared to some of their longer travel weeks. Barely enough time to miss his own bed.

I.R.: I love you too

I.R.: everything okay?

Shane: Yep, just wanted to tell you. Call you later?

I.R.: I'll be waiting

I.R.: have a good game

-

In the locker room getting ready, Shane was standing by his stall, feeling good. About himself and Ilya and the Raiders' chances of beating Columbus. Cliff was at the stall next to him, talking to St-Simon on his other side.

"These cocksucking fags aren't beating us tonight," St-Simon said, his voice loud and cheerful.

"Hey, knock it the fuck off," Shane said to St-Simon without even thinking.

Shane happened to be facing the bench across the way where one of the rookies, Cameron Jennings, was standing. As soon as those words left St-Simon's mouth, Cam's face fell, and he looked down for a millisecond before his face went blank and he turned around. But when

Shane spoke, he turned back, a look of slight surprise there. Shane doubted anyone would have noticed at all if they didn't know exactly what those looks meant.

"What?" St-Simon said, looking at Shane like he'd misheard.

"We don't need that kind of language in here. It's ignorant, and we're better than that."

He kept his voice firm even as his stomach sank with St-Simon's confused, mildly offended look. Shane never commented on it. He always let it go, telling himself it was normal, everyone did it, nothing would change even if he wanted it to. But he was tired of it, and somehow he'd never even considered that there might be someone else in this locker room who was listening and shrinking and trying not to let it get to them. He had of course acknowledged that he couldn't be the only queer player in the whole league. Statistically speaking, that was unlikely. But here, sharing his locker room? He looked over at Cam again, who was watching him, and quickly looked away. Fuck. How had he not even considered it?

"Hollz is right," Cliff said loudly. "That shit makes you sound stupid. Now...are we going to let those assholes win? Absolutely not. I better see you on Humphrey's ass out there," Cliff pointed at St-Simon, who still looked like his two brain cells were struggling to catch up.

Shane wanted to give Cliff a fucking hug right there for backing him that quick and letting him off the hook for following it up while his throat was tight and his stomach was burning uncomfortably. Earning that A on his chest even more than usual.

Shane sat down on the bench and tried to get back to his earlier mood. He leaned forward and pulled out his phone, making sure no one could see it from behind, and opened his photos, navigated to an album with the bland name "pics" and a cover photo showing a Boston sunset. In it were a few photos of Ilya and Vanya. He had been reluctant to keep photos in his phone, but somewhere along the way, he'd stopped caring. Being able to see Ilya and save some of the little moments that made him happiest started to outweigh whatever disaster scenarios he could come up with in his more anxious moments. He hunched further over his phone and let himself look at a picture they'd taken on Christmas Eve in Ilya's apartment. Ilya was holding Vanya against his chest, bookshelf draped in lights behind him, Shane leaning in, head resting on Ilya's shoulder, both of them smiling, eyes on Vanya instead of the camera. Only a second, and then he closed it and put his phone away, already feeling better.

-

When Shane got back home on the 30th, the first thing he did was retrieve his mail, which included a small package that had him itching to get to One Good Memory. He had a few things to do at home first, including looking over something his mom sent him via email and unpacking and repacking to spend the next couple of nights at Ilya's.

It was close to 6 when he finally headed down, wearing jeans and a Raiders sweatshirt, toque pulled low, and his backpack slung over his back. He stopped briefly in front of the store to admire the shelf he'd given Ilya for Christmas, sitting perfectly situated in his big front window. It took up enough space to be the centerpiece, but still allowed people to see into the shop. Vanya was curled up in the attached bed, asleep and cozy.

Shane was grinning like an idiot when he stepped inside, already pulling his hat off, only to freeze briefly in his tracks when he was greeted by an older man behind the counter. He'd been expecting Mallory and hopefully Ilya, but neither were anywhere in sight.

"Welcome," the man said, his voice deep and kind, and if Shane didn't already know John was a retired teacher, he would have assumed. He just had that air about him. His hair was short and white, a neat but impressive beard, and glasses that sat a little too forward on his nose. Shane could see the exact moment John recognized him, but instead of getting overly excited, he just said, "Mr. Hollander. Great game last night."

"Oh, um, thanks," Shane said, wondering what he should do now. Maybe he could just turn around and leave, go to the back entrance instead. He didn't really want to though, and John was still looking at him with a friendly smile.

"What can I help you with? Looking for anything in particular?"

My hot boyfriend.

"Oh, um—"

Before he could think of something, Vanya was out of his window bed and between his ankles, meowing with his usual fervor.

"Hey, buddy," Shane said and picked him up. He wasn't going to ignore the cat who didn't understand just to pretend he wasn't here for something other than books.

"Oh, he likes you," John said. "He's very good company."

"Yeah, he's sweet. Do you, um, happen to know where Ilya is?" He could have just gone straight to the back and up to the apartment, but that would probably be even weirder and more suspicious.

John's bushy white eyebrows went up slightly. "He just went upstairs to take care of something. We were busy earlier this afternoon, but it's been slow this evening."

"Right," Shane said. "I'm uh...going to head up there to see him."

He was weighing how much more to say. Telling John they were just friends would basically be confirming otherwise. And Ilya said John was married to a man. Shane had to believe he'd understand and be sympathetic either way.

"Sure. It was nice to meet you, Mr. Hollander."

"Shane. You can call me Shane."

John smiled warmly. "Shane."

Shane walked quickly through the store, carrying Vanya with him since he'd made no move to get down. Upstairs, he knocked a couple of times on Ilya's door and waited.

Ilya opened it quickly, a look of surprise on his face. “Hey, you came through the front?”

“Uh, yeah. I should have texted so you could open the back.”

“You met John?”

“Yeah, he seems really nice.”

“He is,” Ilya said. “I think it’s okay...for him to know you. Are you okay with it?”

Shane nodded. “Yeah, I’m sure it’s fine.”

He was too happy to be home and too excited to see Ilya to dwell on it. He set Vanya and his backpack down and pulled Ilya into a crushing hug.

“I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” Ilya said, pulling back just enough to kiss him. “Did you already eat?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. You will need the energy later,” Ilya said, wearing Shane’s favorite wicked grin.

Shane laughed. “I’m sure. Look what came.”

He bent to grab the small package from his backpack. Inside were two light brown jewelry boxes. They’d needed the same size, so Shane just opened the one on top to reveal the gold bracelet.

Ilya started to reach out with one finger and then pulled it back, like he didn’t want to smudge the shiny metal.

“What do you think?” Shane asked.

“Very nice. Are you going to put it on me?”

“Yeah, over here.” Shane led them to the couch and gestured for Ilya to sit. “Which wrist?”

Ilya held up his left. Shane carefully took the bracelet from the box and unclasped it, then gently wrapped it around Ilya’s wrist and secured the clasp. It fit perfectly. Shane glanced at Ilya’s face to find him staring at it, his bottom lip sucked in, and his eyes suspiciously shiny.

“Well?” Shane asked.

“I love it,” Ilya said quietly. “It’s the nicest thing anyone has ever given me.”

“You’re supposed to be ignoring the price.”

“I did not mean the price, Shane Hollander.” Ilya pulled him down to the couch beside him, one hand cupping the back of his neck. “It’s the nicest because it’s from you.” He took the other brown box from Shane and opened it. “Which wrist?”

Shane sometimes wore a watch on his left, but not today. He held it out and let Ilya drape the bracelet around him. Ilya's touch was light and sensual, fingers caressing the skin beneath Shane's palm and sending a shiver through him.

"There," Ilya said. He pulled Shane's wrist up to his mouth and pressed a kiss to the clasp of the bracelet, then turned his hand the other way and held it between his own. Shane suddenly felt very warm and gooey inside, and he leaned forward until their foreheads were pressed together. He couldn't help but look down at Ilya's wrist, the delicate gold chain subtle but meaningful. It felt like they were claiming each other in a way, despite having done so with words already. This was words made into something else, something they could carry around and look at whenever they needed to. A promise...maybe a reminder.

Shane traced his fingers around Ilya's wrist with his other hand, let them linger near Ilya's pulse. He moved his forehead to the crook of Ilya's neck, nuzzling against him.

"Shane," Ilya whispered against his temple. "The store is still open. We have to be good for now. As soon as it's closed, you're going to take off everything except this," Ilya fingered the gold chain around Shane's wrist, "and then," he moved his lips closer to Shane's ear, "I will fuck you better than that toy."

Shane moaned and turned his head, pressing his lips to Ilya's neck. "Mean."

"I think you'll make it."

They settled more comfortably on the couch together, Ilya on his back, Shane half on top of him.

"I'm going to tell Marly," Shane said, face upturned to see Ilya's. "After I tell my parents."

"Are you ready for that?"

"I think he'll be okay with it and keep it to himself."

He relayed what happened in the locker room without giving away Cam's potential secret. It wasn't his to tell, and he didn't even know for sure if he was right.

"I haven't met that one," Ilya said about St-Simon.

"No. He does go out sometimes, but he's in a pretty serious relationship, so not as much lately. And he is definitely an asshole. But I don't even think he meant it that way. Everyone says that kind of shit all the time."

"Mm. Jocks."

"By definition, I'm one too."

"Yes. An exception. Maybe there are more exceptions."

Shane nodded. "I hope so. Marly too, I think. I want him to know. I think I need someone else to know. And I don't want Svetlana to have to lie for me, if that goes anywhere."

Ilya stroked a hand through his hair, but he didn't say anything else about it. They stayed like that, talking quietly, until John had locked up downstairs and left, and then Ilya made good on his earlier promise.

-

Ilya arrived at the arena the next day feeling strange. A mix of the usual hockey-related uncanniness, like he was somewhere he should be but not like this, and a little extra disconcertment from being alone, in a place where Shane couldn't even acknowledge that he existed because of it. If Svetlana had been there, Shane could have at least waved at them, just his two buddies there to watch him play. He pushed it away and reminded himself that he didn't care...he was here to watch Shane, and later he'd have him in his bed, all to himself.

He figured he might as well make the most of this unsettling little outing and grabbed a beer and a hot dog on his way to his seat. He glanced around at the people in his section, wondering which, if any, were there for other Raiders, and what he might say if anyone asked that of him.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, drawing him out of his musings.

Shane: Love you.

With a picture of his wrist, a piece of flesh-colored wrap covering the gold bracelet, but Ilya could see the outline of it. Ilya's eyes slipped automatically to the one on his own wrist. He hadn't thought about it, but if he had, he'd have assumed Shane would take it off during the game. Knowing he hadn't, and instead had protected it and kept it against his skin...god, how did he get this sappy. He was glad no one was paying him any attention while his eyes blinked too fast and his lips curled into something too soft.

Compared to watching the game from Rose's fancy suite, this seat, while not as comfortable, was at least closer to the ice. He got a good view of Shane when the team made their way out, and he didn't know if he was imagining Shane's eyes flickering up to him and the smile on his face getting wider. Over the course of the first period, he watched Shane play flawless hockey, knock helmets with his teammates, get in someone's face after a scuffle, and talk to multiple players with his captain face on. It was hot, but it was also a reminder that Shane was indeed also a jock.

He is a weapon, a killer. Do not forget it. You can use a spear as a walking stick, but that will not change its nature.

For so long, Ilya assumed the jock side would win out, that he'd reach his limit and they'd stall where they were, or Shane would move on. But Shane said he was ready to tell a few people. He told his idiot teammate off for using slurs. He was letting Ilya into his life in ways he'd previously assumed were off limits. Maybe he wasn't changing his nature so much as accepting what had always been there. It was more than Ilya had fully allowed himself to believe.

He traced the bracelet around his wrist over and over again as he watched Shane score and celebrate, face turning up toward Ilya again. This time, Shane held up his left wrist, and Ilya

sighed happily.

During the first intermission, Ilya's phone buzzed, and he was grinning before he even had it out of his pocket. When he saw the Cyrillic in the message preview, his grin fled.

Alexei: *Answer your fucking phone, Ilya*

Ilya had been sending Alexei's calls to voicemail for days. He was tired of hearing the same thing over and over.

Ilya: *what do you want now*

Alexei: *Father is on his deathbed*

Nothing new. He'd been on his deathbed for months apparently.

Ilya: *again, what do you want me to do about it*

Alexei: *I don't know Ilya, maybe care about someone besides yourself*

Ilya looked away from his phone, eyes sliding sideways, trying and failing not to let those words in, the guilt settling heavy and nauseating in his gut.

Ilya: *the way you and father care about me?*

Alexei: *This isn't about you, asshole*

No. Nothing ever was. Before Alexei could make up a new excuse to ask for money, Ilya told him to fuck off and stop texting. He wasn't doing this tonight. He put the uneaten half of his hot dog down, drained the rest of his beer, and opened the picture of Shane's wrist again.

While he was staring at it, a new message popped up.

Shane: Marly saw you in the stands and says hi.

Shane: He also said you're invited to play basketball on Wednesday and better be there.

Shane: Only if you want to, but I hope you will.

Ilya let the burn in his eyes replace the nausea in his gut. He welcomed it.

Ilya: I'll be there

Shane: See you at home later. I'll make sure I'm there by midnight.

Home.

-

Shane made it to Ilya's with twenty minutes to spare. He'd barely made it through the door of the apartment before Ilya was kissing him. It was a desperate kiss, like Ilya couldn't get enough of him, and Shane was happy to give and give and give until they were panting and rubbing together against the door.

“Fuck,” Shane whispered when they finally parted. “What was that for?”

Ilya blinked at him, soft smile pulling at his lips. “Watching you out there was hot,” he said, though Shane wasn’t sure if that was the full story. “Need you.”

Shane nodded and let Ilya lead him to the bedroom, where they stripped each other quickly but tenderly, Ilya stopping to kiss a new bruise and Shane bringing Ilya’s braceleted wrist to his lips and licking against his pulse.

Based on the kiss at the door, Shane expected something frantic and hard, but Ilya took his time fingering him open, kissing his neck and his lips and his chest, still like he couldn’t get enough. Shane was happy to reciprocate. He pulled Ilya against him, letting his lips trail down Ilya’s neck and up his jaw, noting the way his eyes fluttered at the tender touches.

When Ilya finally pushed into him, Shane tangled his fingers in Ilya’s golden brown curls and kept him close.

“Look,” Shane said, reaching out to light up his phone screen. 12:00am. “Happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year, my Shane,” Ilya whispered back to him, and Shane wondered if he was imagining the tinge of sadness in his voice.

“I love you,” he said, hoping he was.

Ilya said it back in Russian. Shane recognized those words now, and hearing them in Ilya’s voice, in his mother tongue, was beautiful and special, like he was letting Shane in to a part of his life that he usually kept to himself.

Ilya rocked into him slowly, his eyes dark like the churning sea tonight, staying locked on Shane’s, kissing him softly every so often, sharing breath when they stopped. It was clear that Ilya needed the tenderness, and Shane was happy to receive it after a long night.

“It’s going to be a good year,” Shane said, his voice thready as Ilya’s nose pressed against his. “I get to spend it with you.”

Ilya’s hazy eyes focused on him, but he didn’t say anything. He just buried his face in Shane’s neck and moved his hips faster, until they were both moaning and clinging to each other. Shane’s orgasm found him first, but Ilya’s followed quickly. His forehead was still pressed to Shane’s neck, and Shane stroked his hair while they both caught their breath.

Ilya slowly slipped out of him and sat up, using the towel beneath his hips to wipe himself and Shane clean. If he wasn’t already wiped from the game, Shane might have insisted on another shower, but that could wait until morning.

Ilya tossed the towel aside and lay down next to him. “Will you read tonight?” he asked quietly.

“Of course. Any requests?”

Ilya shook his head. “Anything.”

Shane started to get off the bed but stopped to press a kiss to Ilya's forehead and brushed his damp curls back. Ilya smiled up at him, and Shane's chest warmed pleasantly. "Be right back."

He went to the living room, stopping to pet Vanya where he lay on the back of the couch, and then searched Ilya's shelves until he found what he was looking for.

Back in bed, he settled against the pillows, and Ilya rested his head on Shane's chest and wrapped one arm tightly around his waist.

"What did you pick?" Ilya asked.

Shane showed him the cover: E. E. Cummings: Complete Poems, 1904–1962.

He looked through the pages and stopped at one that had a familiar title, though he wasn't sure he'd ever actually read it until now.

*"i carry your heart with me(i carry it in
my heart)i am never without it(anywhere
i go you go,my dear;and whatever is done
by only me is your doing,my darling)
i fear
no fate(for you are my fate,my sweet)i want
no world(for beautiful you are my world,my true)
and it's you are whatever a moon has always meant
and whatever a sun will always sing is you*

*here is the deepest secret nobody knows
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life;which grows
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart*

i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)"

Shane kept his fingers moving gently against Ilya's scalp as he read, and Ilya turned his head and pressed his lips against Shane's chest, right over his heart. As he came to the end, he felt Ilya's breathing slow down, the arm around his waist loosen and grow heavier. When he set the book aside and turned off the lamp, Ilya shifted just a little, but he stayed pressed against Shane, his head angled enough that Shane could see in the little bit of light from the window that his face had slackened into something restful, lips slightly upturned, losing some of the tension he thought he'd noticed earlier. Shane kissed the top of his head and fell asleep.

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The next two weeks passed slowly, mainly because Shane spent much of them on the road. Ilya had made good on his promise to play basketball with them the Wednesday after New Year's, and Cliff had made good on his promise to have Ilya on his team every time. Shane's team had lost again, and he admittedly had not taken it well. The sweetness of Ilya and Cliff

acting like bros and shit-talking together faded, and Shane tried to rally his teammates against them. It didn't work, but he still left the gym happy, with a sweaty and grinning Ilya beside him in the jeep, and the sex after was hard and frantic, the undeniable hotness of Ilya being good at sports outweighing the sting of the loss.

After that, he had a game at home on Thursday, and then Friday, January 6th, he left for 8 days. It was the longest stretch he'd been away from Ilya in a while, and the only thing that made it bearable was talking to him every night. Ilya sent him videos of Vanya, selfies of him sweaty and working out or holding a stack of books or lying in bed, flushed and happy, and Shane reciprocated. They facetimed, sometimes just to chat, sometimes to jerk off, once to use the prostate massager again.

When Shane finally got back to Boston, they settled back into their usual routine. Shane passed through the store a few times while John was behind the counter, had even stopped to chat once and found out that his husband was the real hockey fan of the family. Shane surprised himself by saying maybe they could have dinner together one day.

The closer it got to the 24th and his parents' arrival, the more nervous Shane felt. He couldn't help but feel that he was quickly approaching a fork in the road, one that would change his life entirely. He already knew which tine he'd choose, but that didn't mean it wasn't scary. He mostly wanted to not think too hard about it, worried he'd manage to talk himself out of it before the day even arrived.

The approaching date seemed to be having the opposite effect on Ilya, who'd taken to asking him questions about his parents at random times, starting simple and getting increasingly more specific and frequent.

On the couch one evening, he asked, "What are they like?" and Shane tried his best to find words to describe his mom, who might be the only person he knew who loved hockey more than he did, fierce and always ready to solve a problem, but loving and soft when you got past the exterior. Ilya had watched him thoughtfully, maybe sadly, as he'd spoken about her. When he started describing his dad, mentioning all the ways in which he and Yuna were opposites and complements, and how his quietness didn't mean he wasn't paying attention, Ilya's face had gone neutrally blank. Shane wanted to ask about Ilya's parents in return, but he thought maybe it wasn't the time.

Exactly one week before Yuna and David were due to arrive, Shane played a home game in the evening, stopped at his apartment to grab some extra clothes and park his car, then headed to One Good Memory. He was in a good mood after the Raiders won, and he was dying to compare notes with Ilya about Cliff and Svetlana's big dinner date a couple nights prior. He assumed she would have filled Ilya in, even though he hadn't mentioned it, and Shane had gotten an earful from Cliff.

He let himself in through the propped open back door and trudged up the stairs, his legs feeling the tiredness of their hard-fought game. He knocked a couple of times and waited. After a minute of no answer, he knocked again and then turned the knob, finding it unlocked. Just as he stepped inside, Ilya walked through the doorway of the kitchen, and Shane stopped in his tracks.

Ilya's face was almost unrecognizable, collapsed into something drawn and painful, skin too pale. Shane's eyes drifted down to see blood running down Ilya's left hand, dripping onto the floor next to him.

"Ilya," he gasped and hurried over to him, picking up his hand to see where it was bleeding from. "What happened?"

Ilya looked down at his hand in Shane's, eyes narrowing at the sight of blood. "Nothing. Is fine."

His accent was thicker than usual, and Shane got the slightest whiff of alcohol.

"How did this happen?"

Ilya looked down again and shook his head. "Accident. Broken glass."

"Okay...come on."

Shane led him to the bathroom and ran his hand under cool water. He breathed a sigh of relief that it was just a small cut on his palm and dug around in the cabinet for something to clean and bandage it with, while Ilya sat heavily on the side of the tub.

Supplies in hand, he knelt in front of him and gently cleaned and bandaged his hand. When he was done, he looked up to see Ilya staring at the stark white bandage, tears in his eyes.

"What happened?" Shane asked again.

Ilya let out a long breath, full of so much more than a little pain from a cut. "My father is dead."

Chapter End Notes

I almost stopped this chapter with Ilya standing there bleeding, but I didn't want that to actually be a scary cliffhanger. I promise Ilya didn't self-harm or anything. It was an accident like he said, and Shane just happened to walk in at the wrong (or right) time. Anyway, I underestimated what was left between Christmas and Ilya's father dying, which is the main reason the chapter count went up (also because I am a pantsner, not a plotter, and should know better than to guess). This is probably not going to be anyone's fav chapter, but the setup was necessary!

So yeah, as mentioned above, we're getting into some angst now, but um...it's going to be fine. It's just gotta get a little worse before it gets better.

[The bracelets!](#) (I hope Shane Hollander would approve)

Poems mentioned in this chapter:

The Hug by Thom Gunn

[i carry your heart with me(i carry it in] by E. E. Cummings

"He is a weapon, a killer. Do not forget it. You can use a spear as a walking stick, but that will not change its nature." - The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller

[Book list doc](#)

threads: shadow_lilies1 (most active)

tumblr: shadowlilies1

Chapter 15: 'Till the tears run down from my eyes

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a little heavy, but trust the process 🌞.

Content warning: mention of canonical suicide (Ilya's mother)

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

“My father is dead.”

“Ilya, I’m so sorry,” Shane said. “Are you okay?”

Ilya rubbed his eyes and nodded. “Fine. Sorry to worry you.”

Shane shook his head. He wasn’t sure what to do or say. “What do you need right now?”

“I don’t know. I need...” his eyes slid to the floor.

“When did you find out?” Shane tried.

“Earlier. Couple of hours ago. My brother called.”

“Are you...planning to go? To the funeral?”

Ilya nodded heavily. “Yes. I need to book flights.” He started to get up.

Shane laid a hand on his thigh, stopping him. He wasn’t sure what he could do or what he should offer, but he had to try. “Do you want me to come with you?”

Ilya’s eyes snapped to his. “What?”

“To Russia. I know it’s...I could come and stay in a hotel room. Or...or whatever you need.”

Ilya was looking at him like he was speaking a foreign language. “You have a game in two days.”

“I know. I could miss one game. I never take leave, they’d be fine with it.”

“Shane,” Ilya was shaking his head. “You would do that?”

“Of course. If you need me.”

“No, no, I...it would not be good for you to be there. Someone will recognize you on plane and people will go digging. And I will not be good company while I’m there.”

Shane knew he was right, unfortunately, but, “Are you sure? I can take a separate flight, book a room in my name only.”

Ilya was still shaking his head a little. “I don’t...why would you risk that?”

Shane’s eyes went wide. “Because I love you. And if you need me, I’ll come.”

“But your game...” Ilya said again.

“You’re more important than a game.”

Ilya’s head stilled, and he was looking down at Shane like he’d never seen him before, confusion that turned into his mouth twisting and his throat bobbing and his eyes going shiny again. A shaky almost sob escaped him before he leaned forward and pulled Shane closer.

“Thank you.” He took a deep breath and let it out, pulling back a little. “But no, that’s too risky, and I will be busy anyway. Not a good place for you to be. And Sveta will probably come if she can get more time off. Fuck.”

“Okay, yeah. Does she know?”

“Not yet.”

Finally, something he could do. “Where’s your phone?”

Ilya shrugged.

“Okay, you go find somewhere more comfortable to sit, and I’ll get your phone.” Shane stood and held a hand out to Ilya, pulling him by his uninjured right hand. “Be right back.” He leaned in and kissed Ilya on the cheek, wanting so badly to wipe away that lost look.

Shane went to the kitchen, stopping short at the glass and clear liquid on the ground, an open bottle of vodka on the counter. He carefully picked up the bigger shards and then located Ilya’s broom to get the rest before Vanya wandered in. He wiped up the vodka and then used those alcohol-soaked paper towels to wipe up the drops of blood in the doorway. When he was done, he retrieved Ilya’s phone from the counter and went in search of him, stopping to pet Vanya, who was sitting on the arm of the couch, tail flicking, looking mischievous.

“Be good tonight, okay? Your dad is having a hard time.” Vanya rubbed into his hand and then stayed where he was when Shane headed for the hallway.

Ilya was sitting in the bed, back against the headboard with his knees drawn up, eyes on the ceiling. Shane handed the phone over, and Ilya was about to dial when he stopped and looked over at Shane where he settled next to him.

“This is okay with you? Sveta coming?”

Shane blinked at him. “Of course. I don’t want you to be alone.”

“Thank you.”

Shane reached up to stroke the back of Ilya's head while he called. He didn't know what Ilya said because the entire conversation was in Russian. His tone was carefully neutral, but Shane could hear the strain in it, holding back too much.

"Okay," Ilya said when he hung up. "She can come for a few days. The funeral is on Sunday."

Shane did the math. It was currently Wednesday, though already Thursday in Russia. "When will you leave?"

"Fuck," Ilya breathed. "Tomorrow, as soon as I can get a flight." He was on his phone again.

"Hey, um, let me do that." Shane said, putting his hand on Ilya's.

Ilya looked at him questioningly. "What?"

"Book your flights. I can't do anything else, but I can do that. Please? I have a travel agent. She's great."

Ilya was just looking at him.

"I need your passport information. Okay? Please...let me help."

"Thank you," Ilya said softly and leaned over to rest his forehead on Shane's shoulder. Shane rubbed his back for a while, feeling some of the tension drain out of him.

Ilya eventually got up to get his passport. "Are you sure?" he asked. "Won't they wonder why Shane Hollander is arranging travel for a random man?"

"I don't care. I doubt anyone will ask questions. Can you get Svetlana's too? I'll have her arrange both." Then, just to make sure Ilya knew, "Not because I'm worried about that."

Ilya tried to give him a credit card too, and Shane shook his head. "I'm taking care of this, okay? Please let me. I wish I could do more, but at least let me do this."

Ilya relented, and Shane typed up an email to his travel agent Natalie Lorenz, providing all the info she'd need about Ilya, Svetlana, and their travel dates. Ilya asked for a flight back to Boston on Tuesday the 24th, while Svetlana would leave late on the 22nd so she could be home for work sooner. Shane made sure to tell Natalie to book business class. If he could make any of this even the tiniest fraction more bearable, he would.

"Is that enough time for you?" Shane had asked while typing out the dates.

"Yes. Probably too much time. And I will be back to meet your parents."

Shane was too occupied with Ilya to even be nervous when he mentioned that. "If you can't, it's okay. I can still tell them. They can meet you another day."

"You don't want me to be there when you tell them?" Ilya asked, voice small.

“Of course I do.”

“Then I will be.”

Shane sent the email, knowing Natalie would get back to him quickly, even though it was late. He set his phone aside and pulled Ilya close to him, wrapping arms around his back and stroking his hair again.

“Are you okay?” Shane asked. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Ilya made a low, rumbling noise against his chest. “I’m fine. I knew this was coming, but I... maybe I thought I would go back before he died. He would not have remembered me, and maybe that would have been easier.”

Shane kept moving his hand lightly in Ilya’s hair, not interrupting.

“If he remembered, he would not have wanted to see me. If he didn’t remember, would it even have mattered if I went? Nothing would change.”

“Do you have any good memories of him?”

Ilya nodded against him. “Not many, but there are some, when I was very little, and my mother was still happy. Or at least, in my memory she is.”

“Tell me about her?”

Ilya’s voice went soft and quiet. “She was very beautiful. And funny. She laughed like...” he trailed off. “Agh, my English is bad tonight. Her laugh was uninhibited is maybe the best word. I remember that more than her voice now.”

Shane thought of the line in his journal about not being able to remember her voice, and his heart ached, unable to imagine how that must feel.

“She read to you,” Shane remembered.

“Yes, every night. To my brother too, when he wanted.”

“What was her name?”

“Irina.” It sounded delicate in Ilya’s voice.

“Irina,” Shane repeated. “What happened to her?” He wondered if now was the time for such questions, but he thought maybe Ilya wanted, needed, to talk about it. He’d felt him relax a little the more he talked.

“She took her own life,” Ilya said. He said it so casually, Shane knew it must be a practiced non-affectation. “Pills. I guess I knew she was unhappy, but I was a child, and that didn’t translate into anything so permanent. Didn’t seem like...I thought...” He shook his head, voice getting thick with tears. “I didn’t think she’d ever leave us. I was the one who found her.”

“God, Ilya. I’m so sorry.”

“I know it was not so simple as staying or leaving. I know she...she loved me. And I want that to be enough.”

Shane rubbed the back of his neck gently, his eyes burning, the thought of Ilya going through that making his chest hurt.

“My father tried to make excuses,” Ilya continued, his voice a little steadier. “That it was an accident. He has never admitted otherwise.”

“When’s the last time you saw him?”

“Years. Right after I graduated from college. I took a trip home with Sveta. I thought maybe he’d be proud of me, but it did not go well. I am nothing to him but a disappointment.”

Shane clocked the present tense, as if his father's disappointment was still alive and well even though he wasn't.

“You’re not, Ilya. That was his problem, not a reflection of you. Look at the life you’ve built here.”

Ilya sniffed and buried his face further into Shane’s chest. “I know,” he said, voice thick. “But it still hurts.” The last was so quiet, Shane almost thought he imagined it, that those words hadn’t actually been uttered, but he felt the slightest tremble go through Ilya’s body.

“I know,” Shane said. Ilya’s admission made his eyes well with tears, knowing he couldn’t fix this. All he could do was hold him and listen. “I love you so much. You know that right?”

Ilya nodded, and Shane could feel the dampness on his t-shirt, silent tears. Some minutes later, quiet and gravelly, “I love you too.” Shane held him tighter.

After a few minutes of silence, Shane thought of something else.

“Where will Vanya go while you’re away? I’d offer to take care of him, but I leave for Pittsburgh Saturday night and won’t be back until Monday morning.”

“I can send him to a boarding place. Sometimes Mallory will check in on him a few times a day if I’m only gone for a day or two, but I wouldn’t ask her for that many days.”

“What if I take care of him while I’m home, and Mallory can check on him while I’m away?”

“Are you sure? You’re busy.”

“I want to. Do you mind if I’m here while you’re gone?”

“No. I will give you keys. I should have already, but I’m always here...” he sighed. “Thank you. You don’t have to do that, but I like the idea of you staying here.”

Shane did too. He hated that Ilya would be away, but sleeping in his bed and hanging out with Vanya would help. "I'm happy to do it. I love him too."

"I know. I'll text Mallory in the morning. Speaking of the brat though, where is he?"

"He was on the couch earlier, plotting something."

Ilya laughed, and Shane's whole chest warmed at the sound. "Sounds about right."

"Are you tired?" Shane asked. "Do you want anything?"

Ilya shook his head. "A shower, maybe."

They got up and stripped, Shane pulling Ilya's shirt up and off, Ilya smiling softly at him.

"You are taking care of me tonight?" Ilya asked, his voice carrying just a hint of smugness.

Shane nodded, smiled. "I would like to. If you let me." Ilya briefly laid his head on Shane's shoulder and hugged him tight before he finished undressing.

In the shower, Ilya did let Shane wash his hair, leaning into his fingers as they massaged his scalp. When he was done with shampoo and conditioner, he moved on to gently scrubbing him with a soapy washcloth, taking his time and savoring the relaxed look on Ilya's face, so welcome after the earlier palpable stress. He rebandaged Ilya's palm and then let him dry his own hair with the little microfiber towel while Shane went to check on Vanya, who was in his usual spot on the back of the couch.

"Goodnight, buddy. You and I are gonna get lots of quality time for the next few days."

Ilya was already in bed when Shane got back, naked and relaxed now, a little smile on his face. Shane checked his phone before he got in bed to find Natalie had already emailed back with itineraries.

"Your flight is at 10am. Is that good?" Shane asked, sitting next to him.

Ilya looked at the time and sighed. "Yes, it's good. I will text Sveta."

"I'm forwarding everything to you." Shane hit send, set an alarm on his phone, and put it on the nightstand.

"Ready to go to bed?" Shane asked.

"No." Ilya pulled him down on top of him. "I'm going to miss you. Need you while I have you." He pushed his hips up against Shane's.

"Are you sure?"

Ilya nodded. "Yes. I'm fine, I promise. Make me forget for a little while. I want to think only about you."

“Okay,” Shane said and pressed his lips to Ilya’s.

“My Shane,” Ilya whispered.

Shane lifted his head enough to see Ilya’s face. “You’re mine too, you know.”

Ilya blinked up at him and scrunched his nose for just a second.

“My Ilya.” Shane whispered it, then snorted. “It’s not sexy when I do it.”

Ilya laughed, his face brightening. “Sexiest thing I ever heard.”

“Liar.” Shane squeezed his side, making Ilya squirm under him.

“I would not lie about that, Shane Hollander.” His face went soft. “I would like to hear it again.”

“My Ilya.”

Ilya pulled him in down for a kiss, and this time it went on and on, hungrier and hungrier until Shane too forgot what else was happening tonight and wanted only to make Ilya forget for a while. He broke away from Ilya’s lips and kissed his way down his jaw, the slight stubble rough against his lips, making him kiss harder, down Ilya’s throat. He didn’t stop there, continued down to his collar bones, kissing and licking his way across them while Ilya moaned softly and tangled fingers in Shane’s hair. Shane moaned too, loving the way Ilya was moving against him, trying so hard for more friction against his hard cock, and while Shane was hard too, he wasn’t planning to let Ilya come that way.

His mouth moved further down, stopping to lick and suck at each of Ilya’s nipples, running his tongue through the fine hairs circling them, and Ilya’s other hand landed on the back of his neck, holding him there until he moved down again, this time finding the trail of hair leading to one of his favorite places. He nosed into it, pressing kisses to Ilya’s skin, his tight muscles, and stopping to pay extra attention to the smooth skin just below each v-line, getting closer to where he intended to go.

Finally he took Ilya’s cock into his mouth, just long enough to get him moaning and moving his hips, and then he pulled off and resumed kissing, starting with the insides of his thighs. He pushed Ilya’s legs further apart and then used his hands to caress his balls and spread his cheeks. He looked up at Ilya, seeking permission to go somewhere he had yet to explore but had been thinking about. They just always got distracted by other things, usually involving Shane’s hole instead.

Ilya seemed to know right away what he was asking. He sucked in a breath through his already parted lips, his still damp hair a little wild and his eyes dark and full of desire. He nodded, quick little jerks of his head, and Shane wondered if he was nervous or excited. Shane smiled and rubbed Ilya’s thigh and then ducked his head, letting his body flatten out against the bed between Ilya’s legs.

The first brush of his tongue against Ilya's hole drew one of the sexiest noises Shane had ever heard from Ilya's throat...a wild moan turned almost a whimper. Shane was no better, moaning just from the feel of his tongue there. He took a few moments to lick and suck and familiarize himself with it before his hand snaked up to wrap around Ilya's cock. He was admittedly having a hard time keeping his mouth and hand moving in tandem while he was trying desperately not to hump the bed. Listening to Ilya's obvious pleasure with his face pressed into his perfect ass was enough to make him come on the spot if he wasn't careful.

"Fuck, Shane," Ilya said, his hands tightening in Shane's hair.

Shane picked up his head. "This is okay, then?" he asked with a grin.

Ilya snorted. "Yes, fuck, your mouth is perfect everywhere."

Shane took a moment to angle Ilya's cock toward him so he could swirl his tongue around the head, loving how much precome was already dripping. It made him feel a little powerful, even though he knew the effect he had on Ilya already, this was something more.

He moved to press a kiss to the crease of Ilya's thigh before dropping back down to his hole, licking at him with the same ferocity he enjoyed, listening to Ilya's noises and adjusting as needed until they were building in a beautiful crescendo that was due to break at any moment. Shane stiffened his tongue and speared into Ilya at the same time he gripped his cock harder, the precome and Ilya's foreskin making his stroke just right, just where Ilya liked it, and he felt Ilya's body tense, heard the pleasure in his voice as he moaned and said Shane's name like it was a prayer to the gods. Ilya's hole fluttered around his tongue, and his cock spurted over his first, and Shane stroked and licked him through it, softening his movements until Ilya's body had loosened, the only movement his heavy breathing and his fingers still tangling in Shane's hair, like he didn't know where else to put them.

Shane kissed the insides of his thighs again, then sat up and took in one of the most beautiful sights he'd ever seen. Ilya's head was thrown back on the pillow, eyes closed, lips still parted on the echo of Shane's name. His chest was flushed, stomach painted with cum, debauched and beautiful and perfect. Even though Shane was still hard, had expended Herculean effort to keep from spilling against the bed while Ilya came on his tongue, he managed to take a moment to savor that sight and be grateful that he had distracted Ilya from the very real heartbreak he knew was still twisting in his chest, whether he wanted to fully admit it or not.

Ilya's eyes snapped open, his mouth shifting into a tired smile. "Fuck," was all he said at first, then, "come here."

Shane stretched back up along the length of Ilya's body and kissed him, his cock pressing against Ilya's thigh, hips rocking against him involuntarily.

"Was that okay?" Shane asked.

Ilya gave a short, breathy laugh. "Fuck," he said again. "Yes. Couldn't you tell?"

Shane smiled. "Good. Because I'd like to do that again."

Ilya nodded and kissed him, then said, "Come closer."

Shane started to move more fully on top of him, but Ilya said, "No, bring this closer," as his hand reached down to stroke what he could reach of Shane's cock.

Shane got on his knees next to Ilya's chest, but Ilya wasn't satisfied until Shane was near his head and Ilya propped himself up enough to take his cock into his mouth. Shane was already so close, so on edge, it only took a few good pulls of Ilya's mouth before he was coming, hands reaching out to hold onto the headboard while he looked down to see Ilya's red lips stretched around him, throat working to swallow down his release, long golden eyelashes perfectly resting against his cheeks...he was so simultaneously hot and beautiful, so much love and affection was rushing through Shane and his eyes started to well up.

He managed to scoot back down the bed before flopping down and laying his head in the crook of Ilya's arm.

"Fuck," he breathed. "That was hot." Though he was mostly still thinking of what he'd done to Ilya, how boneless and sated he looked.

"Yes," Ilya agreed.

"I love you," Shane said, turning his face toward Ilya's.

Ilya smiled and slow-blinked at him. "I love you too. Thank you."

Shane shook his head, hoping Ilya knew that nothing that happened required a thank you. He managed to push himself up again, bent to kiss Ilya lightly on the lips, and told him to stay while he went to the bathroom to clean up and grab a wet washcloth. Vanya was in the hallway when he went back to the bedroom and followed him in, sitting on the floor, like he was watching and judging.

Shane wiped Ilya's chest and stomach clean, then pushed the cloth between his legs, which Ilya accommodated by moving them apart. It was such a simple thing, but it made Shane's chest ache, in the good way this time...satisfied and so full.

When he finally stretched out in the bed again, he turned the lamp off and pulled Ilya to his side. Then he felt a little dip in the bed next to him, followed by fur brushing against his shoulder before it moved further down. Ilya let out a little sigh.

"Are you okay?" Shane asked.

"Yes, very good. I just wish I didn't have to go."

"I know. You can call or text me anytime while you're gone."

"I will," Ilya said, and his voice broke a little.

Shane grabbed his phone again and opened his kindle app, which was still logged in for once, and pulled up one of his many recently added poetry books: Selected Poems, E.E. Cummings. He clicked to the table of contents and scrolled through. It felt like bad luck not

to read tonight of all nights, so he chose something with a title that sounded appropriate and started reading.

*“i like my body when it is with your
body. It is so quite new a thing.
Muscles better and nerves more.
i like your body. i like what it does,
i like its hows. i like to feel the spine
of your body and its bones, and the trembling
-firm-smooth ness and which i will
again and again and again
kiss, i like kissing this and that of you,
i like, slowly stroking the, shocking fuzz
of your electric furr, and what-is-it comes
over parting flesh.... And eyes big love-crumbs,

and possibly i like the thrill

of under me you so quite new”*

“Mm, I like that one,” Ilya said, turning on his side and nuzzling against Shane’s shoulder.

Shane stroked his back and said, “Me too. Get some sleep. I set an alarm.”

“Thank you. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Ilya.”

Shane pressed a kiss to his hair and lay awake for a little while, listening to Ilya’s breathing get slower and hoping that he came home in one piece.

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Shane woke up earlier than his alarm. He looked at his phone... only 6am. He quietly slipped out of bed, letting Ilya sleep a little longer. Vanya nearly startled him in the dark room by jumping off the chair in the corner as soon as he stood up.

“Come on,” Shane whispered, leading Vanya out of the bedroom and gently closing the door behind them. “I’ll get your breakfast.”

He put a scoop of food in Vanya’s bowl, made a pit stop in the bathroom, and then wandered back to the kitchen, trying to decide what, if anything, he should do to help Ilya get ready for his trip. He decided the best thing he could offer right now was coffee, which he set up and then went back to the bedroom to wake Ilya.

The light coming in through the window had brightened enough to make out his sleeping form. His face was relaxed, almost angelic, and Shane hated that he’d have to sully it by rousing him.

He sat on the edge of the bed and ran a hand through Ilya's hair, keeping his touch light so as not to startle him. Ilya's eyes blinked open and his mouth curved up into a smile that made Shane's own mirror it.

"Hey," Shane murmured. "It's after 6. You need to pack."

He watched Ilya's face fall, and could see everything come back to him all at once, tension settling back in. Ilya sighed and nodded.

"What can I do to help?" Shane asked. "Coffee is on. Do you want breakfast?"

Ilya let out a defeated breath and sat up. "No, I don't think I want to eat yet. Coffee is good, thank you."

"Anything else I can do?"

Ilya shook his head. "I will pack, and then I need to text John and Mallory. They can close the store whenever they need to while I'm not here, but hopefully they will be able to work their regular hours at least."

Ilya disappeared to the bathroom for a few minutes, and Shane went to fix coffee for both of them. He felt a little useless today, having nothing more to contribute and wanting nothing more than to make this whole ordeal as easy for Ilya as he could.

When Ilya took a seat at the table, Shane set a mug in front of him and then wrapped arms around him from behind for a moment. Ilya melted into him, leaning his head back to rest on Shane's shoulder.

"I wish I could come with you," he said, letting go so Ilya could drink his coffee.

"Me too, but it is safer for you to be here. It will only be a few days." Ilya sounded like he was trying to remind himself more than Shane.

"I'm glad Svetlana is going with you," Shane said, and he very much meant it. There was no lingering jealousy between them, and he was grateful that Ilya would have someone with him that he could lean on, even if he'd rather it be him.

"Yes. She has always been good at trying to shield me from my family. Not that she should have to, but..." he trailed off. "I'm glad too."

Svetlana showed up about 30 minutes later, while Ilya was still packing. Shane let her in.

"Hey," he said. "He's almost done packing."

She nodded. "How's he taking it?"

Shane shrugged. "Last night was a little rough at first, but he seems okay now."

"I figured. This will be hard for him, but it will also be a relief I think. His father has been a black cloud hanging over him for most of his life."

“Yeah. I can tell. Um...is there anything else I can do? Financially speaking.” He hadn’t wanted to bring it up to Ilya again, but he wondered if Svetlana might be more forthcoming.

“I think the funeral expenses will be an argument between him and his brother, but I don’t think he will let you do anything,” she said, mouth twisting up to the side. “Other than that, I think it will be okay. Alexei has been trying to get money from him with their father as the excuse, and now the excuse is gone.”

Shane nodded slowly. He couldn’t relate to this complicated family dynamic, but he hoped Ilya’s brother would at least not be a jackass while they were grieving their father.

Ilya came into the living room with his suitcase. Svetlana moved to hug him, said a few words in Russian, then in English, “I left my suitcase at the bottom of the stairs.”

“I need to do one more thing downstairs and then we can go,” Ilya said.

“Let me order a ride for you,” Shane said, following them out the door and making sure Vanya stayed put.

“We can get an uber,” Svetlana said. “Unless you want to get us something fancier, I won’t stop you.”

Shane laughed and pulled out his phone. He did get them something nicer.

Ilya stopped by the computer at the counter and typed for a couple minutes, his face serious in concentration. When he was done, he came back around the counter and immediately wrapped his arms around Shane, who was momentarily surprised before returning the gesture and holding him tight.

“I will miss you,” Ilya whispered in his ear.

“I’ll miss you too. Text me as much as you can, okay?”

Ilya nodded and then pulled back enough to capture his lips, the kiss lingering longer than polite in front of company, but Svetlana made an amused noise and said, “Don’t stop on my account.”

Ilya laughed against his lips and pulled back. “I left the keys on the counter upstairs. The darker one is for the back door, the silver one for this door,” he nodded to the glass front door of the shop, “and the gold one is for the apartment door.” He paused, eyes darting around like he was thinking. “You know Vanya’s food schedule. His litter box is self cleaning, and the bag can go out every few days. I think that is everything.”

“We’ll be fine here. Mallory is going to check in on him over the weekend?” Shane asked and ran his thumb down Ilya’s wrist, moving lightly over the bandage and then more firmly over the bracelet, feeling a little comforted that this small physical connection between them would remain while Ilya was away.

“Yes, she texted back already to confirm. She has a key. I trust her.”

“Okay. Don’t worry about us,” Shane said, and pulled Ilya into another hug.

Their car arrived soon after, and Shane watched from inside the store as their bags were loaded and they slipped into the car. He sighed and went back upstairs to hang out with Vanya until he needed to leave for practice.

-

As soon as Cliff appeared in the locker room, he made a beeline to Shane.

“Hey, man,” Cliff said, voice low enough that no one else around them would hear, “I heard about Ilya’s dad.”

Svetlana would no doubt have let him know she was leaving town and why.

“Oh...yeah,” Shane said, turning his attention to his stall.

“How’s he doing?”

Shane realized he couldn’t wait until Cliff knew, because having someone to talk to right now would have been nice, even if it was just to say the truth out loud instead of pretending to be detached. Pretending he didn’t care so much about how Ilya was doing right now that it was a physical ache in his heart was nearly unbearable.

“I think he’s fine. I haven’t really heard much,” he lied and looked away. He promised himself that soon he wouldn’t have to, at least with Cliff, and he also desperately hoped that Cliff still even wanted to talk to him when he found out.

“Oh, right. Well, if you talk to him, give him my well wishes,” Cliff said and clapped him on the back.

Shane looked up and nodded. “Sure.”

“Maybe the four of us can hang when they get back in town, huh?” Cliff asked as he pulled on his gear. “I know Ilya is important to Svetlana, and since you guys are...friends, it might be fun to hang out, right? My place is always available if you don’t want to go out.”

“Yeah, that might be fun.” *If you’re still willing to be in the same room with us after I tell you the truth.*

Shane’s phone buzzed then.

I.R.: business class?

Shane: Is that a problem?

I.R.: I looked up the price of these tickets and almost had a stroke

Shane had looked at the receipt that Natalie had sent him separately, and each ticket, business class, round-trip Boston to Moscow on Turkish Airlines, was nearly \$10,000. He didn’t really

care and would have paid more if necessary.

Shane: You shouldn't have looked. I love you and it's fine and I'd happily pay more. I hope your trip is comfortable at least.

"Is that Roz?" Cliff asked, nodding at his phone.

"What?" Shane said, startled for a second. "Oh, uh no, just my mom."

"Tell her that her favorite Raider says hi and that I can't wait to be invited to dinner when they're in town," Cliff said with a grin.

Shane laughed. "Yeah, I will."

I.R.: I love you too

I.R.: thank you

I.R.: for everything

The texts came through one after the other, and Shane sighed, still wishing again that he could do more.

Shane: No thanks necessary. Text me when you get to Istanbul.

I.R.: I will

Shane reluctantly put his phone away and got ready for practice.

-

After practice, he stopped at home to pack for the next couple of nights at Ilya's place. He made sure to grab his laptop so he could answer emails, but more importantly, he packed Ilya's writing journal. If he couldn't have Ilya right now, at least he'd have his words.

The walk to One Good Memory gave him time to decide how he wanted to enter the building. It was Thursday, so John should be working. Shane felt a little strange about going through the back, like he was hiding. Something about being in the building with John and John not knowing made him feel too sneaky. He decided he'd peek in through the window first and make sure there were no customers at the counter.

It was cold and gloomy outside, the little bit of snow they'd had recently already a dirty slush pushed into the crevices of the street. He kept his head down, hoping to avoid being recognized. One Good Memory came into view and the cold was immediately less persistent, pushed out by the fuzzy warmth this place always brought him, even knowing Ilya was halfway around the world.

Shane stopped by the big window, peering in like a weirdo. He didn't see anyone but John behind the counter and headed in.

"Shane," John said in his usual deep, welcoming voice when he stepped inside. "Nice to see you. I heard about Ilya's father."

Shane nodded. "Yeah, uh, really sad."

"What are you up to today?" John asked.

"Um...I'm staying here the next couple of days to take care of Vanya."

"Oh good, I did wonder. I'm sure that's a comfort to Ilya, knowing he's in good hands."

"Yeah, I hope so. I leave Saturday night for a game, but Mallory will check in on him while she's here."

"She's a delight," John said. "She reminds me of my brightest students. Makes me miss the classroom."

"Did you ever have any issues while you were teaching?" Shane asked, the question slipping out before he could think better of it. "About being...gay."

John's face turned thoughtful. "I did, yes. Never anything as dramatic as being fired for it, but that certainly happened to people I knew. Rarely specifically for being gay, you see. Sometimes that happened...there were no legal protections. Still aren't in a lot of places. Usually they'd find another reason as an excuse though, to avoid any scrutiny. I kept my sexuality to myself for a long time."

"That must have been hard? Hiding for so long?"

"It was. Very lonely and painful, a lot of resentment. It festers if you're not careful. I'm lucky that I was able to keep my job and still find the love of my life. It wasn't always easy, but it was worth it."

Shane nodded slowly and looked down at the counter. "How did you meet?"

"Oh, that's a fun story," John said jovially. "I was out for a walk in my neighborhood one afternoon when a dog ran up to me. Beautiful black lab with a blue collar and a leash dragging behind him. He sat right in front of me, like he knew I was the person to ask for help." He laughed and shook his head. "Anyway, I grabbed his leash and let him lead me around the neighborhood for a while, hoping he'd walk back to his home. Instead, we wandered the streets for over an hour until he started barking at a man who was half-running down the street, frantically looking down every alley and side street. Allen was so relieved to have Louie back safe, he offered to buy me dinner that evening. And the rest, as they say, is history."

"That's really nice," Shane said, smiling. "I hope I get to meet Allen soon."

"He would be delighted."

"Well, I better get upstairs. But um...if you need anything, you know where to find me."

John gave him a nod. "Absolutely. Same to you."

Upstairs, Vanya greeted him with the usual meows and leg rubs, and Shane was so happy to see him, even though it was strange to be here without Ilya.

“What are we going to do the rest of the day?” Shane asked him, squatting down for proper pets.

Shane fed Vanya and then made himself a quick dinner. By the time he was done, Vanya had disappeared from the kitchen. Shane changed into more comfortable clothes and then settled on the couch to wait for a text from Ilya, his writing journal in hand.

He opened to a random page, the sight of Ilya’s neat writing already a balm. The first thing he read: *‘Those seconds, half seconds, that the line of our gaze connected, were the only moment in my day that I felt anything at all.’ TSoA*

Shane recognized The Song of Achilles quote and wondered why Ilya had written it down, though maybe he could guess. He flipped to another page, one with a longer paragraph in a slightly messier cowl: *The day I scored four goals in one game. She was there with Alexei, watching from the stands. It’s hard to imagine Alexei wanted to be there, so she must have bribed him with something good. Usually, she was alone, my father not caring enough about children’s games to show his face often. And even when he did, he was bored and unimpressed. His face in the crowd was a bad omen because I was never able to give it my full attention once I’d seen it. That day, I felt on top of the world. She was standing up, cheering, calling out my name, and I had visions of her in the crowd when I was drafted, won a Stanley Cup, given awards, and a spot in the hall of fame. A week later, I held her cold hand and never wanted to have those thoughts again.*

There was more in Cyrillic, but Shane was almost grateful he couldn’t read it right now. He reached up to wipe his eyes, ignoring the dampness against his hand. Ilya must really love him, to see past all the things Shane must represent.

He turned the page again and went through a mini rollercoaster of feelings as he moved through the words.

Today I met the most handsome boy ever. His name is Toby, and I would have brought him home if I thought Vanya wouldn’t murder me in my sleep. His foster was walking him around the park with a little “Adopt Me” vest. He even knew some tricks. Play dead, shake, roll over...very smart. Vanya will have to step up his game.

Vanya had jumped up beside him on the couch, and Shane reached out to pet him. “I think your dad might want a dog,” he said, and Vanya’s head snapped up to look at him, like he knew what those words meant. “Sometimes you scare me,” Shane muttered.

The first thing on the next page he turned to was another book quote, but this one made Shane smile: *I don’t know, it’s like I look at you and suddenly the sonnets make sense. The good ones, anyway. -IWWV*

Right below it: *How dare you send me that and expect me not to fall for you?*

That book had led to their first real date. Pretentious or not, Shane would always be very fond of it. And that quote as well, which was still one of his favorite among those he'd read, considering how perfectly true it was. Shane ran fingers around the gold bracelet on his wrist. It was still a marvel, the way his life had changed from then til now. In ways he thought might be unattainable for him. Now he was sitting in an apartment, next to a cat, reading a journal of the most intimate kind of writing, and they all belonged to the man he loved.

He turned another page and found multiple book quotes, some that sent a cold chill through him, and some that chased it away:

If you cannot love me, I will die. Before you came I wanted to die, I have told you many times. It is cruel to have made me want to live only to make my death more bloody. -GR

I bet you could sometimes find all the mysteries of the universe in someone's hand. - AaDDtSotU

This feeling of love, it transports me, it makes me happy. At the same time, it consumes me and makes me miserable, the way all impossible loves are miserable. -LWM

I look

at you and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world - O'Hara

Shane wasn't sure if it was a little conceited to assume Ilya had been thinking about him or their relationship, or what would become their relationship, depending on when he'd written these down, but he did. And he hoped that whatever doubts may have been there had been assuaged. It also made him smile because it was so very Ilya to just write down quotes. Perhaps that was why he always had them ready to go on the tip of his tongue. He was certainly having an effect on Shane when it came to collecting them.

A few minutes later, his phone buzzed on the coffee table.

I.R.: made it to Istanbul

I.R.: Svetlana might kiss you when we get back

Shane laughed and texted back.

Shane: Why?

I.R.: gourmet meal, wine, and full reclining seats

I.R.: it was very good

I.R.: I will kiss you too

Shane: I'm glad it was good. Vanya and I are hanging out on the couch.

I.R.: send me a pic

Shane leaned over next to Vanya and held his phone out. He took a few pictures and then looked at them, feeling kind of silly when he saw the goofy smile on his face. But he sent one anyway.

I.R.: fuck, miss you both

Shane: We miss you too.

Ilya sent a picture of a lounge with wood floors, ornate ceilings, and plush chairs everywhere.

I.R.: we're going into the fancy business class lounge now and Svetlana would like me to tell you that you are a god

Shane smiled and rolled his eyes.

Shane: I'm not. Enjoy it though. Text me when you get to Moscow?

I.R.: I will

I.R.: and I will call you tomorrow before your game

I.R.: I love you

Shane sighed and closed his eyes for a moment before texting back.

Shane: I love you too.

-

The first person Ilya came face-to-face with when he arrived at his father's home in Moscow was Polina, his much-too-young stepmother, whom he'd hardly exchanged more than a handful of words with since she slunk into their lives many years ago. He really didn't hold a lot of ill will toward her. Mostly he felt embarrassed on her behalf, and maybe slightly sorry for her. Or he would have if she wasn't already trying to get money out of him and Alexei. Money that did not exist. What a disappointment it must be to have married a man like his father and then be left with nothing for your troubles. Perhaps he didn't feel sorry for her after all.

He'd called ahead to make sure it was fine to stay in his old room. He hadn't expected any pushback from Polina, and he'd been correct. Sharing space with her for a week would probably be a frustrating experience, but he'd do his best to avoid her.

The second person he saw was Alexei, and it was just as unpleasant as he'd expected.

"You have some nerve showing up here," was Alexei's greeting.

"You called me."

"Only because I was required to. And you need to pay up for your half of the funeral costs."

Ilya rolled his eyes. *"I will pay exactly half directly to them. You won't be collecting it."*

"I will because I've already paid it."

Ilya shook his head and walked into the kitchen, hoping his father had left good vodka somewhere in this house before his mind fled him entirely. He found a bottle of cheap vodka

and decided that would do.

“You can show me the receipts then,” Ilya said as he poured a glass. “Why are you even here?”

Alexei no longer lived in their family home, hadn’t in years. He had a wife and daughter of his own, and Ilya mourned that he’d probably never know his niece.

“Can’t I want to see my little brother for the first time in years?”

“Fuck off, Alexei.”

The fact that he almost longed for Alexei’s words to be true was neither here nor there, because there was no reality in which they were. Alexei had hated him since they were children and their father being gone would only make it worse. Wanting someone to choose you when they never would was masochistic at best, delusional at worst. Or vice versa, it didn’t matter.

He managed to escape the kitchen with no further confrontations and made his way up to the room that once belonged to him and showed no trace of it. The only thing keeping him going right now, in this place that should feel like home and felt like anything but, was that he was going to call Shane. He sank to the floor with the vodka in one hand, phone in the other.

“Hey,” Shane answered right away. “How was the flight to Moscow?”

Ilya took a deep breath and leaned against the bed, legs stretched out on the floor in front of him.

“I slept most of the way. It was very comfortable, thanks to your fancy business class tickets.”

“Oh, good. I’m really glad.”

“Thank you for doing that.” Ilya sipped the vodka, letting the burn fortify him.

“You’re welcome. How’s Svetlana?”

“She is fine. She went to her parents’ house, but I will see her tomorrow.”

“And how are you?” Shane asked, his voice sounding so genuine and worried, Ilya could almost cry.

“I don’t like being here.” An understatement really.

“I’m sorry. Anything good about being home in Russia at least?”

“I don’t think I’ve considered this my home since I was twelve. But I will enjoy some local food while I’m here.”

“You consider Boston your home?”

Ilya made a noncommittal noise. Shane seemed to sense that he didn't want to discuss it.

"Send me pictures of the food you get," Shane said quickly.

"I will."

"Marly told me to give you his well wishes. He wants us to hang out with him and Svetlana when you guys get back."

"Hm, yes, I have heard. I talked to Sveta about him, and she said he has not asked her at all about you and me. Except for this hanging out plan."

"Oh, yeah. That's good," Shane said. "I guess it'll depend on how he feels when I tell him the truth."

"I think it will be okay."

"I hope so."

Ilya got up and laid down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling and listening to Shane's voice for a while. Eventually Shane had to go get ready for his game, and Ilya needed to sleep. He tried to ignore the ghosts of his past that hung heavy around him in this haunted bedroom that should have been a comfort. But his comfort was 7,000 kilometers away.

-

The next few days dragged by. Ilya met with the funeral services place, only to find out that money was in fact still owed. He passed on seeing his father's body before the actual viewing. Once would be enough. He also found out that his brother had not arranged the expected post-funeral dinner, and he had to call around and find a restaurant that could accommodate them at the last minute, trying not to let the resentment drown him.

By the time he was standing in a room with his father's body while wearing an itchy suit, he was ready to be done with it all. Svetlana had stuck by him at all appropriate opportunities, but she couldn't stop people from making thinly veiled snide comments about his apparent abandonment of his father when he needed him most. She did put a hand on his arm when he thought about asking them where his father had been when Ilya needed him. When he needed comfort after finding the only person who loved him unconditionally dead in their own home.

Somehow, he made it through the funeral, then he made it through dinner with only one brief confrontation with Alexei, who had called Svetlana a whore, and Ilya had almost taken a swing at him. They were drawing the wrong kind of attention during something that was supposed to be somber and commemorative, so Ilya left. He told Alexei he wanted nothing from their father's will, nothing to do with the house, and nothing to do with him ever again. Alexei and Polina could duke it out for whatever was left, which Ilya suspected was very little. If there was anything for him, the lawyer would get in touch, and Ilya would put it into a fund for his niece.

Svetlana had gone back to Boston after the funeral, and talking to Shane when they could find a few minutes was the only thing that got him through the next two days. He also took the opportunity to visit his mother's grave one last time. He tried not to think too hard about what she'd think of his relationship. Instead, he thought about what it might have been like if she'd also made it out of Russia, maybe to Boston with him. Out from under the harsh expectations placed upon her by her family and her husband and the orthodox church she was born into. He thought about her exploring the world and reading books by someone other than old, dead white men, which he appreciated but wouldn't be who he was today if he hadn't broadened his horizons. He decided that she would have come around and been happy that he was happy. That she would have come to love Shane as much as he did. And that was all he could do, because all he had were memories and what-ifs.

The last thing Ilya did, while Polina was out of the house, was snoop. He had almost no pictures from his childhood, only one faded one of his mother with her arms around him and Alexei when Ilya was only 6, and another of her sitting in a rocking chair with a book on her lap, head turned toward a bright window. He wouldn't have been surprised to find that his father had thrown out all traces of her, but after poking through drawers and closets and boxes, he found one cardboard box in the back of a closet in a spare room, and inside, there was a smaller photo box containing a few pieces of gaudy jewelry, a pair of gloves, and a handful of pictures.

He was sure Alexei had already been through it because the only pictures left were those in which he was not present. There were a few of just Ilya, sticking his tongue out or laying in the grass or wearing a hockey jersey and grinning at the camera. There were also a few of Ilya with his mother, and his throat had gone tight as he flipped through them. The two of them sitting on a bench, Ilya holding ice cream in front of his face with wide, silly eyes. The two of them in skates, holding hands at an outdoor rink, Ilya no more than 4 years old. Irina sitting on the floor next to him in the same room he'd been sleeping in, but unrecognizable, with a few toys on the floor, and Ilya bent over them, barely more than a toddler with a crib behind him. He'd taken a picture of a couple of them with his phone and sent them to Shane, who told him he was adorable, which had made Ilya smile.

By the time he left his father's house with a quick and mostly polite goodbye to Polina, Ilya felt lighter. This trip had been about saying goodbye, and he had done that. To his father, his mother, his asshole brother, the place he once called home. He felt good about leaving it behind, hopefully for the last time, and going home. Mostly to Shane, but also Vanya and One Good Memory and Svetlana and his BU friends who he was due to hang out with soon. He was even looking forward to meeting the Hollanders, despite how nervous Shane sounded the last time he'd brought it up on the phone. For Ilya, everything suddenly felt possible. Like this part of his life had been holding him back without him realizing it, and now he had more room to imagine the life he wanted and was maybe finally getting.

He texted Shane from the airport.

Ilya: I love you and can't wait to get home

Shane: I love you too. Can't wait to see you. Vanya can't either.

Ilya ran his fingers along the gold bracelet at his wrist...not a new habit, but it used to be the necklace that drew his fingers and gave some comfort. Now it was a very expensive box chain bracelet that meant more than he even had words for, but it still wasn't quite enough. All he wanted right then was to have Shane in his arms and Vanya walking on his head or chest or whatever bizarre cat thing he felt like doing. He just wanted his family.

-

Ilya had stopped at a bookstore in the Boston airport and grabbed a new release to read on the plane when they left, but he'd ended up talking to Svetlana and eating gourmet food and sleeping. So he still had the book he'd grabbed and pulled it out for the flights back to Boston. The book, a new release called *We Are the Ants* by Shaun David Hutchinson, was queer young adult sci-fi. He'd almost picked up *History Is All You Left Me* by Adam Silvera, because that was another queer young adult new release that he was stocking at One Good Memory, but it had sounded too heavy for his current headspace. Too much grief.

We Are the Ants ended up being a little heavy too, but it opened with an Arthur C. Clarke quote and at least explored grief and depression in a somewhat unique way. It sucked Ilya in, and he read the whole thing by the time they landed in Boston, with a quick nap somewhere in the mix. He hadn't brought a highlight, but he did find a pen in his bag and underlined a couple of poignant lines, figuring he'd give the book to Shane to read if he wanted to.

Maybe love doesn't require falling after all. Maybe it only requires that you choose to be in it. I wasn't sure what was going to happen with us or how much time we had left, but I wasn't going to waste a second of it.

Ilya had tried to stop thinking of being with Shane as a countdown to the end of something, and mostly he had. But he still wondered if they'd ever get to be a normal couple who went out on dates and posted pictures together on instagram to celebrate birthdays and anniversaries. He wondered if he could be in the crowd the next time Shane won a Stanley Cup and if he'd be allowed to celebrate it. But he was choosing to do this either way, and he wouldn't take a second with Shane for granted.

The other things he'd underlined were maybe even more poignant, like they were written just for him in that moment.

That's the problem with memories: you can visit them, but you can't live in them.

He thought maybe it was better that he'd read that one after leaving Russia instead of on his way, while he'd had so much baggage still heavy on his heart.

We remember the past, live in the present, and write the future.

Maybe the most apt collection of words Ilya could have read right then. An exact blueprint.

And when he finally stepped off the plane in Boston, though it was already 11pm and he was exhausted and barely aware of what day or timezone he was even in, he couldn't wait to get back to his present. He was ready to crawl into bed with a warm Shane and then get up and meet his parents.

He checked his phone to find several missed calls from Svetlana, but nothing from Shane, who had a home game against Detroit and was probably just finishing up at the arena. He figured Svetlana could wait, and slipped his phone back in his pocket, then made his way to baggage claim. While he was waiting for his bag to make its way around the carousel, he texted Shane.

Ilya: landed and waiting for my bag

Ilya: can't wait to see you

He pulled up ESPN to look at the final score for the game and nearly dropped his phone. The first headline nearly sent him to his knees on the speckled white tile floor.

Raiders' Shane Hollander stretchered off the ice during Detroit game

A cold wave washed through him, his chest squeezing, heart suddenly thumping so hard he could feel it in his ears. Time stretched around him, the chatter and noise turning into a roaring amalgamation that began to fade, his vision starting to blur on the edges. He forced himself to take a deep breath, close his eyes, get himself back under control. He didn't let himself think about how the last time he felt this way was when he was 12 years old, and his world had fallen apart. And he didn't let himself wonder if he could survive it cracking open again.

When his fingers could move again, he clumsily opened and scrolled through the article, but it was clearly written by an idiot. There were no updates and the only information indicated that Shane was hit during the third period and taken off the ice. It didn't even say if he was conscious or what type of injury or whether he was okay. Useless.

Ilya's hands were shaking as he closed out and called Svetlana immediately, the missed calls suddenly demystified. She didn't answer, so he texted and then went back to the internet, looking up Shane's name + injury. All the headlines were variations of the same thing, and none of them contained any information that let Ilya know if he was even okay. Fucking social media was useless, but he did finally find a replay of the injury, which was also fucking useless. One of Detroit's players slammed into Shane during a play, and he hit the ice, but there was apparently only a single fucking camera in the whole fucking arena, and a bunch of moronic hockey players were blocking it.

Ilya could feel panic setting in again. He didn't know if Shane was okay. What if he had a brain injury? What if his career was over? What if he was unconscious and never...

He forced himself to take another deep breath, not jump to the worst conclusion. He realized he hadn't been paying attention to his bag, and he needed to get it and get the fuck out of this airport before he lost his shit in public. He looked around him, people everywhere, some waiting for bags, others on the phone, a few wrangling a dog. It felt wrong, to see the world keep turning while his was collapsing.

He managed to get his suitcase from the carousel and order an uber. In the backseat, he was back on his phone, desperately looking for more information. He couldn't help but repeat a thought he'd had before, but more catastrophic now: Shane could have died, and he wouldn't

know until the rest of the public. He was no one and nothing to Shane Hollander as far as the world knew.

I am air and thought and can do nothing.

The car pulled up to One Good Memory, and Ilya's shaky legs managed to carry him upstairs and to the couch before he collapsed, a needy Vanya already on his lap. Ilya petted him and hugged him to his chest and didn't say out loud what was happening, even though Vanya wouldn't understand. Because maybe he would, and it would feel too real that way.

Just as he was about to call Svetlana again, his phone rang, a Boston number he didn't know appearing on the screen.

"Hello?"

"Roz, hey, it's Marly. Uh, Cliff Marlow."

Ilya made a noise that he hoped wasn't as loud as it sounded in his quiet living room.

"Marly?"

"Yeah, man. I thought you might be back in Boston by now. And um...I thought you might want an update?" Cliff asked tentatively. "About Shane, I mean."

"Is he okay?" Ilya asked, not even bothering to cover up the desperation in his voice.

"Oh, fuck dude, yes, he's fine. Sorry, I should have led with that."

Ilya let out a breath and fell back against the cushions of his couch. "Fuck."

"Sorry, man. You haven't talked to anyone yet?"

"No," Ilya said. "I just got home. And..." he trailed off before he gave away the whole thing...though the fact that Cliff was calling him might suggest it was already found out.

"Yeah, so he's fine. He got the wind knocked out of him, and his right shoulder is kind of fucked, but probably not enough to take him out for the season. He was a little dizzy at first, very, very mild concussion. Basically, he got his bell rung."

Ilya's eyes were wet, and his throat was tight, but it was mostly with relief. Shane was okay, and he probably wasn't even out for the season. Fucking hell. The adrenaline was already starting to leave his system, exhaustion and nausea taking its place.

"Thank you. For calling," Ilya managed.

"Yeah, of course. I thought you might really want to know. His parents are trying to get an earlier flight in, but they're not here yet. It's just me. I can probably get you in to see him if you want. The nurses love me," Cliff said, clearly proud of himself. Ilya might have laughed any other time. "They gave him something for the shoulder pain, and he's out right now, but I'm sure he'd like to see you."

“Really?”

Ilya knew he shouldn't, not without Shane's express permission. Showing up to his hospital room at midnight would definitely be suspicious if anyone knew. But it was late and the hospital should be emptier than usual and he still felt like he might die if he didn't see Shane, whole and healthy, with his own two eyes.

“Yeah, if you want to. They're probably going to let him go home in the morning, they just wanted to monitor him overnight to be sure everything was good. But um...I wasn't sure if you'd want to wait that long to see him?” Cliff said, the lilt at the end enough to make Ilya sure Cliff knew exactly what they were to each other. He'd had his suspicions before today, but he hadn't wanted to mention it to Shane, knowing it would just make him nervous.

“I want to see him,” Ilya said, done with pretenses.

"Cool, we're at MassGen."

"Thanks, I'll text you when I get there."

“Alright Roz, see you soon.”

Ilya changed clothes quickly, ordered a ride, and scratched Vanya's head, then he was out the door. Right as the uber showed up, Svetlana called.

He answered in Russian, so as not to give away all his business to the poor uber driver.

“Hey.”

“Hey, sorry I missed your callbacks. I assume you've heard?”

“Yes, I'm on my way to the hospital. Cliff called.”

“Good. I've been ignoring his texts because I didn't want to answer any questions until I talked to you. But I'm pretty sure he knows.”

“Yes.”

“Shane is okay?” she asked.

“Cliff says he is. Minor injuries. Probably going home tomorrow.”

“Good. Let me know how it goes okay?”

“I will. Thank you.”

They hung up, and Ilya let his head fall back against the seat, hoping he wasn't about to make a very big mistake.

If you follow me on threads, perhaps you remember me mentioning my indecision about leaving a cliffhanger or writing past it. Well, I am nice, so I wrote past it. I could have left you with Ilya trying not to collapse on a dirty airport floor. But now you know Shane is fineeee. More fine even than his canonical injuries. And the HEA is near.

Books mentioned in this chapter:

We Are the Ants by Shaun David Hutchinson

History Is All You Left Me by Adam Silvera (mentioned in passing)

Poems read in this chapter:

i like my body when it is with your by E.E. Cummings

Quotes:

"Those seconds, half seconds, that the line of our gaze connected, were the only moment in my day that I felt anything at all." - The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller

"I don't know, it's like I look at you and suddenly the sonnets make sense. The good ones, anyway." - If We Were Villains by M.L. Rio

"If you cannot love me, I will die. Before you came I wanted to die, I have told you many times. It is cruel to have made me want to live only to make my death more bloody." - Giovanni's Room by James Baldwin

"I bet you could sometimes find all the mysteries of the universe in someone's hand." - Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe by Benjamin Alire Sáenz

"This feeling of love, it transports me, it makes me happy. At the same time, it consumes me and makes me miserable, the way all impossible loves are miserable." - Lie With Me by Philippe Besson

"I look

at you and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world" - Having a Coke with You by Frank O'Hara

"I am air and thought and can do nothing." - The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller

[Book list doc](#)

threads: shadow_lilies1 (most active)

tumblr: shadowlilies1

Chapter 16: Anybody, anywhere, anybody

Chapter Notes

Hello, yes, I have changed the chapter count again. 🤖 This is the second to last chapter. For real this time!

Also, playing a little fast and loose with various things here... namely, hospital visitation rules and how visas work. Please allow it.

Also also, I did make this part of a series as sort of a placeholder in case I decide to revisit these two book nerds in the future...if you would like to subscribe just in case. I will miss them, so if I can think of a fun way to write anything else for them, I will.

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

Ilya texted Cliff as he was getting out of the uber at the front entrance, but Cliff was already there, stepping through the glass front door under the big “Entrance” overhang.

“Hey,” Cliff said, clapping him on the back and letting his arm linger there. It was comforting and almost brought tears back to his eyes. “You must be exhausted. Did you sleep on the flight home?”

Ilya shook his head. “Barely. I was trying to wait.”

“Well, they have him in a private room...not sure if he’s technically allowed to have multiple visitors, but if not and you want to stay overnight, I’ll head out. He’s fine though, just sleeping.”

Ilya just nodded and followed Cliff into an elevator and down a hallway, trying to ignore the unsettling hospital smell. They didn’t pass many people, mostly tired looking staff. Cliff stopped at the nurse’s station, and the woman behind the desk was doing some eyelash batting and hemming and hawing about visitors. Ilya wasn’t listening, his mind still trying to settle down and accept that Shane was fine and nearby. Eventually they were cleared to go in, and as Ilya followed Cliff to Shane’s room, he wondered briefly if the poor nurse was going to be in trouble later.

Ilya braced himself as Cliff pushed the door open. Shane was lying in a standard hospital bed, eyes closed, wearing a hospital gown, maybe a little pale, but otherwise normal...alive and perfect. Ilya found himself standing beside him, hand hovering above his head before he realized what he was doing. He dropped his hand back to his side and glanced at Cliff, but Cliff gave him a nod, as if to say *go ahead*. So Ilya let himself brush Shane’s bangs back, ran his thumb over his brow and then his freckles, lightly so as not to bother him, but Shane’s eyes blinked open anyway. Ilya let his hand drop again.

“Ilya,” Shane said, voice gravelly. “You’re home.”

“Yes, любовь моя. Are you okay?” Ilya said, trying to keep his voice even.

“Yeah, mostly,” he said, voice a little sluggish but smiling. “Messed up my shoulder again, but they don’t think it’s too bad.” Shane’s eyes moved to where Cliff stood closer to the door and went wide. “Marly. You’re still here.” He glanced back at Ilya and then again at Cliff, and Ilya could see him putting the pieces together.

“Yeah, of course. I, uh, called Ilya for you. Hope that was okay, but I thought maybe you’d want him to know you were good” Cliff said pointedly. “You kind of passed out after they gave you that first hit of pain meds.”

Shane snorted weakly. “Right. Thanks.” He stopped and swallowed, clearing his throat. “So...um...you know?”

Cliff looked a little uncomfortable for the first time since Ilya had known him, his usual confidence flagging. He opened his mouth and closed it, then cocked his head. “I know he’s important to you.”

“Have I been that obvious?” Shane asked, but he was smiling a little, and enough tension left Ilya’s body that he almost fell over.

Cliff smiled back and lifted one shoulder. “I know you pretty well, dude.”

Shane nodded and licked his lips nervously. “I was going to tell you. After I told my parents tomorrow. Or...what time is it?”

“After midnight.”

“Today then.”

“Well,” Cliff said, walking closer to the bed, “go ahead and tell me. Let me feel special for getting to know before my two favorite Hollanders.”

“Fuck you,” Shane rolled his eyes, no bite in his voice. “And you just said you already knew.”

“I want to be sure we’re on the same page here.”

Shane nodded again and reached for Ilya’s hand. It took Ilya a moment to realize that’s what Shane was doing, but then he let their fingers tangle together in front of Cliff fucking Marlow. Ilya might have been the one feeling dizzy now.

“I’m gay,” Shane said, voice low but loud enough in the mostly quiet room. “And Ilya is... we’re...together.”

Cliff was still grinning. “You know that doesn’t change anything for me, right? I’m happy for you, Hollz. I already love this guy.” He put a hand on Ilya’s shoulder. “And I’ve never seen you so happy since I’ve known you.”

“Thanks, Marly.” Shane closed his eyes and leaned back against the pillows for a second, relief evident. Ilya rubbed his thumb in circles on the back of Shane’s hand until he looked up again. “Please keep it between us for now. I’m not ready to...come out.” The last two words didn’t seem like they wanted to come out either.

“Yeah, of course. I’ll be by your side when you’re ready,” Cliff said. “But you better stop hogging Roz all to yourself. I was hoping we might be able to, you know, like double date.” Then he paused for a second and said, “Svetlana knows, right?”

“Yeah,” Shane said.

Cliff breathed out a dramatic sigh of relief. “Great, because it was getting harder and harder to avoid the subject.”

Ilya looked over at Cliff. He’d been nothing but kind and fun and respectful since they’d met. Svetlana could do worse. He needed to talk to her more about it. She’d mentioned it briefly in Russia, but he’d been too preoccupied to really dig more than asking if Cliff mentioned him and Shane. Now he was wondering if it was more serious than she let on.

Ilya realized he’d zoned out for a minute, and the conversation had moved on. Shane was looking up at him.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t call you. I didn’t have my phone when I got here,” he said.

Ilya shook his head. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

“I was going to ask about adding you as my emergency contact. I didn’t think it was going to be necessary so soon,” Shane said, then looked at Cliff again. “Thanks for doing that.”

“You’re welcome, buddy. I’m gonna get out of here and let you two catch up. They think you’re one of our teammates,” Cliff said to Ilya, who snorted. “They don’t know the whole roster, trust me. You fit right in. They won’t kick you out. I’ll talk to you tomorrow, Hollz, get some rest.”

Once Cliff was gone and the door closed behind him, Ilya’s free hand was at Shane’s jaw, cradling it gently.

“Are you feeling okay?” he asked.

Shane nodded. “Tired. But I’m really glad you’re here.”

“Do you want me to stay?”

“Please. Unless you want to go.” His eyes sharpened suddenly. “Vanya. I fed him before I left for the game, but—”

“He’s fine. I was home for a few minutes before Marly called.”

“Fuck,” Shane breathed. “I can’t believe he already knew.”

Ilya laughed. "I think maybe he has known the whole time. Since that first basketball game."

"Really? Do they all know?" Shane said, the edge of panic in his voice.

"No." Ilya stroked his hair. "I think Marly pays attention, and like he said, he knows you pretty well."

Shane nodded. "My phone, do you see it? Marly brought my stuff."

Ilya let his hand go and went to look in the gym bag sitting on the small vinyl couch. "It's here."

"Is my bracelet there too? I took it off before the game tonight. Maybe that was bad luck."

"Yes, it's here too," Ilya said.

"Thanks, I'll leave it in there for now. But can you hand me my phone?"

"Are you supposed to be on screens?" Ilya asked, vaguely recalling from television that screens were bad for concussions.

"Fuck, I forgot. They said to limit it for 48 hours. Can you just let me know if my parents texted? Marly talked to them earlier."

Ilya lit Shane's phone up and saw a block of notifications, including his texts from earlier. "Looks like your mom texted, and Rose and some of your teammates."

"What did my mom say?"

"You need to unlock your phone for me to read it."

"242424," Shane said, and Ilya laughed.

"Shane...that's a terrible passcode. Anyone could guess it."

"Shut up," Shane murmured, smiling and letting his eyes close.

"Hm, your mom sent flight info. They get in a little before 10am."

"What about Rose?"

"She saw what happened and wants to know you're okay."

"Can you text her back and tell her I'm fine? And that I'll text her tomorrow. Today. No, tomorrow...she's in L.A."

Ilya nodded and typed a message to Rose.

Shane: hi, it's Ilya. Shane is fine

Shane: he has a very mild concussion and something with his shoulder that doesn't sound too

bad

Shane: he said to tell you he will text you tomorrow

Rose texted back immediately.

Rose: Thank goodness!!! Glad you're there. Miss you both!

He read the text out loud and then put Shane's phone down.

"Do you need anything? Are you sure you want me to stay? Nurses are going to come in here," Ilya said.

"Stay, I don't care."

Ilya pulled one of the metal-legged, plastic-cushioned chairs closer to the bed and sat heavily, the exhaustion of traveling and wondering if his boyfriend was seriously injured or worse catching up to him. He was tired enough to ignore how uncomfortable the chair was.

"I missed you," Shane said, reaching a hand out again, Ilya taking it in both of his.

"Missed you too. Fuck, you scared me. The first thing I saw when I got off the plane was a stupid headline about you being taken off the ice and nothing about whether you were okay."

"Shit. I'm sorry. I promise I'm adding you as an emergency contact as soon as I get out of here."

"It's okay. How's your head?"

"Hurts, like a headache. Not too bad. I'm mostly just tired."

"Get some rest while you can," Ilya said, leaning back in his uncomfortable chair.

Shane nodded and closed his eyes. Ilya thought he'd drifted off, but then, voice quiet and eyes still closed, he said "We have to watch season 7."

"What?" Ilya asked, lost.

"Together."

"What together?"

"Game of Thrones," Shane murmured, his words almost slurred, like he was already half asleep.

"We will."

"At the cottage. You'll come?"

"Yes, sweetheart," Ilya whispered. He wondered if he was imagining the way Shane's mouth curved up imperceptibly, but then his eyes opened and the smile became undeniable.

“I love you,” Shane said and squeezed Ilya’s hand still in his.

“I love you too.” Ilya, still feeling fragile and like he’d come too close to losing the most important person in his life, stood up so he could kiss Shane’s forehead. He wanted to climb in the bed and hold Shane and feel his heartbeat and never let him put himself in danger again. “We will watch Jon Snow be very boring together.”

“Rude. He’s going to be king.”

Ilya snorted. “How much pain medication did they give you?”

“Definitely not enough,” Shane said. “I don’t suppose you have anything to read? Missed that while you were away. There’s stuff on my phone,” he said, voice getting sleepy again.

“Hm. How about one of the first poems I ever had to memorize...” Ilya said, not waiting for an answer. He sat back in his terrible chair, one of Shane’s hands still in his.

*“Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.*

*My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.*

*He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.*

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.”*

“I actually know that one,” Shane said.

“Ah, so you are not completely hopeless.”

Shane smiled and weakly said, “Shut up”

“Okay, this time I will, but only because you need to go to sleep.”

Ilya held Shane’s hand and watched his chest rise and fall, while his other hand squeezed the gold cross and chain around his neck, thanking whoever might be listening that Shane was okay.

Ilya woke briefly when a nurse came in some hours later, feeling both grateful and mournful that their hands had separated in sleep. After, he drifted back to sleep for a while, waking again when the sky started to visibly lighten outside. Shane woke not long after.

“Hey,” Shane said softly, eyes still blinking slowly. “What time is it?”

“Just after 6:30. How do you feel?”

“Sore, but fine, I think.”

“Your head?”

Shane squinted his eyes and scrunched his nose. “Dull headache, but it’s not too bad.”

“When can you get out of here?” Ilya asked, hoping the answer was soon.

“I think this morning after the doctor checks in. You don’t have to stay. You need to go feed Vanya, and I’m fine.”

“I can come back to pick you up when they let you out,” Ilya said. “Where is your car?”

“At the arena still, I guess,” Shane sighed.

“Okay. Your key is in your bag. You want me to go get it? Then I can come back to get you when you’re ready?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Unless your parents get here first.”

“I still want you to meet them.”

Ilya nodded and licked his lips, feeling the first pinch of nervousness about the meeting he was still maybe a little convinced wasn’t going to happen. “Are you sure you want to do that today? We can wait until you’re feeling better.”

Shane shook his head and then winced. “No, I’m fine. I need to do this.”

“Okay. Do you need anything before I go?”

“No, I’m okay.”

Ilya stood and glanced at the door, not seeing anyone through the small window, then bent down to press a kiss to Shane’s lips. He meant it to be just a chaste goodbye, but Shane grabbed the back of his neck and held him there a few seconds longer.

“I better go before you ravish me in your hospital bed,” Ilya said, straightening up, even though all he wanted was to do it again. “I don’t think you should be doing that with a concussion.”

“Don’t worry, I plan to ask exactly what I can do and when,” Shane said.

Ilya leaned back down, lips hovering beside Shane's ear. "Naughty, Shane Hollander." Then he kissed Shane's cheek and moved away from the bed to grab the jeep's key. "Keep me posted about when you can leave and if you want me to pick you up."

Ilya left the hospital and grabbed an uber to the arena to pick up Shane's silly jeep that he'd become quite fond of, then drove it home so he could feed Vanya.

Vanya, as per usual, was in a dramatic mood, meowing like he'd been abandoned.

"I know, I know," Ilya said, shooing him away from the door. "I'm sorry I left so quickly. Our Shane needed me."

Vanya quieted and rubbed against his legs, then gave one low, sorrowful meow.

"Yes, he is fine. He's going to be fine." Ilya's eyes welled up, and he sank to his knees, scooping Vanya up against his chest. He felt suddenly so heavy, like being alone had allowed every moment of worry and grief from the past week to settle back into him all at once. He breathed out a shaky, half-sob and let Vanya rub against his jaw, taking comfort from the little menace.

Eventually he stood up and let Vanya escape. He went to his room and dug through his nightstand drawer until his fingers wrapped around a plastic-covered paper box. He didn't smoke often these days. Before he met Shane, he'd already been making an effort to quit. But Shane had made it clear he didn't like the habit, for health reasons of course, and that had given Ilya enough fuel to intensify his effort. However...he thought maybe Shane could cut him some slack considering. Ilya had spent at least some amount of time wondering if the love of his life was maimed or worse. He'd earned one.

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Ilya's phone rang around 10am.

"Hey," Shane said when he answered. "I called so I don't have to look at the screen or whatever. They're discharging me, but it's taking forever."

"Why?"

Shane exhaled loudly. "I don't know. But my parents are coming here. They just got off the plane, so I guess it'll take a little while for them to get their luggage. I don't know what to do. I didn't want to tell them from a fucking hospital bed, but I want you to come pick us up and meet them, and I can't lie to them about who you are just until we get home and then tell them the truth—"

"Shane," Ilya cut in. "You are freaking out. Relax. Are you still hooked up to machines? You will set them off."

He heard Shane huff a small laugh. "No. Sorry. What should we do? Do you want to come back here? Or I guess you can meet us at my place later?"

“Whatever you want to do. You are nervous. I don’t want you to do anything you don’t want to do. We can wait until tomorrow?”

“No, today. I think I want to do it like...immediately when they get here. I need to get it over with. Do you mind coming back?”

“Of course not,” Ilya said, trying to keep his own voice even. If he was nervous, it would probably only make Shane more so. “I will leave here now, okay?”

“Yeah, okay. Thanks, I love you.”

“I love you too. Try to relax, okay? I’ll see you soon.”

Ilya quickly went downstairs to make sure John was good. He’d kindly agreed to open and close the store, even though Ilya had originally planned to be back at work today to open. John was very understanding, and Ilya was grateful. He was also grateful he’d already had a shower to wash off the airplane and the stress and, most importantly, the cigarette smoke.

He drove to the hospital, parked in the garage, and found his way through the endless maze of walkways and hallways and elevators to get back to Shane’s room, which was still blessedly empty but for Shane himself, who immediately held a hand out, and Ilya was already next to him accepting it, magnets snapping back together.

“Are you still freaking out?” Ilya asked with a gentle smile.

Shane nodded jerkily. “I think so.”

Ilya brushed his other hand through Shane’s hair. “I think it’s going to be okay. They love you.”

“I know. But...it feels like I’ve been lying to them.”

Ilya didn’t know what to say to that, so he bent to kiss him quickly and then kept Shane’s hand tucked in his until there were figures approaching through the window in the door. He let Shane’s hand go and stepped back, kept stepping back until he was a good distance from the bed, closer to the window.

Yuna and David Hollander were exactly how Ilya imagined them. Yuna didn’t even look at Ilya, making a beeline straight for Shane’s bed, on the opposite side from where Ilya had been. David did look at him, the pleasant curiosity evident in the narrowing of his eyes, but his attention quickly shifted to his son.

“Oh honey, how are you feeling?” Yuna was asking, and Ilya was trying to listen and also possibly disappear because being faced with two parents who were fawning over their son, who Ilya also happened to love, was doing strange things to his chest and stomach and throat, going warm and cold and tight, like his body couldn’t decide what this threat was.

Ilya lost track of the conversation, other than knowing they were asking Shane about each of his injuries and what the doctors said. Yuna was asking about physical therapy and whether he’d talked to the team’s PTs yet. At some point, Ilya realized that Yuna was looking at him.

Shane was too, and his face was pulled into something between fear and nerves, and Ilya wanted to go to him and hold his hand and tell him it was fine. Instead, he waited and wondered if this was going to be a breaking point, if Shane was going to decide it wasn't worth it.

But Ilya shouldn't have doubted him.

"Mom, Dad, I need to tell you something else," Shane said, voice wavering just enough to hint at lingering nerves. "This is Ilya." Shane held a hand out to him again, but Ilya hesitated. He looked at Shane's face, expecting the earlier conflict to still be written there, but it was gone, replaced by steely resolve. "My boyfriend."

Ilya moved back to the bed, letting Shane grab his hand. He watched Yuna and David take it in, eyes dropping to their clasped hands, then back up to Shane's face, then Ilya's, the truth working its way in and twisting their expressions from surprise to confusion to... Ilya wasn't sure. For David, it almost looked like relief. For Yuna, it looked like regret, but Ilya suspected not for Shane, her face falling and then rearranging back into mild surprise.

"I'm gay," Shane said finally, his voice a little high, still tight with nervousness. Ilya squeezed his hand and Shane squeezed back.

Yuna's mouth opened, but nothing came out.

"Please say something," Shane said and let his head fall back against the pillow, deflating.

"Thank you for telling us," Yuna said eventually. "We...we thought maybe you were...gay."

"Oh," Shane said, sitting back up. "You did?"

David shrugged. "We knew it was possible. We figured you'd tell us when you were ready."

"But Rose Landry...?" Yuna started.

"Yeah, well, that's why it didn't work out. She, uh...helped me be honest with myself," Shane said. "And then I met Ilya."

Three pairs of eyes were back on him. He nodded at the Hollanders.

"How long have you been together?" Yuna asked, but Ilya suspected that was not the question she really wanted to ask.

"Um, a few months," Shane said.

"Christmas," Yuna said knowingly. "That's why you didn't come home."

Shane let out a shaky breath. "Yeah, I'm sorry. We wanted to spend our first Christmas together."

Yuna's face softened. "You could have told us. Ilya would have been welcome too."

Ilya was having an out of body experience. He couldn't be standing in a Boston hospital room with Shane Hollander and his parents, listening to Shane's mother say his name and be kind to him when she didn't even know him, could have seen him only as a threat to Shane and his career.

He came back to earth in time to catch "One Good Memory" and "down the street" and David Hollander's face suddenly becoming more animated. Before he could speak though, a nurse pushed the door open, and Ilya barely had time to drop Shane's hand and back away.

He stayed by the window, trying to make himself inconspicuous while Shane dealt with paperwork and discharge instructions, though if Ilya heard correctly, he'd mostly be dealing with the team's medical staff going forward. Yuna was asking enough questions for everyone.

When it was finally time for Shane to go home, he dressed in clothes from the gym bag while Ilya went to pull the jeep around. By the time he got to the right area, Shane was impatiently getting out of a wheelchair while Yuna hovered, and Ilya snorted at the thinly veiled irritation on Shane's face.

"I'm fine," Shane whined as he opened the passenger side door. He clearly remembered who he was dealing with and offered the seat to Yuna, but she waved him off and got in the back. David was loading their luggage into the trunk. Where they'd stashed it before, Ilya didn't know.

"Are you sure you're good?" Ilya asked lightly, smiling.

"Yeah, sorry." Shane turned to the back seat. "Sorry, mom."

The drive to Shane's place was mostly filled with questions from Yuna about Shane's recovery plan and when he'd be back to playing. It sounded like the shoulder strain needed a couple weeks of rest, but the mild concussion shouldn't linger.

"Coach called earlier and told me not to show my face tomorrow," Shane said glumly. "I guess they can handle Pittsburgh without me. But they leave for Tampa on Monday. I'm going even if I can't play."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Yuna asked.

Ilya pulled into Shane's parking garage and looked for a space while privately agreeing with Yuna.

"It's 6 days from now, and I'm not going to play. I just need to be there for the team. I'm still captain. Even though I know Marly can handle it."

The conversation continued into the lobby and up the elevator. Ilya felt superfluous, but while Shane unlocked the front door, Ilya glanced at David, who gave him a wink and whispered, "They're always like this. Business all the time." A little pocket of warmth flared in his chest.

Shane was somehow talked into sitting on the couch instead of immediately tending to anything.

“I feel fine,” he repeated.

“Are you hungry?” Ilya asked. Because he was starving now that everything was mostly fine.

“Yeah. We can order lunch soon.” Shane looked at his parents. “Is that okay?”

David nodded. “We haven’t eaten.”

“I need a shower first,” Shane said. “I feel gross.”

“Is your head okay? You don’t want to get dizzy and slip,” Yuna said.

“I’ll be fine, mom, I promise.” He gave Ilya a look, which he was pretty sure meant *I’ll be fine because you’re coming with me*. Ilya nodded. Shane stood up and said, “Get settled in the guest room, okay? When I’m done, we’ll order food.”

“Sounds good,” David said, grabbing their suitcases and putting a hand at the small of Yuna’s back to lead her to the hallway, though she still seemed reluctant.

When they were out of sight, Shane breathed a sigh of relief. “I really do need a shower.”

“Yes, come on.”

In the bedroom, Shane stripped while Ilya went into the bathroom to get the water running. “I think you should take a bath instead,” he said through the doorway, then turned the faucet in the tub without waiting for an answer. “I agree with your mom, you need to take it easy.”

“Traitor,” Shane said, coming through the door buck naked. It was the first time Ilya had seen him without the hospital gown and sheets covering him. His shoulder was bruised again from where he landed, worse than the last time, and there were smaller bruises along his thigh and hip.

Ilya pulled him into a hug, pressed his face into Shane’s neck. “Shane,” he whispered. “Fuck.”

“Hey.” Shane’s hands were rubbing up and down his back. “It’s okay. I’m okay. You’re home. And my parents know. Jesus...I told my parents.”

“Yes,” Ilya said against his skin. “And they seem fine.”

“Yeah. I think so.”

Ilya pulled back. “Come on, bath time.”

Shane stepped into the tub and sank into the water, a deep sigh pushing out of him. “Fuck. This is nice.”

Ilya grabbed shampoo, conditioner, and soap from the shower and then knelt next to the tub.
“Let me wash your hair?”

Shane turned his head, a small smile on his face, and nodded.

Ilya used his hands to cup water over Shane’s hair, then gently massaged shampoo into it.
“Does your head still hurt?”

“Not much. A twinge here and there. This feels so fucking good though,” he moaned as Ilya massaged his scalp and washed the shampoo out.

“You are making indecent noises.”

“Can’t help it. Feels good, and you’ve been gone for a whole week.”

“Don’t get too excited. You still have a concussion,” Ilya said, though he agreed...it had been a long week.

“I asked the doctor about that,” Shane said as Ilya rubbed conditioner into his hair.

“And?”

“She said to give it a day and if my symptoms are gone, it’s fine.”

“What’s fine, exactly?”

“Sex,” Shane said, exasperation in his voice making Ilya laugh. “As long as I don’t get dizzy or have any symptoms during.”

“And when did you ask her this?”

“This morning, after you left. She said it was a very common question,” Shane said defensively.

“Oh, I’m sure.”

“So I’ll probably be fine tomorrow.”

“With your parents down the hall?”

“Fuck,” Shane said. “Don’t remind me.”

Ilya finished with his hair and moved on to lathering up a washcloth. “Lean forward.”

Shane did, and Ilya scrubbed his back, then gently pushed him backward again and washed his chest. He lifted Shane’s left arm and scrubbed while Shane squirmed. “You’re tickling me on purpose.”

“You’re a terrible patient,” Ilya said. “Can you lift your right arm, or does it hurt?”

“I can, it’s just sore,” Shane said and lifted his right arm, followed by more dramatic squirming.

“Lift your legs or stand up,” Ilya said.

Shane stood up, and Ilya resumed what he was doing, gently scrubbing Shane’s legs, working his way up his thighs. Shane was already half hard, and Ilya would have happily taken care of that too any other day. Instead, he stilled his hand.

“You want to do this part? Since I cannot follow through.”

“No,” Shane said. He was looking down at Ilya with desire all over his face.

“Shane, you better behave.”

Ilya moved the washcloth between his thighs and took care of all the important parts, and Shane was fully hard when he was done. He made a whiny little noise, and Ilya laughed and said, “Sit back down.”

Shane sat heavily, splashing water over the side of the tub. “Sorry.”

“Now I will have to go back out there in front of your parents looking like I was in a wet t-shirt contest,” Ilya said, leaning over the tub to press a kiss to Shane’s lips.

Shane groaned. “You can put one of my shirts on.”

Ilya took his soaked shirt off, and one of Shane’s hands was immediately on his chest.

“Shane,” Ilya groaned. “Stop that.”

“I can’t,” Shane said, laying his head back. “This fucking sucks.”

“Only two weeks without hockey. And not much longer without this,” Ilya said. He grabbed Shane’s hand from where he was running it down Ilya’s pecs and sucked a finger into his mouth.

Shane moaned, then said, “Asshole. That’s just mean.”

Ilya let his finger go. “I know, sorry, but you started it. Now come on, time to get out and get lunch.”

They both dressed, Ilya slipping on one of Shane’s Raiders shirts, and met Shane’s parents back in the living room. Shane ordered food to be delivered from the Lebanese place nearby, and Ilya offered to go downstairs to get it from the driver, unsure if Shane would allow that. But Shane didn’t even blink. He handed Ilya the elevator keycard and said “Thank you.”

When Ilya got back upstairs, bags in hand, he tried to give the keycard back to Shane, who said, “Keep it. I have another.”

Ilya spent the rest of the afternoon feeling like he was floating. Maybe it was partially the lingering exhaustion from traveling, but mostly it was because Shane was okay and he told his parents and he gave Ilya a keycard to the elevator. And because Yuna and David Hollander were already treating him like he was part of their lives.

“When are you two going to be at the cottage this summer?” Yuna asked over lunch, as if it was just a given that Ilya would be there with Shane.

“We haven’t really talked about dates yet,” Shane said. “Ilya has the store to worry about. But we’ll definitely be there.” He looked at Ilya. “Right?”

Ilya nodded. “Of course.” He reached up and ran a hand down the back of Shane’s neck without thinking, but Shane only leaned into it. Yuna was watching them fondly, but with an edge of sadness.

David was particularly interested in the store, and Shane agreed that they’d stop by the next day, as long as he was still feeling fine. Based on all his questions about the types of books Ilya stocked, he could guess where Shane got his love of books.

Ilya opted to head back to the store in the afternoon and let Shane spend time and have dinner with his parents alone, figuring they might need to talk without him present. Shane walked him out to the elevator.

“You’ll come back later right? To stay overnight?” he asked.

Ilya had not assumed that he would be doing that. “Is that what you want?”

Shane nodded. “Please. If Vanya will be okay for one night.”

“Even with your parents here?”

Shane scrunched his nose and tilted his head. “I mean...we won’t be doing anything since I can’t. Will it be too weird?”

“No, you’re an adult. I’m sure they can guess we share a bed. I just wanted to make sure,” Ilya said. He cupped Shane’s jaw and leaned in to kiss him. “I’ll come back this evening, okay? After I catch up on some stuff in the store and take care of Vanya.”

“Good. I’ve been waiting all week to have you home and sleeping next to me,” Shane said, leaning into him. “Text me when you head back.”

“I will.” Ilya kissed him again and then left.

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Ilya could not possibly have been more grateful to Mallory and John for keeping the store open and running while he was gone. It was hard enough trying to run a store with little help, but even worse when Amazon and ebooks were slowly but steadily putting you out of business. Even just a week of lost sales would have hurt, and Ilya wasn’t sure the store was going to survive even with full effort. But he’d hang on for as long as possible.

He took care of a handful of online orders, not as many as he would have liked post-holidays, then went upstairs to hang out with Vanya and unpack. It was hard to believe he'd only gotten home from Russia less than 48 hours ago. It felt like a lifetime already.

A little after 7pm his phone rang. He expected Shane, but it was Svetlana.

"Ilya," she said. "I had to hear from Cliff that Shane told him the truth about you two and that he went home."

"Sorry," Ilya said, rolling his eyes. "I've been a little busy making sure my boyfriend is okay."

"Yes, yes, I know. How is he feeling?"

"Banged up, but otherwise fine, I think. He was very lucky," Ilya said, stomach lurching as the *what ifs* made themselves known again.

"You met the parents?"

"Yes."

"And?" Svetlana asked impatiently.

"And...they are very nice. Like Shane. I'm giving him some time alone with them. I think there may be some...feelings. But not bad ones. Nothing like mine would have been."

His voice still held the bite of bitterness, softened a little by his newly found closure.

"It's okay to enjoy them," Svetlana said, interrupting the direction of his thoughts.

"What?"

"Shane's parents. I bet they already love you. You should let them."

Svetlana always knew how to stick him where it hurt.

"What the fuck is going on with you and Marly?" he asked, diverting before his eyes started leaking.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know, he's asking us to hang out with you two. I thought you might fuck him and let him go."

Ilya could practically hear the eye roll. "I will forgive your tone since you've had a rough week," she said. "And I don't know. I think we're...dating. For real."

"Dating," he repeated. "You really do like him."

"Yes, I do. He's a nice guy. I mean, he is your boyfriend's best friend after all."

“Good point. His reaction to Shane being gay was very...accepting. Considering,” Ilya said. He’d expected it, but he knew that wasn’t going to be the norm among MLH players.

“Okay, good talk. Gotta run. Tell Shane I’m glad he’s in one piece,” Svetlana said.

Ilya told her goodbye and gathered some clothes to bring to Shane’s. Then he scratched Vanya’s head and gave him some treats before he headed out.

Ilya: on my way back

Ilya: everything good there?

Shane: Yeah, all good. We talked more. My parents felt bad that I didn’t feel comfortable telling them before, but I think everything is fine now.

I.R.: good

I.R.: they love you

Ilya was glad Shane had that. He deserved it.

Shane: Use the elevator when you get here.

Shane: And I mean anytime, not just tonight.

Everyone was trying to make him cry today. Ilya walked into the lobby of Shane’s building and used the keycard to take the elevator up. It was a small thing, but there was a huge difference between doing it while accompanied by Rose and doing it alone because Shane decided to give him unfettered access.

The elevator opened just as Shane was opening the front door.

“Hey,” Shane greeted him with a hug that Ilya happily accepted. “Come on, we’re watching the Toronto-Detroit game. Well, they’re watching, I’m listening. Mostly so my mom can root against Detroit and insult Jordy Chandler.”

Ilya didn’t need to ask for clarification. The video of Chandler slamming into Shane before he went down hard would be forever seared into his head, clean hit or not.

“Well, can’t blame her,” Ilya said.

The rest of the evening with the Hollanders was pleasant. They included him in conversations like he’d always been there. He even admitted that he used to play hockey, leading to David asking him his opinions on a range of things happening in the game and the league while Yuna and Shane had more heated discussions. David gave him an *I told you so* look a few times. It was all so different from how Ilya had interacted with his own father, and even Svetlana’s father, who he respected but never felt any warmth from. David Hollander was as warm and congenial a person as Ilya had ever met, and he tried not to let himself get sidetracked wondering what it would have been like to grow up with that kind of father.

After the game, Yuna announced that they were going to bed and got up to give Shane an extra long hug and fuss over him a little more.

“I’m fine, mom. Really,” Shane said.

She let him go, and to Ilya’s brain-stalling surprise, she bent to hug him next.

“It was so nice to meet you, Ilya,” she said, arms going around him. Thankfully, Ilya’s arms moved of their own accord and hugged her back.

“Thank you,” he said stupidly. “Uh, you too.”

When Yuna stepped away, David was there, holding out a hand to him.

“I’m looking forward to visiting your store tomorrow,” he said, giving Ilya a firm but kind handshake. Ilya could only nod. His hand stayed in the air for a second after David let go and turned away. He let it drop and looked over at Shane, who didn’t seem to think anything out of the ordinary had happened.

“Ready to go to bed?” Shane asked, standing up.

Ilya waited while he turned out the lamps and then followed him into the bedroom. They both got ready for bed, and when Ilya came out of the bathroom, Shane was waiting for him.

“Sit on the bed,” Shane said.

“Okay...” Ilya settled in the middle of the bed, and before he’d even leaned back against the headboard, Shane was climbing onto his lap, straddling him. “What’s this for?” Ilya asked, snaking his arms around Shane’s waist.

Shane nuzzled into his neck. “Just missed you.”

“I missed you too.”

They stayed like that for a little while, wrapped around each other, breathing each other in.

“I’m glad you’re okay. I’ve never been so scared in my life,” Ilya said honestly.

“I’m sorry.” Shane’s fingers were in their usual spot at the nape of his neck, combing through his curls, and nothing had ever felt so good.

“Don’t apologize, Дорогой.”

“What does that one mean?”

“Hm, it is like...darling. It means you are very precious to me.”

Shane’s arms tightened around him for a moment, and then he lifted his head to look at Ilya. “Do you want to talk about Russia?”

Ilya’s first instinct was to say no and move the conversation along. But maybe he did want to. And maybe he owed Shane some honesty.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe.”

Shane brushed the curls off his forehead, and the soft touch made Ilya shiver. “You got home and I immediately made myself the center of attention. You didn’t have any time to decompress or anything.”

“You say that like you did it on purpose. And there isn’t much to say about Russia. I think...I think it was good for me. To go there and say a proper goodbye, you know?”

Shane nodded. “You don’t plan to go back?”

“No. There is nothing left for me there. Only if I lose my visa.”

Shane chewed on his bottom lip, like he was trying to decide what to say or how to say it.

“You said you had a backup plan, if anything happened with that. What was it?”

“To marry Svetlana.”

Shane’s face was comical, shifting from surprise to confusion to annoyance. “No.”

Ilya ran a finger down his cheek. “That was before I met you.”

“Yeah, but...is that still your backup plan?”

“No. But...it might be better than deportation?”

Shane shook his head. “There has to be a better option. I mean...”

Ilya closed his eyes. He couldn’t look at Shane’s face while he waited for him to finish that thought.

“You could marry me,” Shane said finally.

“Are you asking me, Shane Hollander?”

Shane swallowed, brows narrowed. “No, I...I don’t want to ask like this. But I would. Of course I would.”

Ilya let his forehead press against Shane’s. “You aren’t a US citizen either, so I don’t think that would work anyway.” He didn’t acknowledge the rest of it yet.

“Oh...I mean. Yeah. I honestly don’t know how it all works. But I have a good lawyer. And I can afford an even better one if we need to. We’ll figure it out.” Shane leaned back, and Ilya could see his eyes were wet.

“What’s wrong?” Ilya asked.

“My mom was asking me about coming out. Like...for real. Publicly. She wants to leverage it for...whatever, doesn’t matter. I asked her to chill for now. But...but I am going to, eventually. I just...can’t stop thinking about all the ways it could go wrong. I’m scared.”

“I know. What do you think will happen? I can guess some of it, but I don’t know that world as well as you do.”

Shane moved off him to lay flat on his back on the bed. “I already have to deal with...not being white enough. A couple of games ago someone told me to go back to China. It wasn’t the first time. And I don’t even know if they just think all Asian people are from China or if getting it wrong was part of the insult. Commentators and analysts are better at hiding the insults, but it’s there too. If I had a dollar for every time I was the butt of a joke about Asians being good at stuff, I could buy another one of these.” Shane held up his wrist, once again sporting the gold bracelet. “Thinking about being the only openly out gay player in the league and what they’re going to add to their running list makes me...” he let out a long breath and shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Ilya shifted so he was laying on his side next to Shane. He let his fingers move idly on Shane’s chest, just to offer some comfort.

“Fucking assholes,” Ilya said. Perhaps not helpful, but it was true. “You are the best player in the league. They have to sink to that level just to find an insult. Using racism for cheap shots is very on brand, though.” Ilya has known that side of hockey even as a kid.

Shane sighed. “Yeah. And I’m going to give them a whole new bag to pull from.”

“You’re Shane fucking Hollander. The same person you’ve always been and will be, no matter how much of your personal life you decide to share with them. You’re still the best.”

“I know,” Shane said, his lips briefly curving into a small. “But...what I’m most scared about is how my team is going to react. Not just the players. If they decide I’m a liability, they’ll bench me. Or trade me.” Shane’s voice had gone low, and he was pulling at his eyelashes. Ilya gently grabbed his hand away from his eyes and entwined it with his own. “What if I get traded to the other side of the country? Or Canada? I don’t want to leave my team. But mostly I don’t want to leave you.”

Ilya’s chest went tight. “They don’t have bookstores in Canada? Or Seattle?”

Shane’s head turned to look up at him. “What?”

“I don’t think you will get traded. They would be idiots to let go of the best player in the league. But if so, do you think I would just let you go without me?”

Shane was shaking his head slowly. “Yeah, but...you would move your whole store? What about Boston? And Svetlana?”

Ilya smiled and bent to kiss him, if only to get him to stop shaking his head in denial.

“I would go with you anywhere, Shane Hollander. If you’ll have me.”

Shane opened his mouth, but only a soft, disbelieving scoff came out.

“I love Boston, and it’s been good to me,” Ilya continued, “but I can be home anywhere. As long as I have you and Vanya. And maybe One Good Memory.”

“Why maybe?”

Ilya shrugged. “I don’t know how much longer the store will stay afloat. Maybe a few more years if I’m lucky. But if sales keep dropping, maybe not even that long.”

“I didn’t know you were having problems.”

“My online orders have increased, but in-store profits seem to be decreasing faster now. I’m not sure if I’m going to be able to keep both Mallory and John on the payroll like I wanted.”

“No,” Shane whispered. “What can I do to help? Financially, I mean.”

“It’s sweet of you to offer, but putting money into a failing business would not be smart.”

“Failing...But...what would you do? If you have to close the store? Your visa...”

“Hey,” Ilya said, squeezing Shane’s hand. “It’s not that dire yet. I shouldn’t have said failing. We’ll worry about it when we have to. Not tonight, okay? You need to get some rest.”

“I didn’t forget that you said you’d move anywhere with me,” Shane said. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too. And I didn’t forget that you said you’d marry me.”

“Not just *would*, Ilya. I want to. When the time is right.”

Ilya kissed him. He forgot himself for a moment and kissed him with intent, hard and messy and maybe a little wet because his stupid eyes were leaking, but maybe Shane’s were too. He nearly forgot that Shane technically still had a concussion and that he needed to stop before they couldn’t. He pulled back and looked down at him, but couldn’t find any words.

“Hey,” Shane said. He reached up and rubbed a thumb across his jaw. “I mean it.”

Ilya nodded. “Me too.”

“Come here.” Shane pulled him down, so Ilya was half on top of him, careful not to let his weight lean on Shane’s right shoulder. “Will you read tonight?”

“Yes. What would you like?”

“Anything.”

“We were getting near the end of *Call Me By Your Name*,” Ilya offered, assuming it was still in Shane’s nightstand since they’d been rereading it.

Shane shook his head. “I can’t. If you read *‘You are the only person I’d like to say goodbye to when I die’* out loud again, I might actually cry tonight. And the end of that one... It’s... different now.”

Ilya smiled, even as his eyes stung once more. “You are getting good at remembering them. But yes, same. Okay, let me go find something else.” He gave Shane a quick kiss and then quietly left the bedroom and tiptoed down to the room with all of Shane’s bookshelves. He browsed for a couple of minutes, trying to find something that would be gentle on their tired hearts.

Back in Shane’s room, he slipped into the bed and let Shane settle next to him.

“Have you read this already?” Ilya asked, holding up the book: *The Price of Salt* (or *Carol*) by Patricia Highsmith.

“No, not yet. You?”

“Yes, I like it very much. We can read it together.” Ilya opened to chapter 1 and started, “*The lunch hour in the coworkers’ cafeteria at Frankenberg’s had reached its peak...*”

By the time he got to page 3, Shane was asleep. Ilya set the book on the nightstand on his side and turned off the lamp. He pulled the blanket up to cover them both and put a hand on Shane’s chest, letting the steady beat of his heart lull him to sleep.

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Ilya left early the next morning to take care of Vanya and open the store. Shane assured him he felt fine, no headache or dizziness, nothing to suggest the concussion was lingering or causing issues. He was planning to take his parents to breakfast and then bring them to One Good Memory after. Ilya was a little nervous. He was very proud of his shop, but having Shane’s parents come in, viewing it as the livelihood of their potential...son-in-law? Shane’s words from the night before were still knocking around in his chest, reminding him that they were real, that Shane had really said he wanted to marry him one day.

The first thing that happened when all three Hollanders walked through his door right before 10am was Vanya. He ran right up to Shane and demanded to be picked up, his meowing loud and spirited as usual. He rubbed his face on Shane’s chest and jaw and generally made a spectacle of himself. Ilya allowed it, since it was the first time Vanya had seen him since he’d been hurt, whether the cat knew it or not. He probably did. But the more surprising turn of events was Vanya leaping from Shane’s arms and immediately winding himself around Yuna’s legs, meowing up at her like she was already his best friend.

“Well, aren’t you sweet?” she said, reaching down to pet him.

Once he got his fill from Yuna, he moved along and did the same to David. Ilya just watched with narrowed eyes. Vanya was almost always friendly, but not this friendly. What was it with these Hollanders?

When the Vanya show was over, Ilya watched Shane lead his parents through the store, telling his dad where the history section was and pointing out the door to Ilya’s apartment. He sounded so proud, and Ilya wanted to grab him and kiss him against the shelves.

The rest of their visit was similarly a constant push and pull of surprise and relief. Ilya joined them for dinner that evening and the next, but he went back home after so Vanya wouldn't have to spend any more nights alone. And maybe so he and Shane wouldn't be tempted to fuck while Yuna and David were still down the hall, since Shane's head was back to normal. He even got officially cleared during his follow-up appointment the day before the Hollanders left.

Ilya told them goodbye on Friday evening after dinner, with promises to visit with Shane and an open invitation to stay with them anytime Shane played in Ottawa or Montreal. Yuna gave him a tight hug and reiterated how nice it was to meet him, and Ilya hugged her back, already feeling the growing spark of something motherly in their interaction. Something he didn't think he'd ever feel again, even a version that was not quite the same, but might fill his heart up a little. David had given him another handshake before he apparently thought better of it and hugged him too. David had fewer words than Yuna, but he made up for it in little comforting gestures that would never go unnoticed by Ilya.

Ilya left Shane's apartment after that, feeling warm and floaty. He'd gone from losing his remaining parent to gaining two new ones in a matter of days. His heart was fuller, and so was his phone, with two new numbers added to it.

The Hollanders left the next day. Shane drove them to the airport a little after 6pm, then texted Ilya to let him know he was going back home for a little while before he came to Ilya's for the night. Ilya could guess why, and he was looking forward to it. He let Mallory go home early and spent the last 30 minutes before he could close the store tapping his fingers on the counter, willing time to speed up, just a little.

Shane walked through the door at 5 minutes til 8, and Ilya locked it behind him. No one was coming in 5 minutes before close. Not tonight anyway. They didn't even speak on the way to the back and up the stairs, Ilya flipping the lights off on the way. Inside the apartment, Vanya tried to do his usual attention-seeking, but neither Shane nor Ilya had the patience for more than a head scratch before their mouths were crashing together and Shane was backing him up toward the hallway, lips still locked.

Ilya's back bumped against the wall, and Shane took advantage by pinning him there and grinding their hips together. Ilya moaned into his mouth, and then pulled back gasping because Shane lifted him off the floor. Ilya instinctively put his legs around Shane's waist before his brain caught up.

"You will hurt your shoulder," Ilya said, trying to wiggle out of his arms.

"Only if you keep moving," Shane said impatiently.

Then they were kissing again, and before he knew it, Ilya was on the bed, his legs still wrapped around Shane on top of him, their hips rocking together. Suddenly, Shane pulled back.

"Fuck, I'm about to come already," he said, sitting back on his heels.

Ilya laughed even though he wasn't faring much better. "Wow, so impatient."

“It’s been like...almost two weeks,” Shane said. “Need you.” Those words went straight to Ilya’s cock.

Shane got off the bed and undressed, and Ilya quickly followed, shucking off all his clothes in record time.

“Get on the bed,” Ilya said. He stopped to grab lube from the nightstand, then turned to look at Shane laid out like a feast for him. The bruises were still visible, fading and sickly now, and Ilya climbed onto the bed and kissed those first, grateful those were the only marks of his injury. Then he kissed his way up Shane’s stomach and chest and neck until Shane was practically vibrating under his touch, his hands already in Ilya’s hair, tugging insistently.

“Slow down, любимый,” Ilya said, lips hovering just above Shane’s now. “We have all night.”

Shane’s hands loosened. “Wait, that’s a different one. What does it mean?”

“Also like darling. Or beloved.”

Shane smiled his cute, soft little smile that Ilya liked to think was only for him.

“I can stick to English ones if you prefer?” Ilya asked. “Sweetheart, darling, love of my life. Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate—”

“Ilya,” Shane interrupted, punctuating it with a roll of his lips.

“I am trying to woo you, and you just want my cock?” Ilya huffed.

“I think we’re past wooing,” Shane said with a laugh. “But continue.”

“I will probably mess it up if I try the whole thing anyway. But I remember the last lines: *So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*”

“Shakespeare, right?”

“Mhm. And it was written about a man.” Ilya said and kissed him.

“Wait, really?” Shane asked when Ilya lifted his head. “Shakespeare was...”

Ilya tilted his head in lieu of a shrug. “Probably. Many believe he was bisexual.”

“Huh. I didn’t know that.”

Ilya was grinning, both at Shane’s apparent awe and that he’d managed to distract him from his other pursuits, if only momentarily. “Would you like me to recite Shakespeare while we fuck? I can be romantic and make you forget your name at the same time.”

Shane snorted. “After. I just want you right now. Only your words.”

“Okay, Shane Hollander. I will make love to you and then read you Shakespeare after, like a proper annoying English major.”

Shane laughed at that and pulled him into a kiss. “We’re basically one of my gay romance books. Jock and English major. Maybe you should write that.”

“Don’t tempt me.” Ilya kissed him once more and then shifted down the bed until his face was level with Shane’s cock. He took it in hand and licked up the underside, eyes on Shane’s face as he pressed his tongue along the head and up the slit and watched Shane’s mouth fall open on a moan.

“Fuck, Ilya, not tonight. I really won’t last,” Shane whimpered, his hips already pushing up into Ilya’s mouth.

“Okay,” Ilya said and let him go, only to push his legs up and drop his mouth further down until his tongue brushed Shane’s hole, the moaning ramping back up.

“Ilya,” he said, voice high and breathy. “I’m serious, you’re going to make me come.”

“How do you expect me to do what you want if you don’t let me prep you?” Ilya asked, not waiting for an answer as he dove back in. He could have skipped this part, but he might have gotten less of Shane’s fingers tugging chaotically at his hair and his frustrated, horny little whimpers. The way Shane was pulling his face against him, slightly suffocating but welcome, was belying his protests.

When Shane’s hips started to move too erratically, and his moans got a little too wild, Ilya took pity on him and moved back up the bed, letting his hand replace his mouth, slicked fingers working their way in.

Shane’s hands were moving over whatever parts of Ilya’s skin they could reach, stretching down to Ilya’s cock and thighs, until Ilya remembered he shouldn’t be doing that.

“Put your right arm down. You’re supposed to be resting it,” he whispered against Shane’s lips.

“It’s fine. Only backward movement hurts,” Shane said, but he let it drop back to the bed and continued with his left hand only, which couldn’t reach as far and settled on Ilya’s neck instead, keeping their mouths mashed together. Ilya kissed him in rhythm with his fingers until Shane was ready for him, then he shifted to lay on top of him, cradled between his legs, looking down at those deep brown eyes and swollen red lips and each and every freckle that he could practically draw from memory now.

Ilya pushed Shane’s legs up and lined himself up. “I love you so much,” he murmured as he pushed in. Shane’s face was the picture of bliss, and Ilya could have stared at it forever. He wanted to overwrite Shane lying in a hospital bed, tired and hurt and pale. Seeing this face again, full of love and desire, safe and happy and flushed in his bed, was enough to make Ilya mushy and too honest.

“I love you too,” Shane said, smiling, “but can you fuck me now?”

Ilya laughed and started thrusting. “Can’t you let me be romantic tonight?”

“Later,” Shane said, pulling him into a breathless kiss. “We can take our time later.”

“Yes,” Ilya said and kissed his jaw, drifting down his neck, even as he snapped his hips harder. He was going to savor this even if Shane needed hard and fast. “Is this good?”

“So good.” Shane tugged his curls, pulling his head up so their eyes were locked. “Sorry for being impatient,” he continued, and Ilya loved his voice like this, wavering with pleasure and the rocking of his body. “I do love you, so much.”

“I know,” Ilya whispered. His chest ached with the knowledge, the sweet ache of being full and warm, and knowing that he was home and wanting to stay forever. “My Shane.”

One of Shane’s arms had migrated down to wrap around Ilya’s back, clearly unable to let it rest right now. It tightened, pulling Ilya as close as possible, his other hand still on the back of Ilya’s neck, holding him close. Ilya would never get over the effect those two little words had on Shane, even now, when Ilya had said them so many times.

“Ilya,” Shane moaned, and similarly, Ilya’s own body reacted to his name slipping from those perfect lips in that perfect voice, and probably always would, no matter how many times Shane said it. It was claiming, always pulling Ilya back in where he belonged.

Set off by names that held a million other words, they both reached orgasm together, Shane clenching around him and Ilya thrusting wildly a few more times, both clinging to each other. There was the usual crescendo of pleasure followed by release, but there was also some reaffirmation of everything they were, after Ilya’s emotional trip to say goodbye to a piece of his life and Shane’s close brush with the very real dangers of his career, and the anticipation from waiting days to do this again. It made it so much more heightened, his body a million nerve-endings, each perfectly stimulated and soothed by Shane Hollander wrapped around him.

Ilya kissed him as they both came down from their orgasms. He couldn’t get enough, still too much surging through him. He let himself slip free from Shane’s body and moved down, running his tongue through the cum on Shane’s stomach and stopping to suck a hickey into his perfect skin, knowing at least that Shane wouldn’t be undressing in a locker room anytime soon. Shane stroked his hair and watched with heavy eyes, but by the time Ilya was satisfied with the bloom of color on Shane’s perfect skin, Shane was tugging him back up, pulling him down for a hard kiss.

“Fuck,” Shane breathed into his mouth. “I love when you do that.”

“This?” Ilya brushed a thumb over the spot.

“Yeah. I want to do that to you too. Later, though. You promised me Shakespeare,” Shane said. “Well, after I clean up.”

“Here,” Ilya said, getting off the bed briefly to grab a clean towel off the laundry pile sitting on the chair across the room.

Ilya cleaned him up gently, then flopped back down on the bed with his phone in hand.

“Okay, Shakespeare. Here is the one from earlier, Sonnet 18.” He pulled it up on the Poetry Foundation website so he wouldn’t mix up the lines.

*“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer’s lease hath all too short a date;
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm’d;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature’s changing course untrimm’d;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st;
Nor shall death brag thou wander’st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”*

“That’s really about a man?” Shane asked.

“Yes, it’s part of a whole collection addressed to the Fair Youth...a man.”

“I don’t know why that’s so surprising, but I like it. The sonnet and the way you read it.”

“Well, there are a few more you might like then,” Ilya said.

“I think I’d like just about anything you read me.”

Warmth curled in Ilya’s chest. “Now you are being romantic.”

Shane laughed. “If you say so.”

“I went to that place that has your healthy sorbet. They had strawberry kiwi and mango passionfruit,” Ilya said.

“Which one did you get?”

“Both, obviously. You want?”

“Yeah. That sounds perfect right now.”

Ilya got off the bed and grabbed his boxer briefs to pull on, then tossed Shane’s to him. Ilya went to grab one of the containers out of the freezer and met Shane on the couch, where he had, unsurprisingly, already been joined by Vanya. Shane’s face was pinched while Vanya kneaded his bare thigh with his sharp little claws.

“Shoo,” Ilya said, sitting on the other end of the couch and stretching his legs onto Shane’s lap, displacing the little pest. Vanya simply moved over to Ilya’s thighs and resumed his little

biscuit-making ritual. It did hurt, but Ilya was more concerned with the strawberry kiwi sorbet that he was now spooning into his mouth.

“This one is delicious,” he said, mouth full.

“Do I get to try it?” Shane asked.

Ilya took another spoonful into his mouth, then leaned forward, which made Vanya jump down and scamper off. Shane rolled his eyes, but he didn’t hesitate to lean in and kiss Ilya, tongue sweeping into his mouth to taste the sorbet.

“Good, huh?” Ilya said, leaning back.

“Mhm. But I didn’t get enough.”

“Unfortunately, I only have this one spoon,” Ilya said, slipping it back into his mouth.

Shane was rolling his eyes again and sighing, but he was also smiling Ilya’s favorite little smile. “What am I supposed to eat from then?”

Ilya rocked his head back and forth. “Maybe here?” He let the spoon tip over, spilling a small scoop of sorbet onto his own chest, which made him wince at the cold of it. But it was entirely worth it when Shane’s warm mouth landed there only a second later, enthusiastically licking up the cold, sweet dessert and then dragging his cold tongue over to lick at one of Ilya’s nipples and then the other.

“Fuck,” Ilya breathed. He set the sorbet container down on the coffee table so he could thread his fingers through Shane’s hair and enjoy this turn of events he had orchestrated. Shane looked up at him, mischievous smile on his face as he worked his way down further, his tongue getting warmer and warmer as he worked.

Just as Shane got to the top of his waistband, someone’s phone rang.

“Ugh,” Ilya groaned. “That’s yours.”

“I better get it,” Shane said, getting up to grab his phone from his bag that hadn’t even made it to the bedroom.

“Hey Marly,” Shane said, bringing the phone up to his face and sitting back on the couch.

Ilya could only hear Shane’s side of the conversation.

“Yeah, my head is still fine. I’m resting the shoulder, but the PT said it’s looking good.” Shane paused, listening, then said, “Oh, tomorrow? Um, maybe. Hold on, okay?” He pushed a button on the screen and looked over at Ilya. “He wants to know if we can come to dinner tomorrow. At his house, with him and Svetlana,” Shane said, looking only slightly surprised.

“Do you want to?” Ilya asked.

Shane nodded. “I mean, yeah. Why not, right?”

“Okay, then, yes. Mallory and John will be here tomorrow, so I’ll be free to go.”

Shane touched the screen and brought it back to his ear. “We’ll be there. What should we bring? Yeah, no that’s fine. 7 is good, I think?” He looked at Ilya, who nodded. “Okay, yeah. See you then. Bye.”

Shane went to put his phone down on the coffee table and said, “Vanya, no.”

Ilya looked over to find Vanya licking the top of the sorbet and groaned. “Vanya, out. Out, out, out.” Ilya pushed him off the coffee table and grabbed the container. “I’ll scoop the top layer off...it’s still good. Right?”

“Sure,” Shane laughed. “I guess.”

“A thick layer,” Ilya added, getting up to take care of that and put the rest away.

They lazed around on the couch for a little while, the tv playing in the background. Eventually their earlier activity resumed, without the sorbet, and they managed to quickly shower and then make it back to the bed. Ilya made good on his promise to let Shane mark him, enjoying both the sensation of Shane’s mouth sucking at his skin and the marks left there by him for Ilya to look at whenever he wanted. It was just a more intimate version of their bracelets...a reminder. Shane seemed to enjoy it just as much. By the time he was done, Ilya was sporting hickies on his chest, stomach, and both thighs, and his cock was leaking, though not as enthusiastically as Shane’s.

After trading lazy blowjobs, Ilya offered to read something if Shane wanted.

“Actually,” Shane said. “I have something else I want us to read.”

“Oh? What is it?”

“Wait here,” Shane said. He got up and disappeared down the hallway.

Ilya sucked in a breath when he walked back in carrying the black journal. “Shane,” he started.

“Just wait, okay? I need to ask you something.”

Shane got back in the bed, leaving the door cracked so Vanya could follow him in. He jumped up on the laundry pile in the chair, and sat like a loaf on top of it, blinking at them.

“Some of your writing is in Cyrillic. I don’t know if you meant for me to translate it...I hope it’s okay that I did. It took a while, and I’ve only done a couple of pages.”

Ilya didn’t even remember what he’d written, but his stomach was dipping nervously anyway. “Yes, it’s fine. I gave it to you to do what you want with.”

Shane nodded. “This part,” he said, opening to a page with a few lines in English and a few in Cyrillic. “I think...I mean, I could be wrong, that’s why I need to ask. But I think this says *‘I don’t know if I’ll live when he leaves me.’* Or...or something like that. Does it?”

Ilya looked at it. Close enough. “Yes.”

Shane set the journal down and climbed on top of him, knees on either side of Ilya’s thighs, hands braced on Ilya’s shoulders. “You wrote that about me?”

Ilya nodded. “I don’t remember when.”

The truth, but what he didn’t say was that maybe a small part of him still thought it was true. Shane seemed to read it on his face.

“Ilya,” Shane said, his voice so soft and sad that Ilya had to look away. Shane didn’t let him, one of his big hands coming up to rest on the side of Ilya’s face, tilting it back toward him. “I’m not going to leave you. I love you. I want to marry you. I want to show you off to the whole world. I know...I know I’ve been reluctant...to come out and everything. But I’m going to do it. I talked to my mom about it some more today. I want to wait until the season ends, so it doesn’t distract the team from making the playoffs. But um, I’m going to tell them first, so they hear it directly from me. And then we’re probably going to let one of the big outlets announce it through an exclusive interview over the summer. That way everyone has time to get used to it while I’m like...you know, not contactable. While we’re at the cottage.” He brushed a thumb over Ilya’s cheek. “Is that okay?”

“What do you mean?” Ilya asked. He was trying to keep his face neutral, instead of letting it show the deluge of things sweeping through him.

“I won’t do anything without you. We have to make decisions together. Are you okay with that plan? Once I come out...you’ll be in the spotlight with me. It’s inevitable. Unless we keep hiding our relationship and never go anywhere together.”

“Do you want that?”

Shane shook his head. “No, I don’t. I’m tired of hiding. I want you to come to my games and be my date at all the stupid charity things. I want to go on vacation together. Besides the cottage, I mean. I want to do everything with you.”

“Fucking hell,” Ilya whispered and turned his head. Shane’s hand stayed on him, thumb still brushing his cheek, this time catching a tear and smearing it against his skin.

“Hey, hey,” Shane said, leaning down to kiss his cheek and then his mouth, soft and sweet, and Ilya wrapped arms around him and carefully rolled them over in the direction of Shane’s left arm going under first so his right didn’t take any weight. Ilya dropped kisses against his mouth and nose, his jaw and the patches of freckles under each eye, back to his lips.

“I want that, Shane Hollander,” he managed between kisses. “I want it all.”

They were too spent for more sex, but they kissed and nuzzled against each other, and somehow that was even better.

“You mentioned more Shakespeare,” Shane said eventually, his fingers combing slowly through Ilya’s curls.

“Yes.” Ilya grabbed his phone and pulled up the sonnet he wanted to read to Shane. “This one is Sonnet 116. Another of the ones written for the Fair Youth.

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments; love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no, it is an ever-fixèd mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come.
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom:
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.”*

“Wow,” Shane whispered. “I always think of the plays when I think of Shakespeare, but these are...kind of beautiful. Even if I’m not sure I’m interpreting it right.”

“The nice thing about reading old poems and sonnets is that you can interpret them however you want. This one has a few interpretations, but...most people take it as a meditation on true love...ever fixed, unshakable, standing the test of time. That is how I mean it, when I read it to you.”

Ilya kissed the top of his head, thinking of all the things that might be coming their way, ready to test them.

Shane nodded against him. “Yeah, I like that a lot. Will you read it again?”

Ilya did, the words wrapping around them both, followed by *I love yous* and more promises that they’d get through whatever was coming together.

Chapter End Notes

See you soon for the finale. We're going on a double date. We're going to the cottage. We're getting an HEA. Don't you worry.

Also, I once had to memorize a Robert Frost poem and recite it out loud in a class. I don't even remember when, but I'm sure it was traumatizing. That's probably why I remember it at all, so now Ilya gets to share that with me. Maybe for him it was an exercise to help him learn English. (Coming back to add that apparently having to memorize Frost is a common thing!! I had no idea until I got so many comments about it haha. Welcome to the club, Ilya Rozanov!)

Books mentioned in this chapter:

The Price of Salt by Patricia Highsmith (otherwise known as Carol, which is the name of the movie adaptation)

Poems & Sonnets mentioned in this chapter:

Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening by Robert Frost

Sonnet 18 by William Shakespeare

Sonnet 116 by William Shakespeare

[Book list doc](#)

threads: shadow_lilies1 (most active)

tumblr: shadowlilies1

Chapter 17: I work hard every day of my life

Chapter Notes

Yes, this was going to be the last chapter (again), but I did warn you I'm bad at estimating chapter length. And even with a little time jumping and not lingering on hockey (because that is *for sure* not what this fic is about, sorryyy), I still needed some time to get them to the true finale. So two chapters at once! Had to make sure it was really gonna end at 18 😊

Also, I know there have been fewer books/quotes in later chapters, and I'm sorry if that's disappointing, but that was always supposed to be the case. The more open and honest they get with themselves and each other, the less they need to rely on using those as crutches to say what they mean. Obviously they'll keep reading to each other forever because that is their thing, and there are still quotes being used, especially when they feel connected to them, but yeah. It's kind of the same way they can joke and tease each other more as they get more comfortable and secure in their relationship. This chapter in particular is light on book stuff because we needed to move through some other things to get to the finale. There is more book stuff in the final chapter though :)

Okay...see you at the end.

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

“I don’t want to,” Ilya whined. “I can’t go another round.”

“Stop being a baby,” Shane said, elbowing him in the side.

“Save it for your teammates. Free me from this abuse.”

Shane laughed. “Only one more, I promise.”

“Fine.” Ilya picked up the Wii U controller and got ready to get his ass beat at Mario Kart again.

Playing video games with Shane turned out to be an exercise in humiliation and frustration, and maybe Ilya was also turned on. Shane showed no mercy with his stupid Yoshi, in either Super Smash Bros. or Mario Kart. And every time Ilya won, Shane insisted on more rounds just so he could beat him at least twice to make up for it.

Ilya had worked in the store in the morning until Mallory showed up, and then he did some stocking and online orders until John came in. Shane had gone for a run and then appeared back in Ilya’s apartment with a Wii U and a Playstation 4, clearly bored and restless even though he’d only been sitting out of hockey for a few days. Now he was turning that energy to Ilya, who did not want to compete. Well, he had wanted to until he realized his boyfriend

was Competitive with a capital C, even off the ice. He'd gotten a taste of it at basketball, but now he didn't have the team buffer.

Ilya watched Yoshi zip ahead of him on the snowy course and then whooped loudly when he got three red shells and blasted all of them at Shane, one after the other, knocking his green shell out of the way and smacking him off course. He drove his Mario past the spluttering Yoshi while Shane cursed beside him on the couch.

"Cheater," Shane said.

"I can use my items as I see fit."

Ilya was tempted to slow down and let Shane catch up, because if Ilya won, Shane was going to make him play again. But Ilya was also competitive, if he was being honest, so he did not slow down. He got a trio of green shells and stayed firmly in first place until he was crossing the finish line on the final lap, satisfaction pulling a grin out of him.

"One more," Shane said immediately. "We still have time before we need to leave for Marly's."

"No," Ilya said. "You are very bad at losing."

"Well, it's a game. The whole point is to win."

"Maybe the point is to have fun?"

"Winning is fun," Shane said, so seriously that Ilya laughed. "We can play the MLH game instead." Shane's eyes darted to the Playstation.

"I am *never* playing that game with you," Ilya said, even though he thought it was very cute that Shane was on the cover.

"Liar."

Ilya gave him a look, and Shane grinned at him. Ilya rolled his eyes and looked away so Shane wouldn't see him smile.

"Come on, one more race," Shane said.

"Play online. Torture some other unsuspecting people for a while. I won fair and square. *That* was fun for me."

"Fine. A couple of rounds and then I'm going to shower," Shane relented.

Ilya shifted and laid on Shane's lap, forcing his hands holding the controller to rest on Ilya's upper arm. He watched Shane's dorky little mii character walk around on the globe while he waited for the room to fill with people and choose a course. Then he watched as the yellow guy in the cloud counted down. And then, moments after Shane accelerated past the starting line, Ilya turned onto his stomach and propped himself up so he could pull the waistband of Shane's sweats and boxers down and free his soft cock.

“Ilya, what the fuck are you doing?” Shane said without so much as looking away from the screen where he was in 1st place against 11 strangers.

“Helping,” Ilya said. He hesitated, waiting to see if Shane would tell him no, but his arms resting on Ilya's upper back moved to his head and pushed down in answer, so he took Shane into his mouth. He didn't stay soft for long, very quickly hardening and lengthening against Ilya's tongue. It was a nice change of pace...Shane's cock was never soft when Ilya's mouth was that close to it.

“You're going to make me lose,” Shane said, a moan following his words.

“Do you want me to stop?” Ilya asked this time, letting go for a moment.

Shane made a needy little noise, and his hips pushed up, looking for Ilya's mouth again. That was answer enough.

“Thought so.” He swallowed Shane's cock down again. He wanted to look over and see how Shane was faring on screen.

“Oh fuck,” Shane gasped, and Ilya couldn't tell if it was pleasure or if he'd just lost his lead.

The little back and forth of moans and breathy whimpers followed by curses and the occasional distressed Yoshi sound in the background continued as Ilya worked him with his mouth, switching between fast up and down movements and enthusiastic swirls of his tongue. Shane's hips were rocking up into his mouth, and he probably didn't even know he was doing it. The salty little beads of precome started to come faster, followed by Shane's “fuck, fuck, fuck,” and Ilya knew he was close. He pulled off and let Shane's cock, shiny and wet with spit, smack against his t-shirt covered stomach and turned to look at the screen. Shane was in 9th place. Ilya couldn't help it, he laughed.

“Asshole,” Shane whined playfully. “If you're going to make me lose, you could at least finish the job.”

“Ah, but I wouldn't want you to lose, now would I? Maybe we should just wait until later.”

Shane groaned in frustration. “Please.”

“Okay, fine,” Ilya said and leaned back down. He wrapped one hand around the base of Shane's cock and then sucked him off fast and sloppy, hand moving in tandem with his mouth and tongue until Shane was dropping the controller and holding his head down and coming down his throat.

Ilya didn't let him go until Shane was tugging at his hair, squirming and saying, “Ilya,” in his high, breathy voice. He sat up and kissed Shane, then remembered the game and looked at the tv to see the finish order listed on the screen, with Shane's Yoshi in 4th place.

“How the fuck did you get back into 4th place?” Ilya asked, incredulous. He started questioning his skills, and then he remembered Shane still came in under 3 minutes.

“I didn't want to lose points,” Shane said.

Ilya rolled his eyes. "Only you would care about Mario Kart points." He flopped back in the opposite direction, letting his legs swing onto Shane's lap, and his head rest on the other end of the couch, figuring Shane would be back to his game for a while. But the next thing he knew, Mario Kart was back to the home screen and Shane was between his legs, pulling at his waistband.

"How many points do I get for this?" Shane asked and then wrapped his lips around the head of Ilya's cock, tongue flicking against him in just the right spot.

"Depends," Ilya gritted out. "If you can make me come in under 3 minutes, you win."

Shane immediately pulled off and reached over to light up his phone screen on the coffee table...presumably to check the time, which made Ilya laugh until Shane was swallowing him down again with gusto. Ilya was lost to it quickly, letting his head fall back against the couch and moaning unabashedly because Shane was absolutely devouring him.

"Fuck, Shane, so good."

Shane was bobbing up and down, stopping every so often to suck at the head of his cock, his tongue doing something Ilya wanted to focus on more, but then Shane was swallowing him down again, letting Ilya hit the back of his throat. Shane was also moaning around him, which would have been sexy whether it was for his benefit or because Shane couldn't help himself, but he suspected it was the latter.

Maybe he would have tried to hold off on coming a little longer, just to make sure he won this competition, but then one of Shane's hands was snaking between his legs and pushing against his ass until one finger slipped through and pressed against his hole, then moved up and pressed even harder against his taint. Ilya came so hard his vision went spotty and his whole body jerked against the couch and up into Shane's hot mouth. Before he'd even properly regained awareness, Shane's mouth disappeared, replaced with his hand gently cradling Ilya's cock. It was kind of nice, warm and caressing and not overstimulating, except Ilya quickly realized it was because Shane was leaning over to look at his phone again.

"I win." Shane grinned at him.

Ilya groaned. "Looks like a tie to me. Get up here."

Shane tucked him back into his sweatpants and then crawled up until he was lying fully on top of Ilya, still smiling down at him.

"What do I win?"

"Hmm. No prize for ties. Also, I think this was the prize anyway," Ilya said.

Shane shook his head and then kissed him lazily for a while, fingers combing through Ilya's curls. "You said I'd get a prize if I win...I want a prize."

"Hm, fine. After we get home from Marly's, I will fuck you however and wherever you want. Yes? And then I will read whatever you pick."

“You were going to do that anyway.”

Ilya couldn't argue that. “What would you like then?”

Shane was staring down at him, biting his bottom lip. “There is one thing...”

“Tell me.” Ilya's mind went straight to sex, hoping for something wild.

“I don't like sleeping without you anymore,” Shane said.

Not what he was expecting, but... “Yes, same.”

“I think we shouldn't then.”

“Okay,” Ilya said. “You are going to tell the MLH no more road trips for the Raiders?”

Shane smiled and shook his head. “I mean when I'm home.”

“We already sleep together when you're home.”

Shane tossed his head back, which just put his chin above Ilya's mouth, so he bit it. Gently. But it made Shane squawk and tilt his head down again, and Ilya bit his lip instead, then kissed it.

“You're distracting me,” Shane said.

“Sorry. Continue.”

“I was trying to say...or ask, at least...if maybe we should...move in together?” Shane let his forehead drop down to rest against Ilya's, eyes closed. “Or is it too soon?”

Ilya huffed a laugh. “If so, then everything we do is too soon. But it works for us, so who cares.”

He realized, with a little jolt, that Shane asking hadn't even been a surprise. It felt right. Like maybe, finally, everything was...real.

“You want me to move into your apartment?” Ilya asked. It would be an easy commute, but this apartment...

“What? No,” Shane said firmly. “I thought...I love your place. The store and...I don't know. It just feels like home here.”

Ilya wrapped his arms and legs around Shane, squeezing him tight. “You want to move in here?”

“I know there probably isn't space for all my stuff, but I can keep my apartment for now while we figure it out,” Shane said, nuzzling his face into Ilya's neck for a second, then moving back up to look at him.

"I can make room in the second bedroom for some," Ilya said. "Vanya will be much happier with that arrangement."

"I think he's come to join the discussion." Shane let his head drop to the side so Ilya could see that Vanya was walking up his back.

"Shoo," Ilya told him, but Vanya persisted and lay down on Shane's upper back, staring at Ilya. "You're being weird to our new housemate."

"Housemate?" Shane said, eyebrows raised.

"Roommate? Cat sitter? Lowly subject #2?"

Shane wrinkled his nose and snorted. "Never mind. We should probably go shower and get ready. Still have to pick up the pie."

Ilya wanted to bask in the fact that Shane had asked to move in with him a little longer. Maybe it wasn't a surprise, and nothing would really change in their day-to-day lives, but it was another little piece of forever that Ilya had hardly let himself hope for.

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Shane had felt nervous walking into Cliff's place, and he wasn't even sure why at first. They were hanging out with their respective best friends, who both knew about and accepted them. But there was something different about being openly together in front of Svetlana and Rose than Cliff, who was a very real piece of the part of his life that clashed with the rest of it. Everything was just like normal though, Cliff greeting both him and Ilya with a bro-style half hug and then falling into conversation about hockey and how prepared they were for Tampa in a couple days.

"This is really good," Shane said during dinner, after taking a bite of the risotto. "I know Marly can't cook, so I'm assuming you made this?" He directed his question to Svetlana.

"Fuck off, Hollz. I can cook," Cliff said from his right.

"So you made it?"

"Well, no. But I helped. I caramelized the onions," Cliff said.

"He did," Svetlana agreed. "But only after he burnt the first batch."

Shane laughed. "Nice job, buddy."

The look Svetlana was giving Cliff, though...Shane recognized that *I'm charmed by everything you do* look.

When they were done eating, Cliff got up to clear the dishes away, and Shane took the opportunity to talk to him alone while Ilya and Svetlana stayed at the table in the dining room, chatting about the store.

“So, um, none of our other teammates know, right?” Shane asked. “About me.”

“I don’t think so. Honestly, they’re so wrapped up in their own lives and the usual locker room bullshit, I doubt it has even occurred to them.”

Shane nodded slowly. “Yeah. Did you already know? Before you met Ilya.”

Cliff took a deep breath and looked more thoughtful than Shane usually saw him. “I didn’t know, but the thought crossed my mind. It’s not really the kind of thing you ask someone in our line of work unless you want to get your ass kicked, right?”

Shane snorted half-heartedly. So many things about their line of work were not compatible with that part of his life.

"Even though you're my best friend, I didn't want to ask," Cliff continued. "What if I was wrong and you were offended? Or worse, what if I was right and you weren't ready for me to know and it caused some sort of rift between us? You're my captain, but the friendship part is more important, yeah? I know we're all pretty bad at remembering we're more than just hockey players sometimes. Anyway, I figured if there was anything there, you'd tell me when you were ready."

Shane's throat was tight. He was nodding, but words were taking their time. "Thanks, Marly. I um...Thanks."

Cliff slung an arm around his shoulders and pulled him in for a second.

“Do you have a plan? To tell the team?” he asked.

“I think so,” Shane said, and then explained his plan, mostly engineered by his mom, including the hardest step, which was to tell Coach and the GM, and then his teammates, all before the interview.

“That’s a solid strategy. What about keeping the team from talking before the interview comes out?” Cliff asked.

“I’m basically banking on Coach threatening them if they open their mouths,” Shane said with a shrug. “At that point, it won’t make a huge difference. It’ll come out anyway. On purpose. I guess if rumors start beforehand, maybe it’ll just soften the blow.”

“Well, just let me know when everything is going down. You know I’ll be right there with you.” Cliff stepped up beside him and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Thanks, Marly. I hope Connors won’t be pissed that I’ve kept it from him too.”

“He’ll be alright. He might say something stupid, because he’s an idiot. But it won’t change how he feels about you.”

“Do you think the rest of them will turn on me?” Shane asked. He didn’t really want to think about it. But he wanted Cliff to tell him the truth. Unless the truth was universally *yes*, and then maybe he just wanted Cliff to lie.

“Not all of them.” Cliff leaned back against the counter, arms crossed. “I think Ham might be a dick for a second, just because, but he has a gay cousin who he spends a lot of time with. You know, the one who’s always in his vacation pictures. They’re close. St-Simon could go either way. Half the shit that comes out of his mouth is just trash talk with no thought behind it. The rest...well, it's hard to know what a bunch of chronically concussed assholes will do.” Cliff paused for a second, then looked up at him. “Though I think Cam might be... supportive.”

Shane blinked. “You noticed that too?”

“Yeah, a couple of times. I think maybe he won’t be the only one, you know? I don’t know the stats, but imagine how many players might feel a little less alone once they find out. And that includes future players.”

“Yeah,” Shane said quietly. He had never really wanted to play that role, even though he already did in some ways, but not for being gay. He had enough on his shoulders. But it would be nice to know that maybe he helped someone. That would be worthwhile.

“So,” Shane said, changing the topic. “You and Svetlana. Seems to be going well?”

“Fuck yeah, dude,” Cliff said, genuine joy in his voice. “She’s great. We’ve been having a lot of fun.”

Shane raised his eyebrows.

“Get your mind out of the gutter, Hollz. I mean it, though.” Cliff’s face went all soft and serious. “I was right, huh? It’s kind of nice, having someone to come home to.”

Shane nodded, his mouth curving into a smile at the thought. “Yeah. It is.”

Eventually Shane followed Cliff into the living room, where Ilya was sitting on one side of the sectional, and Svetlana standing near the other side as she dug around for something in her purse. Shane watched as Cliff sat down and then pulled Svetlana onto his lap, drawing a giggle from her. For a moment, the old longing and *I wish I could do that* crept in, then he remembered, here and now at least, he could. He went to where Ilya was sitting and sat right next to him, one hand landing on Ilya’s knee, thighs pressed together, and Ilya draped an arm around his shoulders. Shane leaned into him. Such a normal thing that most people didn’t need to think twice about, and Shane felt like he’d just checked something off his bucket list, an absurd happiness coursing through him. Cliff was looking at them, a grin on his face, probably at least partially because of the beautiful woman in his lap, but he winked at Shane. It was a pretty recurrent Cliff move, but it was enough to make Shane’s chest go warm anyway. He squeezed Ilya’s knee and glanced over at him, finding a small smile on his face too.

When it started getting late, and Shane had indulged in more glasses of wine than he usually allowed himself, they told Cliff and Svetlana goodbye and made their way to the jeep.

“Keys,” Ilya said, holding a hand out.

“What?”

“You’re under the influence. You never drink that much.”

“Oh,” Shane said, realizing he did feel a little warm and buzzy, that pleasant floaty feeling making itself a bit more known now that he was walking in the cold night air. He gave Ilya the keys. The wine had also made him both chatty and clingy, one hand groping Ilya’s thigh the whole way home. Ilya didn’t complain, so Shane figured he didn’t mind.

“They seem really happy,” he said, fingers brushing up and down the material of Ilya’s jeans.

“Yes, I think so. I wasn’t expecting it. Sveta has never been one to seek out a relationship,” Ilya mused.

“Were you?”

Ilya glanced over at him. “No.”

“So I was just special?” Shane asked, smiling to himself.

“Yes, my Shane. Surely you know that by now.”

“Mm, nice to hear anyway.” Then Shane remembered their earlier talk. “Hey, we’re going home.”

Ilya looked at him again, smiling but a little confused. “Yes?”

“No, I mean. Home. Together. Because it’s our home together.”

Ilya chuckled softly. “Yes, sweetheart. Are you drunk?”

“No. Just a little buzzed.”

“From two glasses of wine,” Ilya said, amused.

“Well...Marly overfilled them.”

They made it back to Ilya’s apartment...their apartment...it still felt weird to think it, and Shane hadn’t technically moved in, unless you counted spending almost every night he was in Boston there and keeping a huge stash of clothes and food and books there. Their apartment.

Upstairs, Vanya was waiting to ambush them, meowing and rubbing on legs and trying his best to trip Shane, who picked him up.

“I need your dad’s attention right now,” Shane told him. “He owes me a prize.”

“What prize? You turned down my first prize.”

“Only because you were already going to fuck me however I want. Right?”

“Mm, yes,” Ilya said, wrapping arms around him from behind. “I like you like this. You going to tell me what you want?”

“I’ll show you.”

Ilya quickly moved around front to take Vanya from his arms. He kissed the top of the cat’s head and then set him down so he could drag Shane to the bedroom. Their bedroom. They barely got their clothes off before Shane was flat on his back on the bed with Ilya on top of him, a situation of his own making because he had Ilya tangled up in all his limbs and didn’t want to let go.

“I can’t reach the lube,” Ilya said between kisses. “You’ve got me wrapped up like an octopus.”

Shane did wish he had four more arms to put to use because his two were wrapped around Ilya’s lower and upper back, with one leg tight around his ass, the other around his thighs. Ilya was trapped, and his warm weight felt so good.

“I don’t want you to move,” Shane said.

“I will come right back.”

Shane let his limbs go loose while Ilya moved to get what they needed. He didn’t just feel loose and clingy from the wine, he realized. It was more than that. A sigh slipped from him just as Ilya’s weight settled on him again.

“What’s wrong?” Ilya asked.

“Nothing. I’m happy. Today was…” Shane got distracted by those intense eyes, like ponds under a setting sun in the low light of the lamp coming from his left. Deep enough to drown in, warm enough to bathe in.

“Shane,” Ilya said, looking down at him. He brushed Shane’s bangs back and let his thumb linger near his temple. “Today was what?”

“It was nice. I’m still really fucking scared. About telling my team. But,” he sucked in a breath. “I guess…it’s easier, knowing I have you no matter what happens. And now Marly. I don’t know. It’s more than I ever thought I’d be able to have, you know?”

“You should be able to have everything you want. But you are correct, no matter what happens, you have me,” Ilya said, and then he leaned down to kiss him. Shane let himself get lost in it for a little bit, long enough that his cock was leaking between their stomachs and he could feel it.

“Wait,” Shane said, breaking the kiss, thoughts catching up to him finally. “Are you happy?”

Maybe that was a big question to throw out while they were naked and hard and nearly past the point of talking, but Shane suddenly needed to know. He knew Ilya had hard days, that he’d been talked into seeing someone about it in the past by Svetlana. So Shane knew that it wasn’t a simple question. But he hoped maybe Ilya would tell him the truth anyway.

Ilya was looking down at him, kiss-swollen lips parted and sexy and distracting.

“I am happy, yes,” Ilya said. “This is more than I ever thought I’d have too. I thought...” Ilya dropped his head to the crook of Shane’s neck, partially muffling his next words. “I never thought I’d get to have this. And then you showed up here, with your big brown eyes and your beautiful freckles and you cared about what I had to say and you trusted me with the most important things.” Ilya lifted his head again, his eyes shinier than before. “And you love me.”

Shane smiled, his eyes burning. “Yeah. I do. More than anything.” He paused, wanting to remember the next words correctly. He reached up to brush his fingers through Ilya’s curls while he spoke. “Half of my soul, as the poets say.”

Ilya’s grin was luminous, still soft, but it lit up every fiber of Shane’s being.

“Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same,” Ilya whispered. He leaned down to capture Shane’s lips again. The kiss was gentle but deep, filled with so much, Shane wondered how it stayed in place between their lips, how it could fit there and in his chest and in this room. How could whatever this was even be real.

“I’ve heard that, I think. What’s it from?” Shane said when they broke apart, breathless and barely moving away from each other, lips brushing when he spoke.

“Wuthering Heights. I think I always secretly liked it, but I also thought it was too cheesy... not believable. Maybe it was just jealousy because I couldn’t imagine feeling anything big enough to write something like that. Now I believe it.”

“You can write all the cheesy, unbelievable stuff you want. I’d read every word,” Shane said.

“If I can find them, you will have them.”

Ilya kissed him again and then shifted down the bed between Shane’s drawn up legs until his hand wrapped around Shane’s cock.

“Hm, should I wax poetic about this for now? Blushing and weeping, just for me. The most beautiful one I’ve ever seen,” Ilya said, then bent to wrap his lips around the head, and whatever Shane might have responded was entirely lost to the moan he couldn’t contain. Ilya pulled his mouth off, letting one hand linger while the other clicked the cap of the lube off and poured some directly between his cheeks, a cold little shock against his skin.

One of Ilya’s fingers dragged through the lube and then circled his hole before pushing in, the stretch a welcome sensation tonight. Shane let his head fall back against the pillows, enjoying the double sensation of Ilya’s hands on him and in him, hips rocking up and down in a gentle sway, while Ilya’s eyes moved to a similar motion between his own hands and Shane’s face.

“That’s enough,” Shane said, as Ilya pressed a second finger in. “I don’t need it tonight. Want to feel you.”

“You will,” Ilya said, but he didn’t pull his fingers out right away. He did lean up so he could kiss Shane’s lips and then his jaw, distracting him until he finally removed his fingers. “Like this?” Ilya asked, “Or on your stomach?”

Shane shook his head. “Like this.”

Ilya settled between his legs. “Your shoulder is okay?”

Shane nodded and gripped Ilya’s hips hard, pulling him closer. Ilya reached between them to line himself up, then pushed against him until he slipped in. The stretch, the feel of him, the weight of him, the love that was swirling around in those depthless blue-green eyes...Shane was drowning again, and he didn’t want to be saved.

“Kiss me,” he said, voice already gone low and desperate.

Ilya kissed him, kept kissing him, moving from lips to neck to ear and back, and Shane was moaning his name, and Ilya was whispering something in Russian into his ear, sending a shiver from the back of his neck to the tip of his cock where it bounced between their stomachs on every thrust. Even when they couldn’t hold the kiss any longer, Ilya stayed close enough that their noses kept pressing together.

Shane could tell when Ilya was getting close, his hips losing their rhythm a little and his hand reaching between them to fist around Shane’s cock so that it pushed up through his fingers on every thrust. Shane came first, one hand tight in Ilya’s curls, the other raking down his back, no doubt leaving marks. Both of those things together with the way his body clenched around Ilya’s cock seemed to send him over the edge soon after, his hips rocking a few more times while he panted into Shane’s neck. Shane held him there by his hair, more gently now, his other hand resting lightly at the back of Ilya’s neck. Shane wanted to stay like that all night, bodies still connected, Ilya’s weight on him, sweaty and too warm, but he didn’t care. Ilya made no move to get up.

“Fuck,” Shane said. “I needed that.”

Ilya snorted and lifted his head. “You always need that.”

Shane only smiled and kissed him before adding, “Also need you to read something. Have anything in mind?”

Ilya closed his eyes and rested his forehead against Shane’s. “Give me a second. I will think of something.”

But then Shane wondered what Ilya needed right now. He was going to ask, but somehow he knew the answer would be something along the lines of “I have what I need.” He kind of figured that would always be Ilya’s answer, though he would make sure to ask more often anyway. Just because Ilya said it, didn’t mean it was true. Not because Ilya would be lying, but Shane suspected sometimes he didn’t even know he needed more, maybe wouldn’t even know how to ask for it.

People are very fond of giving away what they need most themselves.

Ilya pulled out of him and started to roll off and get up, but Shane grabbed his wrist. “Stay,” he said. “Let me.”

Ilya gave him a curious look, but he laid down on his back and watched Shane grab the towel from the bed and do a cursory wipe up before heading to the bathroom. He came back with a wet washcloth and gently wiped Ilya’s stomach and cock and took extra time kissing his chest and hip and inner thigh while he did it. Ilya’s hand combed through his hair, an unreadable look on his face. Shane crawled up the bed to kiss his lips, and Ilya moaned into his mouth, but it sounded sweet and satisfied now.

When Shane finally, reluctantly let Ilya’s lips go, he got rid of the washcloth and went to the living room to look through Ilya’s shelves. They still had *The Price of Salt* to finish if they wanted, but Shane thought something a little more romantic might be the move tonight. Luckily he didn’t have to decide.

“Christopher Marlowe,” he heard Ilya shout from the bedroom.

Shane scanned the shelves until he found *The Complete Poems and Translations* by Christopher Marlowe, nestled among several other books of poetry.

“This?” Shane asked, walking back into the bedroom holding the book.

Ilya nodded. “I told you I would think of something.” Ilya took the book from him and flipped to a page. “Something relevant to your prize today.”

“Which prize?”

“Moving in. Though you did not have to earn that. I would have asked already, I just didn’t think you’d want to move into my little place with its tiny tub and its boring appliances and nowhere good to park.”

Shane cupped his jaw. “I don’t care about any of that. Only you. And him.” He nodded at the open door where Vanya was slinking through, headed for the chair he liked to perch on.

Ilya was looking up at him with big, awestruck eyes. “I love you,” he said thickly.

“I love you too. Now what does Christopher Marlowe have to do with me moving in?”

Ilya smiled and held the book up, open to a page. “This one is called *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love*. It is written about a woman, but Marlowe was probably queer, so we will pretend.”

“Were all the good writers queer?” Shane laughed.

“Depends on who you ask.” Ilya cocked his head, smiling. “But this poem is, hmm...maybe a little old-fashioned sounding. More so than some of the others. But it’s sweet.”

Shane snuggled up next to him as Ilya began to read.

*“Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove,...”*

Shane turned onto his side so he could easily set one hand on Ilya’s chest, first feeling his heartbeat and the rumble of his voice as he read through the verses, then running his fingers downward through the fine hairs on his stomach.

*“...And if these pleasures may thee move,
Come live with me, and be my love.*

*The Shepherds’ Swains shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May-morning:
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me, and be my love.”*

“That one was sweet,” Shane said. “I’m not going to lie though, that’s the kind of thing I used to think of when I thought of poetry, and while I didn’t dislike it, I wasn’t really eager to read it. But now that I know so much, I appreciate it a lot more.”

“That makes me very happy, Shane Hollander,” Ilya said and kissed the top of his head. The full name still had an effect on him.

“Plus, everything sounds good when you read it.”

After the book was set down and the lamp was off, Shane turned over so Ilya could spoon against him while they talked.

“Since tomorrow is Monday, we can hang out before I leave for Tampa right?” Shane asked. He was still flying out with the team, even though he wasn’t cleared to play yet.

“Yes. What do you want to do?”

“I was thinking I might go get some more of my stuff to bring over. Is there room for more books?”

"Always room for books."

"We can go through them and get rid of the duplicates. Does One Good Memory take book donations?"

"Of course," Ilya said and rubbed his nose against Shane's neck. "That's very nice of you. But you should keep your books. We have room."

Shane nodded. "I'm also going to clean out the ones in my closet."

He felt Ilya go still behind him. "Yeah?"

"It's time, I think." Shane knew it was silly to have big feelings about pulling books out of a locked closet. But sometimes things really were just on the nose for a reason.

"Plenty of room on the shelf in the living room."

For all to see.

"Maybe after that I'll go for a run," Shane pushed on. "But then we can play the MLH game."

"Mm, no. I will open the store on my day off just so I don't have to do that."

Shane laughed. "Come on, I promise I'll be nice."

"I don't believe you, Mr. Competitive."

"You'll change your mind eventually."

"We will see," Ilya said and kissed the back of his neck. "Go to sleep."

Shane lay awake a little longer, a smile stuck on his face. He still had so many things to worry about, but none of them felt as heavy when there was a warm arm over his waist and the faint whisper of breath on the back of his neck and a future with the man he loved waiting for him.

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Shane's shoulder healed enough to start playing again after two weeks, and the team was no worse for wear. In fact, they played well enough to earn their spot in the playoffs...a surprise to no one. Moving in with Ilya hadn't changed their daily lives, but it did have a positive effect on Ilya's overall financial situation, which in turn allowed him to keep John and Mallory on the payroll. That had been a relief to Ilya, but also to Shane, who had really taken to John and his husband. They'd had dinner with them a few times, learning more about Allen, who was a few years younger than John and not quite ready to retire from being a correctional nurse. He had a lot of stories about his line of work, and about their lives together. A whole joyful life.

Ilya suspected that seeing a happily married and out gay couple just existing in the world with successful careers and fulfilling lives was soothing to Shane, even if Shane himself might not have realized it in so many words. Each time they hung out with John and Allen, Shane seemed a little lighter after, even as the end of the season ticked ever closer, and the prospect of actually coming out loomed larger.

Ilya had his own worries. Despite Shane's contributions to their living costs, the store had still not been on a good trajectory overall. He'd spent time on reddit and forums for other indie bookshop owners, wanting to know how they were making it work under the crushing foot of Amazon, when even Barnes & Noble was struggling to hang on.

One day in March, when Shane was on the road, Ilya started the day with a little shock. He opened his online order inventory to find a total order number he had never expected to see in one 24 hour period. Most of them had come in late the previous night, continuing through the morning, with more popping up in real time. He pulled out his phone to see if he'd missed

something, but he had no calls or texts, and he wasn't sure who would even have contacted him about it anyway.

He texted Malloy first, asking if she knew what was going on or if his software was glitching and pouring out delayed orders. Though even if delayed, this would have been weeks, or more likely months, worth.

Mallory: I don't think so. I had orders come through yesterday like usual. Packed up two and gave them to the delivery guy when he came.

Ilya: okay thanks

Ilya: I'll figure it out

Ilya: hope you're ready to help pack more today because this is going to take days

A problem he was happy to have, even if he didn't know why. The answer came later in the morning when Shane called.

"Hey, how's your day?" Shane said.

"I'm having a weird one. I woke up to hundreds of online orders for the shop."

"Oh. That's good right?"

"Very good. But I usually only get a few on a good day."

Shane was quiet for a second, then said, "Hold on."

Ilya could hear muffled movement and then an "Oh!" before Shane came back on and said, "It was Rose."

"Rose?"

"She texted me yesterday to say hi, and she mentioned her new role got announced. For that YA book, remember? I just looked at her instagram and she posted about it, with a picture of the book."

"Okay..."

"She dropped the name of your store and told people to go read the book."

Ilya opened up the list of orders, and sure enough, a good many of them were for The Diviners. Even after his in-stock copies sold out, people kept ordering. There would have been a warning that orders wouldn't ship for weeks, since Ilya would have to order more stock, but apparently Rose Landry's influence knew no bounds. Not all the orders were for The Diviners, but they did skew to Libba Bray and other YA books, as if people just wanted to order from the place Rose mentioned. Well, Ilya certainly wasn't complaining.

"Tell Rose she did me a very big favor," Ilya said, still in slight disbelief. "Holy shit." As he watched, more orders popped up.

“I’m texting her now,” Shane said, and his voice got further away for a minute. “She says she would have done it sooner if she’d known.”

“Also tell her I said congrats on the role,” Ilya added. More muffled noises.

“Okay, I did.” Shane’s voice was back at the speaker. “So, this is really good right?

“Yes, very good. This is months' worth of what I usually get, all in a single day,” Ilya said. “Dating Shane Hollander with his famous friend is apparently the secret to staying in business.”

Shane laughed. “Happy to help then. I gotta run, but I’ll text you later before the game. Love you.”

“Okay, love you too.”

The surprises weren’t done yet. When Ilya opened for the day, there were people waiting at the door. In fact, he’d never had so many people in his store at one time, save for during the holiday rush. Definitely not at 9am on a Thursday. He’d never been so happy to see Mallory, who walked in and looked at him in comical confusion. He just grinned at her.

“What is going on?” she asked, joining him behind the counter as he rang up a customer.

“Rose Landry,” he said by way of explanation, and the confusion on her face only increased.

When they finally got a break in customers, he gave her the full explanation.

“Wow. I mean...I guess I never really heard about him being friends with her,” she said.

They’d never had a conversation about Shane specifically. Obviously Mallory knew him well enough by now, had spoken to him plenty of times and seen him come and go from the store since the beginning, but Mallory wasn’t a hockey fan and didn’t care one way or the other that he was the captain of their home team. She also didn’t seem like the type to follow celebrity gossip.

It was a weird day, but Ilya was ecstatic once he got over the surprise and got through some of the orders...the ones for books in stock, at least. When John arrived, Ilya went immediately to order more stock, both to fulfill orders and for the store that had been quite picked over. People were coming in, and instead of leaving empty-handed when they found out The Diviners was long out of stock, they picked something else. Ilya happily chatted with everyone, many of whom didn’t even know his store existed before Rose’s post. Maybe he hadn’t done such a good job at advertising.

He filled Shane in when they spoke again later in the afternoon.

“Maybe I can help too,” Shane had said afterward.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’m obviously not as famous as Rose, but people in Boston know me. And the team’s social media manager has been getting on us all to use our accounts more. Promoting local businesses seems like a good idea.”

Ilya stopped what he was doing. “Promoting how?”

“Like posting about your store. Showing that I go there.”

“You will be giving us away before you’re ready.”

“Not really. I can just say that it’s where I buy books. And I mean...even if people suspect something is up...it doesn’t really matter. They’re going to find out soon anyway.”

Ilya let out a long breath. He hated that he still doubted it. It wasn’t Shane himself that he doubted, more just the entirety of having the life he wanted. The life he basically already had. He still wanted to go on dates, be public, let Shane meet his friends...waiting a few months was really nothing compared to what he’d be gaining. But sometimes his mind liked to play tricks on him, convincing him that Shane still had time to change his mind, even though logically he knew Shane wasn’t going to do that to him.

“Not yet,” Shane continued. “But you know, when the hype from Rose’s post dies down maybe? Fuck, I’d hang out in the store anytime if it meant more people coming in and spending money.”

Yeah, Ilya definitely shouldn’t doubt him.

“Thank you. You don’t ever have to do that. But I appreciate the thought.”

“I’m serious,” Shane said. “We can test it out, see if it helps. Marly would do it too. Make posts on social media or whatever. He loves the store, even though he only comes in to see Vanya.”

Ilya laughed because that was true. Sometimes Marly, or Marly and Svetlana, would stop by just to say hey and pet the cat. It was kind of sweet, if he was being honest. He could have ended up with a worse built-in friend from both Shane and Svetlana, the latter of whom seemed very happy and in love. Sometimes Marly texted him just to shoot the shit and tell him something funny that happened at practice or recommend a new band. Ilya knew Shane was right...Marly would promote the store too, with no hesitation.

The effects of Rose Landry lasted quite a while. The store stayed busier than usual, online orders kept coming in, though not in such a large volume as the first few days. It was enough to let Ilya consider hiring even more help for the summer. He finally allowed himself to start thinking ahead to the weeks he’d be gone at the cottage, and knowing Mallory had things under control, with enough help to make everyone’s lives easier, would let him actually relax and enjoy the time away.

Everything felt too idyllic really, and Ilya had maybe been waiting for the other shoe to drop. But instead, things kept getting better. The Raiders breezed through the first round of the playoffs, handily defeating Toronto in five games...quite embarrassing for them. Ilya knew

the win was a little sweeter for Shane because of Dallas Kent and his continued assholery on the ice. For Ilya, it was sweet because it was his first time watching the playoffs and actually caring deeply about the outcome. That led to him having a deathgrip on the seat or Svetlana's wrist every time another player got too close to Shane on the ice, flashbacks of him lying in a hospital bed still crisp and clear in his mind.

Ilya and Svetlana had attended the games in Boston together, and cheered on their boyfriends from home for the games that had taken place in Toronto. It was the most fun Ilya had ever had watching hockey, and if someone had told him this time last year that he'd be watching the MLH playoffs this eagerly now, he'd have laughed in their face. Besides the excitement of watching Shane, it was nice to have Svetlana, who had always been enthusiastic, reach another level of unhinged hype woman when her own boyfriend was down there too. It was infectious.

Boston played Tampa for the second round of the playoffs, and that one was not a breeze. The Raiders came out the winners, but it went all the way to game 7. The whole team was exhausted and bruised, sporting new injuries and some a few missing teeth. Shane's birthday passed during that round, and the game that night had been in Tampa. Ilya had at least talked to him on the phone after the game.

"I'm too fucking tired to do anything tonight. Even jerk off," Shane said. "And I hate that because all I want right now is you."

"You have me. We can celebrate your birthday anytime. And you won tonight...pretty good way to celebrate."

"Yeah, for sure. The guys sprayed me with water and sang Happy Birthday in the locker room. Marly tried to lift me above his head, but I made him stop. God, imagine him being out with a back injury because of that."

Shane's voice was happy, but Ilya could hear the exhaustion in it.

"I will have a massage and whatever you want to eat waiting for you when you get home tomorrow," Ilya said. "Think about it and let me know."

"You don't have to do all that. The massage sounds good though."

"Happy ending still guaranteed."

Shane laughed. "I still remember the first one. I was already so in love with you," he sighed.

"Mm, me too. Even though you made me walk up 8 flights of stairs."

Shane groaned. "Sorry about that."

"I forgive you." Ilya felt a weight on his legs, which were stretched out in front of him on the bed. "Vanya is here to say Happy Birthday." Ilya moved the phone to the cat's face, and Vanya, cooperative as ever when it came to Shane, let out a long meow.

“Thanks, Vanya. I miss you too,” Ilya heard Shane say as he brought the phone back to his own ear.

“He’s been sleeping on your pillow. Which was cute at first, but I snuggled into him while half asleep this morning, and he bit my lip. I bet he thought it was funny.”

Shane laughed. “Maybe he learned that from me. You like it when I do it.”

“Well, you better stop teaching him things. If he tries to bite my asscheek next, he’s going to have to find somewhere else to sleep.”

“See...this is why he can’t be in the room for that part. Besides, those are mine only,” Shane said, and the possessiveness in his voice did make Ilya’s cock twitch. He ignored it for his poor, exhausted boyfriend’s sake.

“Only yours. You should get some sleep while you can.”

“I will. But um, can you read something? It is my birthday after all.”

Ilya smiled, even though Shane couldn’t see it. No matter how many times he asked, Shane wanting him to read out loud filled him with such warmth and love he could hardly stand it. It was something he hadn’t done, or had done for him, in so long before Shane came into his life.

“Of course, *любовь моя*. You want me to pick? Poem or book?”

“Yeah, you pick. Poem would be nice.” Shane’s voice was already taking on the edge of sleep, like just the anticipation was enough to lull him.

“Okay. How about a classic?” Ilya put the phone on speaker so he could pull up the one he wanted.

*“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal grace.
I love thee to the level of every day’s
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood’s faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.”*

There was a long enough silence after he finished that he wondered if Shane had already fallen asleep, but then he heard rustling.

“I know that first line, but I don’t think I’ve ever heard the rest of that. It’s nice. I’d like to hear it again one day when I’m not sleepy,” Shane said.

“It’s not my favorite one...too much faith and God. But I like the message that love is... something that we can see and do every day, but it still transcends those things too.”

“Fuck,” Shane whispered. “Sometimes you’re too smart, and it’s really sexy.”

Ilya laughed. “So are you.”

“I wish I wasn’t so fucking tired. My shoulder hurts too, so I don’t think I could do anything properly anyway. I hope it makes it through the rest of playoffs.”

“Ah, well, no more jerking off for you. Only I can do that until you have time to heal again.”

“Yeah,” Shane said sleepily. “Definitely gonna need that massage tomorrow.”

Ilya snorted. “Go to sleep. Dream of me.”

“Always. Love you.”

“Love you too. Goodnight.”

Ilya rolled over and buried his face in Shane’s pillow before Vanya could steal it.

-

Going all the way to game 7 with Tampa meant less rest for the team. Four days between game 7 of round 2 and game 1 of the Eastern Conference Final. The team was in good shape, all things considered, but they were going up against Scott Hunter and the Admirals. Hunter was good, but he often fizzled out before or during the early rounds of the playoffs. Shane was both excited and worried about facing them for the ECF. Not many other players in the league gave him a run for his money, but Hunter did when he was on his game. And he was on his game this season. The Raiders studied game tape, went over plays, did everything they could to prepare while trying to let their bodies recover.

Ilya, Svetlana, and Shane’s parents were at the first two games in Boston. Between Shane’s tickets and Cliff’s, they’d had no problem making sure they could all be there. Shane was very aware of them, sitting in the crowd together. Even if no one knew yet who Ilya was to him, having the three people he loved most just existing together in this place while he did his thing felt like enough to fuel him all the way to the cup. And maybe it did at least fuel a win the first night. Boston won game 1 but not 2, and that win didn’t come easy. The Admirals were hungry for it, playing like someone had lit a fire under their asses.

That became even more clear when Boston lost games 3 and 4 in New York. Game 5 was back in Boston, and they needed the win to stay in contention. Svetlana and Ilya were there again. Shane could always feel the difference when Ilya was there. He might’ve sounded crazy if he said it out loud, but that didn’t make it any less true.

In the locker room before the game, he wrapped and secured the gold bracelet around his wrist and texted a picture of it to Ilya. Ilya sent one back of his own resting on his wrist.

I.R.: always with you

Shane scrubbed a hand down his face, trying not to let anything bubble up to the surface right now. Not while he was already half on edge and feeling the pressure. He texted back a heart and put his phone away. He glanced over at Cliff, who was also on his phone, smiling softly. Shane wondered if that was how he'd looked over the last several months. No wonder Cliff had known.

"Ready to do this?" Cliff said when he put his phone down.

"Ready as can be. Hunter is playing like he has something to prove this season. And Bennett is freakishly good. But we're better. Watch out for Vaughn out there too."

Coach came in to give the team a quick talk before the game. When he was done, Shane stepped up and kept his own words brief.

"You all know what to do. We work well together. Maybe Hunter and the Admirals have got something to prove, but so do we. Forget the last two games, nothing matters but what we do tonight. Trust each other, remember where you're supposed to be, and keep it clean. Let's go."

Cliff stepped up and did his own hype work. He was always much better at that part, and Shane was happy to let him do it. Everyone was raring to go by the time he was done, knocking helmets and sticks and chanting for New York's demise.

The first period went well, commencing in a 1-1 tie, with Cliff scoring the first goal for Boston. Back in the locker room for intermission, Shane watched Cliff grab his phone and send a text, the smile on his face giving away exactly who he was texting. Yeah...Shane was pretty sure he'd been just as obvious. He picked up his own phone and texted Ilya. He didn't really have anything in particular to say, but he usually texted him during the game anyway.

Shane: Cliff is on his phone with the dumbest smile on his face.

I.R.: Sveta too

Shane: I'm pretty sure I look the same every time I text you. No wonder he figured us out.

I.R.: yes, you are very obvious

Shane snorted and looked over at Cliff, who winked at him. When he looked back at his phone, the I.R. at the top of his screen caught his eye. No more of that. He went to Ilya's contact and changed it to Ilya Rozanov, then took a screenshot and sent it to him.

Ilya: don't make me cry at a hockey game

Shane smiled and sent another heart emoji before he put his phone away and got ready to hit the ice again.

The second period saw Boston score once, New York not at all. Shane had been the one to score, but he also took Carter Vaughn to his right shoulder during a play. It wasn't much of a hit, but his shoulder was already suffering. Everyone was suffering from something that deep into the playoffs, so he sucked it up and got it taped by one of the trainers before the third period.

Back on the ice, he let his eyes find Ilya in the crowd for just a moment. He raised his right wrist to his lips and saw Ilya smile and nod in acknowledgement. Maybe that had given him the boost he needed to score again, putting them up by 2. Not for long, though. Hunter seemed to have found his second wind too and scored once, followed by another goal from Vaughn, tying them up again at 3-3.

The clock was ticking down, and Bennett was still blocking everything. He didn't even look like he was breaking a sweat. Shane was sweating. Especially when the Admirals scored again, putting them at 3-4 with almost no time left on the clock. Boston's only hope was to score and force them into overtime.

Shane put everything else out of his mind and focused on the ice and the puck and his teammates around him. He had the puck, moving through the Admirals' defense with what seemed like ease at first, but one of their defenseman was there, forcing him to pass to Cliff, who took the puck and kept it going. Shane got clear, and Cliff passed the puck back to him, and Shane was in place, the goal in his sights, no one else open. He took the shot. Any other night, any other goalie...but Bennett wasn't having it. He dove, the puck caught him in the shoulder and bounced off right as the clock hit zero. And just like that, Shane's season was over.

-

It was late when he got home. He'd had to do all the usual post-game media stuff, listen to Coach's final speech for the season, sit around with his teammates and try not to sulk while they peeled gear off their weary, aching bodies for the last time until the next season. It was solemn, even more so because it was a home loss. Maybe later, when the sting wore off, he could feel good about it being Hunter and the Admirals they lost to. It would have been a harder pill to swallow from other teams. Shaking Hunter's hand had been bearable, respectable even. He wondered if it would finally be Hunter's year to take the cup.

He dragged himself up the stairs at One Good Memory, a little bit of energy returning to him with the knowledge that Ilya was waiting. He'd barely gotten the door open when strong arms were wrapping around him.

"Hey," Shane said quietly.

"Hi. How are you feeling?"

Shane shrugged and buried his face in Ilya's neck, the familiar clean woodsy scent of him a balm on his bruised body and soul.

"It's never fun, especially when we were so close."

Ilya nodded and kissed his temple. “You played well. All of you. The Admirals just really had their shit together this year.”

“Yeah. Haven’t seen Hunter play like that in a while. Better to lose to him than someone worse. Like Kent. I actually like Hunter.”

“Yes, he seems like your type. Very boring, kind of shaggy. Like Jon Snow.”

Shane laughed weakly. “Shut up. You’re my type.”

Ilya leaned back enough to kiss him. “What do you need tonight? Food? Massage? Sleep?”

“I had a shake at the arena. Can’t stomach anything else tonight. I wouldn’t say no to a massage, though.”

“Come on,” Ilya said, letting him go. Vanya was there too, winding through his legs.

“Hey, bud. No more traveling for a while. We can spend lots of time together.”

And that was the difference between this year and all the others when the Raiders didn’t make it to the cup final. The usual disappointment was there. The guilt for missing that last goal was there. But there was also...more. Instead of spending his break alone at the cottage, he would get to spend it with Ilya and Vanya. He’d been looking forward to it so much, now that it was finally almost here, it clouded out the disappointment a little. Alleviated some of the guilt. He was sore and tired and still acknowledging that another season without a cup was in the books and he could never get it back, but he was also stripping naked in Ilya’s bedroom—their bedroom—so Ilya could give him a massage and then curl up against him and sleep, happy and warm in his arms. It was just so much more than he ever thought he’d have, than he’d ever had before, cup or no cup.

He stopped himself there, because beyond that, there was now no barrier between him and his coming out plan. They’d have their typical post-season exit interviews and meetings and medical checks over the coming days. And somewhere in there, already penciled into everyone’s calendars, was a meeting with Coach and the GM, followed by a team meeting where he’d have a few minutes to say his piece. If he thought too hard about that right now, he wouldn’t be able to relax, and all he wanted after a long, hard season was to relax with Ilya.

Once he was naked, including the tape that had been on his shoulder, he laid face down on the towel Ilya had spread on their bed, face turned to the side so he could watch Ilya strip down. There was a small bottle of massage oil waiting on the nightstand, and Ilya poured a generous amount into his hand before he climbed onto the bed and straddled Shane’s waist. Ilya’s oiled up hands landed on his shoulders first.

“Is this okay?” Ilya asked. “Your shoulder hurts?”

“It’s sore, but you’re not hurting me.”

Ilya's thumbs dug into his muscle, pushing firm circles into him. It was heaven. Shane didn't know or care what kinds of noises were coming from him right then. He might have been moaning, his eyes were definitely rolling back, he felt floaty and tingly and warm all over. It was a little like the feeling of someone playing with your hair and massaging your scalp, but much, much better and soothing every inch of him.

"It sounds like you are enjoying this," Ilya said close to his ear.

Shane nodded. He couldn't even open his eyes. "So good," he slurred. "You've gotten really good at this."

Ilya moved further down his back, his fingers still pressing in firmly, really digging deep into his exhausted muscles. He slowly worked his way down, over Shane's lower back, his ass, which he spent quite a while on, then down his thighs and calves, even his feet, which were always worse for wear after so much skating.

"I could come just from this," Shane said. "Probably."

"You want to?"

"No. Want you."

"I think we should give your body a rest tonight, don't you?"

Shane shook his head. Or at least he tried to.

"Turn over," Ilya said.

Shane could barely even do that. Now that his body had been given permission to relax, it was taking it very seriously. Ilya helped him maneuver onto his back, then continued the massage, starting at his shoulders again, then moving down to his chest and abs and hips, a lighter touch on this side of his body. When he got to his cock, which was hard despite the way the rest of his body had gone loose and limp, Ilya worked around it, moving to his thighs and down his legs. Shane made an impatient noise, and Ilya shushed him.

"We will get there. First I want to make you feel nice and relaxed. Is it working?"

Shane exhaled. "Mhm."

"Good." Ilya worked his way back up, his hands finding the exact right balance between gentle and firm, digging in on the spots that needed it most, lightening up on the more tender ones, bypassing the bruises and kissing them instead. Shane could feel all the tension and stress leaving his body.

Ilya finally wrapped a hand around his cock and started stroking him while his other hand focused on his thighs and hips, which weren't the most sore parts of him, but it all felt so fucking good, like what Ilya was doing to his cock was just radiating all over. Each of his limbs felt both too heavy and weightless at the same time. He probably couldn't have lifted any one of them, but he also wasn't sure they were actually still on the bed.

His moans went from satisfied to pleasurable, longer and higher and interrupted by little whimpers and intakes of breath, none of which he could control while Ilya's hands were doing what they were doing.

"Close," he managed to whisper, and a moment later, Ilya's mouth was on him, and he was coming, back arching and hips pushing up. Ilya kept a steadying hand on one thigh while he sucked and licked him through it. It was one of the most gentle orgasms he'd ever had, despite how intense the pleasure coursing through him had been. It flowed like a warm wave lapping against every inch of his skin, but still enough to break him apart and put him back together as it retreated, while Ilya kept touching him, softer now. He felt a hand on his forehead, pushing his hair away from his eyes, then soft lips on his. He finally blinked his heavy eyes open to find Ilya's right above him, and a small smile on his lips.

"How do you feel?"

Shane's eyes fluttered, and he had to swallow twice before words returned to him. "So relaxed I can't move."

"Perfect." Ilya kissed him again.

Shane started to reach for Ilya, who was still hard and making no move to do anything about it.

"Not tonight. You rest," Ilya told him. "I will take care of that." He started to get off the bed.

"At least let me watch," Shane said.

Ilya nodded and shifted until he was sitting back on his heels next to him. It didn't take Ilya nearly as many strokes of his own hand to come as Shane had expected. He looked divine like that, and Shane couldn't stop himself from reaching out to touch some part of him. He ran his hand down the inside of Ilya's thigh, feeling the thick muscles there, then further until he could cup his balls, watching as Ilya's mouth fell open on a low moan, hand moving faster, eyes squeezing shut as he came over his own fist. He leaned forward to kiss Shane, and Shane managed to lift and slide his hand through his favorite curls to hold Ilya there a little longer.

After Ilya cleaned them both up and crawled back into the bed, he kissed Shane's chest and asked, "Feeling better?"

It took Shane several seconds longer than it should have to even remember what Ilya was talking about.

"Yeah. Still sucks, but..." he paused, his sluggish brain and heavy tongue making it hard to say all the things he wanted to say. "Usually after a playoff loss, I go home and beat myself up about it until I have to go to the awards and...sometimes that's fun, but it's still kind of a reminder. And then I go to the cottage alone. It's nice to see my parents and have peace and quiet, disconnect for a while. I love it there." He found Ilya's hand and squeezed it. "But having you here, and...I don't know, taking care of me?" He remembered Ilya's gentle chiding

about that, but some things were still hard to say out loud. "Even though I'm fine and don't ___"

"Hey," Ilya interrupted, bringing their entwined hands to his mouth. "We take care of each other because we want to, yes? You are fine...have managed without me for a long time. But it's okay to be happy about this now."

Shane nodded. "Yeah. I am." He smiled. "I guess what I'm saying is...thank you. And I love you. I'm still disappointed. And...fuck...still worried about the team meeting. But um...you're not disappointed in me..." he looked away.

"No. Never," Ilya said softly.

He had no idea how much he needed to hear that.

"Yeah. So...everything is better with you. Now make me shut up before I say anything too corny."

Ilya laughed. "I like when you tell me how you feel. It's not corny. Maybe I will massage you into a boneless, sentimental mess more often."

Shane rolled his eyes and pulled Ilya down more firmly on top of him. "Would that work on you?"

"Maybe," Ilya said. "I'm a willing test subject."

"When I'm not too tired to function."

"Yes, you need sleep. Want me to read?"

Shane nodded. "Something short because I'm not gonna last. Where's Vanya?"

"In the chair. He's licking himself on my clean laundry," Ilya said with an exaggerated sigh.

Shane glanced over at him, only to find Vanya frozen mid-lick, staring at them as if he knew they were talking about him. "Gross, buddy."

"Mm, yes, he is. Glad you're talking sense about him for once." Ilya reached over to turn the lamp off, then pulled the sheet up over them and opened something on his phone. "I will read. You sleep."

Shane was already halfway there. His body still felt loose and heavy and so comfortable he probably could have drifted off right away. But he held on so he could hear Ilya's voice a little longer.

"I am a dreamer. I know so little of real life that I just can't help re-living such moments as these in my dreams, for such moments are something I have very rarely experienced. I am going to dream about you the whole night, the whole week, the whole year. I feel I know you so well that I couldn't have known you better if we'd been friends for twenty years. You won't

fail me, will you? Only two minutes, and you've made me happy forever. Yes, happy. Who knows, perhaps you've reconciled me with myself, resolved all my doubts."

-

Shane enjoyed sleeping in the next day and eating a huge breakfast Ilya had waiting for him when he finally dragged his tired but still semi-relaxed body from the bed. Ilya had to go down to the store for a while. Thanks to a couple of boring but serviceable instagram posts Shane made about visiting the store, including pictures of him standing in front of the shelves browsing, business had continued above expectations, and Ilya'd been able to hire another part-time worker to help out for the summer. Ilya still opened the store most days for now, but they were still able to indulge in a couple of slow mornings, and after months of juggling Shane's schedule and always counting down to the next time he had to leave for practice or a game or a road trip, it was a nice change of pace.

On the day of his meetings, Shane spent most of the morning restless and fidgeting. He paced while he drank his coffee. He laid out his clothes and swapped the shirt out several times. He talked to his mom on the phone. She'd offered to come into town and be there with him, either during or after, but he'd declined. It would only make him more nervous. Ilya had also asked what he needed, offering to drive him there and wait for however long it took, but Shane declined that too. He needed to do this himself. Whatever the fallout would be, he was the one who had to face it.

He walked into the small meeting room at the practice facility 10 minutes early. Coach, the GM, one of the main assistant coaches, and Shane's own agent joined him soon after. His agent was of course already in the know and had been for a while. Everything had been carefully planned and coordinated, the interview already scheduled with The Athletic. They'd chosen to go with The New York Times instead of ESPN or one of the other big outlets or broadcasting companies, at Shane's insistence. He wanted to get it out there without it being front and center. Let it trickle out, give him time to deal with everything...less a spectacle and more an interest piece.

Shane sat across the long wooden table from people he'd known for years in a professional capacity and said the words, "I'm gay," out loud. He'd felt like he might vomit right there on the shiny wood grain, but the words had come and gone, and nothing immediately imploded. There had been a stretch of silence and faces showing wide eyes that slowly pulled into narrowed ones, the calculations already being done. What do we do now? Is it worth it? The answer was evidently yes. Shane acknowledged to himself that maybe someone less skilled, less in demand, would have had a harder time doing this, with a less favorable outcome. He hoped he was clearing the way a little.

"You aren't going to end up in the gossip rags half-naked in some gay club this summer, are you?" asked the GM, an older bald man named Bob Johnston who looked like he should have a cigar hanging out of his mouth at all times and a Transatlantic accent.

"No, sir. I'm in a very serious committed relationship."

After that, the conversation shifted more to logistics. The interview and when it would be published, and the fact that he'd be telling the rest of the team right after that meeting. Shane

also asked for support in keeping the team quiet until then.

“I don’t give a shit what you do off the ice as long as it doesn’t reflect poorly on the team or violate our code of conduct, you hear me? This changes nothing. You’re the best player in the league, a strong captain, and you’re going to win us another cup. Hopefully several.” Coach shook his hand, and Shane still felt a little sick. “Someone was going to be the first, why not you?” Coach muttered. It sounded like he was trying to talk himself into being okay with it, but Shane appreciated the effort. He could tell none of them wanted to deal with this, but they made sure to tell him the league’s anti-discrimination policies would be enforced to the letter.

Soon after, Shane found himself facing down his entire team in the locker room. They were there to clean out their stalls and take care of any last minute paperwork with the staff and admin. Everyone was still vacillating between disappointment at their season being over and excitement about their time off.

“Listen up. I know the season didn’t end how we wanted,” Shane started when everyone had gathered around the benches, “but we made it to the conference championship. That’s further than we got last year, and not as far as we’re going to get next year.” He paused and took a deep breath. “Before we break until next season, I have something to tell you all. I’m asking you to just listen for a minute, okay? Something about me is going to come out this summer, and I wanted you to hear it from me first.”

He heard shifting and whispers, probably some of the guys wondering what about straitlaced Shane Hollander could possibly cause a stir. He looked down at his feet, finding himself unable to meet anyone’s gaze. But he didn’t want to deliver this in a way that made him seem embarrassed. He wasn’t, not anymore. Instead, he found Cliff standing behind the bench across from him, giving him a nod and a reassuring smile, and he held his head up high and fixed his gaze on the wall.

“I’m gay.”

The words had felt like they were swimming against the current, his throat doing its best to knock them back down, wash them away. But they were finally out. In a locker room full of MLH players. Probably mostly straight ones. His eyes remembered how to move, and he found Cam first among his teammates. He didn’t let his gaze linger, so as not to give anything away. But he noted the wide eyes, the half-open mouth, shock on his face. Cam didn’t even notice him looking because he was staring at the bench in front of him. Shane could almost see the gears turning in his head. He glanced around quickly, trying to take note of who looked disgusted, who looked unfazed...trying to get some idea of what he might be dealing with.

“I’m still the same person you’ve known for years. The same as I was when we won a cup two years ago, the same as I was when we beat Montreal so bad on their home ice they nearly died of embarrassment. And I’ll be the same next season when we win the ECF and another fucking cup.”

That got a few claps and good-natured whoops, but he heard a few whispers and jeers that didn’t sound good-natured at all.

“If you have something to say about it, you can say it to my face.”

Cliff had been slowly making his way around the edge of the locker room until he was standing at Shane’s right shoulder, one hand landing on it. A show of solidarity that nearly sent tears to his eyes, but now wasn’t the time for that.

“Hey, Mikkelson. My hearing is still good. If you want to say that, why don’t you share with the class,” Shane said.

Mikkelson stood up. “I said I don’t want to share a locker room with no queer checking me out.”

Shane laughed, loud and genuine, maybe a little unhinged. “Have you looked in the mirror lately, Mickey? I wouldn’t check you out if you were the last person on earth.” Laughter from more people than not. “Don’t flatter yourselves. Nothing worth looking at in here,” he said, trying to hold a teasing look on his face and appreciating the laughs from some of them. “And I’m in a committed relationship, so you can all fuck off.”

Shane finished up by telling them that Coach would be on their asses if they leaked this before the interview. He wanted nothing more than to get out of the locker room and as far away from everyone as he could right then, but he waited around in case anyone wanted to talk to him. Running wouldn’t help. He was grateful that it was Connors who was first in line.

“You could have told me, man,” Connors said, shoving his shoulder. “I’m cool with it. Plus, that’s less competition for me when we go out.” He paused. “Oh shit. You and Marly are both off the market. I’m gonna be drowning in—”

“Fuck off, Connors,” Shane laughed and let Connors bump his shoulder on his way out. A few others stopped to tell him something similar, and the few who still seemed resistant left without a word.

“Hey, cap,” Cam said, stepping up after most everyone else had left. “That was cool. I uh... support you. Just wanted to tell you that.”

“Thanks, Cam.” Shane could see he didn’t want to stick around, and the nerves in his voice were loud and clear. “I appreciate it. Have a good summer, alright?”

Shane let out a loud breath and sat heavily on the bench when the room was finally empty except for Cliff.

“Proud of you, buddy,” Cliff said. “I think that went pretty well, all things considered.”

Shane nodded. He was dizzy. He could feel the adrenaline crash looming.

“You okay?” Cliff asked, big hand on his shoulder again.

“I think so.”

“Breathe. You did it. The few assholes will have to deal with a whole lot of us if they want to make it a problem.”

“I know. Thanks, man.”

Except Shane was under no delusions that that would be the end of it. Once the rest of the league and the rest of the world knew, there would be more, and it would embolden the ones who didn't approve. He'd be dealing with it on the ice, in the locker room, and from the press. But having a few people in his corner was something.

“You gonna get home okay?” Cliff asked.

“Yeah, I'm good. You and Svetlana nail down when you're coming to the cottage yet?” Shane asked, needing a change of subject.

“I think so. Definitely early July, but I'll have to see which day she wants to leave.”

“I'm glad you're both coming up. It'll be fun.”

Eventually Shane made his way to the jeep and drove home on autopilot. He went up to the apartment through the back entrance, not wanting to stop and talk to anyone in the shop at that moment. Ilya was waiting for him inside.

“How did it go?” he asked, pulling Shane into a hug.

“Okay, I think. I'm not getting traded that I know of. A few assholes in the locker room, but not as many as I expected. At least not out loud.”

“I think you need to sit down,” Ilya said. He stepped back and took Shane's hand, which showed the faintest tremble. “Are you okay?”

Shane nodded and kept nodding even when he tried to stop. “Fuck. I can't believe I did that.”

He followed Ilya to the couch and immediately sat down and lowered his head to his knees. Ilya sat next to him and rubbed his back.

“You did the hard, scary thing. You were very brave, and now you get to relax.”

“I feel like I'm going to throw up.” The adrenaline crash had arrived.

“You want a ginger ale?”

“Maybe,” Shane said. He felt the cushion shift when Ilya's weight disappeared, only to be replaced by a smaller one. Vanya rubbed against his shoulder. “Hey, buddy.” Shane turned his head to see the cat. “I'm okay.” That seemed to be enough, and Vanya jumped up to lay across the back of the couch behind him.

Shane sat up, and Ilya returned with a can of ginger ale, already popped open for him. The sip of cold, fizzy liquid pushed away a little of the remaining nausea. He still felt weird. Distant almost, like he wasn't all the way in his own body.

Ilya was standing in front of him and reached out to tilt his chin up. “I've been getting the store ready for my absence all week. Mallory has everything under control, the schedules are

all lined up for full coverage, and Svetlana will be checking in more often than usual.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Shane said. Ilya's finger on his chin, thumb caressing his jaw, dragged him further back to himself.

“Are you done with all your in-person stuff for the season?” Ilya asked.

“Yeah. Everything else will be zoom meetings and calls, but nothing for a couple of weeks. Unless I go to the awards, but I think if ever I was going to skip, this is the year.”

“Good,” Ilya said, kneeling on the couch, fitting one knee on each side of Shane’s thighs until he was in his lap, grounding him even more. Ilya leaned in and kissed him. “I think it’s time to go to the cottage.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, it's time to go to the cottage and finally say goodbye to these two soft book nerds (for now anyway). See you in the next and final chapter.

And...just know that I also care about Mario Kart points, Shane.

Poems/sonnets mentioned in this chapter:

The Passionate Shepherd to His Love by Christopher Marlowe

How Do I Love Thee? (Sonnet 43) by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Books mentioned in this chapter (in passing):

The Diviners by Libba Bray

Quotes:

"People are very fond of giving away what they need most themselves." - The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde

"I am a dreamer. I know so little of real life that I just can't help re-living such moments as these in my dreams..." (the whole passage Ilya reads) - White Nights by Fyodor Dostoevsky

[Book list doc](#)

threads: shadow_lilies1 (most active)

tumblr: shadowlilies1

twtr: shadow_lilies

Chapter 18: Somebody to love

Chapter Notes

*****STOP HERE!! I posted chapter 17 and 18 at the same time, so if you've been following along, make sure you read 17 first!! Hoping the ao3 email makes it clear that two chapters were posted, but just in case!!

Okay... We have arrived at the end. I wrote a lot in the end notes (and exceeded the character limit by a lot...ao3 told me to stop yapping, so I cut it down a bit). I'll be honest...I have never been so nervous to share anything I've written in my life (and I survived reviewer #2 in academic publishing for years). Be gentle with me. Endings are hard.

Since I couldn't fit it at the end and this isn't a spoiler...go listen to Somebody To Love by Queen! I got to see them in concert a few years ago, which is obviously not as exciting without Freddie (who I love with my whole heart), but I was only a very teeny tiny child when he passed, so I take what I can get.

Also!! For the handful of Russian words included in this fic, I left them in Cyrillic so they're easy to translate (I tried the hover text thing with translations, and it did not work how I wanted, sorry sorry). If my use of any of those words is incorrect, feel free to let me know (politely). I am by no means an expert and like all good millennials...I relied heavily on reddit.

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

Shane hadn't realized how much he needed to get out of Boston after his coming out meetings. It wasn't that he wanted to hide. Maybe a little bit of that. But mostly he was just ready to finally take Ilya to his other favorite place where he didn't have to hide or think about any of it if he didn't want to. They had planned to leave the following week, but if Ilya had One Good Memory ready, there was no reason to wait. At least not more than one day, which Shane requested so he could take care of a few errands and get himself together.

The cottage was about a 6 hour drive from Boston, which they decided would be a lot less stressful on both them and Vanya, and probably quicker, even with a stop at the border, when you factored in all the waiting associated with flying. Vanya had a lot to say about being in his oversized carrier in the backseat where he had plenty of room, a bed, and a constant stream of treats.

"Vanya," Ilya huffed after about an hour. "I cannot listen to this for 5 more hours."

The yowling had turned into a lower but no less constant grumbly meow.

“Hopefully he’ll get used to it and relax eventually,” Shane said from the driver’s seat. “Has he ever traveled before?”

“No. So I will forgive him. Maybe covering the carrier with a blanket will help.”

It did seem to calm him some, and the car was finally quiet but for the music that was playing quietly from the speakers.

“What do you want to do tomorrow?” Shane asked. “For your birthday.”

Ilya looked over at him with surprise. “I don’t know.”

“Did you forget it was your birthday?”

“A little.”

“My parents offered to have us over for dinner. And um...we could watch game 5 of the cup final. But it’s your birthday, and I know you don’t care about that as much, so we can do something else instead.”

“No, that sounds nice. Unfortunately, you’ve made me care about this terrible sport again.”

Shane laughed. “Sorry.”

Ilya reached over to lay a hand on his thigh. “I’m not.”

The rest of the drive was blessedly uneventful and quiet besides their conversation and the music that Ilya fiddled with every so often. They pulled up to the cottage in the late afternoon, and Shane felt like he was seeing it anew through Ilya’s eyes.

“Wow, this is nice,” Ilya said as they walked through the front door. He set Vanya’s carrier down and opened it so he could explore, then immediately walked to the glass back wall. “That is your dock?” Ilya was looking out toward the lake.

“Yep. There are a few other properties around the lake, but it’s always pretty quiet.”

“Hm. So we can’t fuck outside?”

“Ilya,” Shane laughed. “No.” He paused. “Well...”

Ilya turned around. He was biting his bottom lip, a grin on his face. “I knew you’d like that.”

“Shut up. I’m going to get the rest of our bags.”

“I can do that.”

Shane shook his head. “You get his stuff set up. I’ve got it. My shoulder is fine.”

Ilya gave him a look. His shoulder was still a mess, but he had a stretching and exercise routine from the trainers, and it already felt better after just a few days of rest.

“I’ll carry with my left.”

Shane used the walk to and from the jeep to let himself smile stupidly and bask in the fact that Ilya was finally here in the place he’d always wanted to share with someone. It was surreal and terrifying and everything he’d ever wanted. Almost anyway.

They got Vanya’s litter box and bed and scratching post set up, hoping his own things would help him adjust to being in a new place. He disappeared to the downstairs rooms, slinking around and checking out every nook and cranny.

“He’s fine,” Ilya said. “Is Mr. Real Estate going to give me a tour of his fancy cottage and its private dock and boat house and master bedroom with huge walk-in shower?”

“Sounds like you’ve already seen it.”

“I watched the documentary once,” Ilya said.

Shane tilted his head and waited.

“Fine. Maybe a few times. Should be illegal, doing yoga in little shorts on tv.”

Shane groaned. “I can’t believe they aired that. Rose almost died laughing at my yoga poses.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon meandering through the cottage and then the property before taking a break to test out the bed. For dinner, Shane grilled burgers, thanks to his parents' offer to stock the kitchen for them so they wouldn't have to stop on the way in with Vanya in the car. They ate outside together, while the sun sank lower and lower and birdsong and mosquito buzzes turned to loon calls and cricket chirps.

Ilya had clearly never heard a loon before. Shane had hardly noticed them calling, having been around them his whole life.

“What the fuck was that?” Ilya asked, looking at him from where he sat to Shane’s left, in front of the fire pit.

“What?”

“It sounded like a wolf.”

It took Shane a second, then he laughed. “A wolf? It was a bird. A loon.”

“Ugh,” Ilya griped. “You make me like hockey again, then drag me to another country with fucking wolfbirds. The things I do for love.”

Shane grinned at him. “Sounds like a real hardship.”

“Yes. Thank you for noticing.” Ilya smiled, his lips pursing together while he shook his head.

Shane tangled their fingers together. “If I haven’t told you already, I’m really glad you’re here.”

“Hmm, I think you maybe told me on the way here. And maybe also while we were sitting on the dock. Probably again while we were fucking in your bed. Oh, and while we were eating dinner.”

“Alright, alright. I get it,” Shane laughed.

“You can tell me again.” Ilya squeezed his hand. “As many times as you want.”

“Actually...while we were rereading *Call Me By Your Name*, I saved something that I hoped might be true one day.”

Ilya cocked his head. “Tell me.”

“You know I can’t recite things like you can. I have to get my phone.”

Shane quickly went inside where his phone sat on the island counter. Vanya was sitting by the glass, looking out, so he stopped to scratch his head on the way back outside.

“Okay,” Shane said, sitting next to Ilya again. “Don’t laugh.”

“You know I won’t.”

Shane cleared his throat and read the lines. “*This felt special. Like showing someone your private chapel, your secret haunt, the place where, as with the berm, one comes to be alone, to dream of others. This is where I dreamed of you before you came into my life.*”

Ilya wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him in closer. “Why would I laugh? That is very sweet.”

“Because it’s true. When I had this place built...obviously I didn’t know you. And I don’t know, I still...I hadn’t admitted that I was gay yet. Maybe I knew deep down, but I was still trying with women. I kept thinking that all I wanted was this to be my private sanctuary, the place where I could escape from everything else. Which at that point meant alone because I just never felt anything...” He paused and shook his head. “I’d never felt that way about anyone...enough to invite them into this place. Other than a friend to visit, but that was different. I never had anyone I wanted to really *share* it with. But...I always hoped that maybe one day I would. The whole time it was being designed and built, I kept thinking, I wonder if that person will like it too. Even though there was no person.”

Shane blinked back a tear. It was a little overwhelming, how much this was affecting him, finally having Ilya here. It felt like one of the last things...one of the final pieces of his plan and the puzzle that was this relationship and how it fit into his life. Like he could finally be whole and himself and the fact that something as simple as a place he spent his summers could be this important felt silly, but Ilya wasn’t laughing and Shane wanted nothing more than to put the last piece in place right then.

Ilya shifted next to him, swallowing audibly. “Now there is a person,” he said quietly.

“Yeah. You were always my person. Even before I knew it,” Shane said.

“Stop trying to make me cry, Shane Hollander. Russians don’t cry.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Shane said, reaching up to rub a thumb at the corner of Ilya’s eye where there was just the tiniest fleck of moisture, reflecting the light of the fire.

Ilya put one hand on Shane’s cheek and turned his face for a kiss. “I’m glad I’m your person.” Ilya returned the favor and brushed a thumb against the corner of his eye. “My Shane.”

They stayed by the fire for a while longer, and Ilya shifted to lay his head in Shane’s lap, Shane’s hand moving automatically to thread through his hair. When the fire started to burn low, Shane put it out, and they went inside to shower, which led to a slight distraction that left them both sated and sleepy.

“I brought some books for us to read together while we’re here,” Ilya said while he knelt beside his suitcase.

“Which ones?”

He pulled out a small stack of books. “A variety. This one is Captive Prince by C.S. Pacat. First in a queer fantasy trilogy. Some of the reviews say it is a little dark, but it sounded good. I remember you like to save fantasy series for the summer.” Ilya put another book on top of the stack: Special Delivery by Heidi Cullinan. “This one is...” Ilya paused and smiled at him, mischievous, eyebrows up. “Kinky, I think. I saw it tagged as BDSM and quote unquote ‘faptastic’ and ‘filthy hot’. I flipped through. Will be fun to read together. And I checked your kindle app to make sure you did not already have it.”

The only reason Shane’s body wasn’t reacting to any of that was because it physically couldn’t.

“BDSM? I don’t think I’ve read a lot of that. But um...yeah. That sounds...good.”

“I think you will probably like this one. Reading about it doesn’t mean we have to do it,” Ilya said. He put the books down on the bed and pulled Shane against him. “But we can. If we find anything we like. And if we don’t like it, we can skip to the next one.”

He reached behind him and grabbed another book. “This one is new, The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo. I want to read it so I know whether to recommend it in the store. Up to you if you want to read it with me. I figured if we need more to read here, we can get ebooks.”

“This is great,” Shane said, while Ilya stacked the books on the nightstand. “I kind of forgot to even bring books.”

“You had a lot on your mind. Hopefully not as much now?”

Shane nodded and climbed in the bed, Ilya right behind him.

“I feel a lot better, I think. I’m sure I’ll be nervous again when it gets closer to the interview being out, but for now, being here, I can relax some.”

“It will be okay.”

Ilya gathered him into his arms, and Shane only barely stopped himself from telling Ilya once again that he was glad he was there. Then he decided why the fuck not.

“I’m still really glad you’re here.”

“Me too.”

A loud meow sounded from somewhere near the end of the bed.

“You too, Vanya,” Shane said, and he heard the little pitter-patter of feet on the floor beside him, then a dip in the mattress and soft fur on his shoulder where Vanya settled against him. “I’m glad you’re both here.”

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The following morning, Ilya woke to the smell of bacon and coffee. But really it was Shane’s hand on his chest that stirred him from sleep. He blinked his eyes open to find his favorite brown ones staring down at him, the early morning sun streaming through the glass walls and lighting them up like glowing pools of dark, delicious honey. Ilya smiled and stretched.

“Happy Birthday,” Shane said and leaned down for a kiss. He tasted of toothpaste and coffee, so Ilya didn’t subject him to his own morning breath for long. “I made you coffee and breakfast.”

“Thank you. Smells good.”

Ilya got up and took care of his morning needs, then met Shane in the kitchen where eggs, bacon, and pancakes were waiting, along with a steaming cup of coffee, made just how he liked it.

“You didn’t have to do all of this,” he said, sitting at one of the stools by the island while Shane put a plate in front of him. “But I do love pancakes...you made them?”

“Yep. From scratch. They’re not too hard.”

Beside the small stack of pancakes dripping with melted butter were a couple of perfectly cooked eggs and several pieces of bacon.

“Delicious,” Ilya said, between bites. He poured some maple syrup on his plate and dipped a piece of the warm, fluffy pancake in it.

“I should have asked what you wanted since it’s your birthday, but I didn’t want to wake you,” Shane said as he fixed his own plate.

“Mm, this is perfect.” Ilya took a sip of coffee and then looked around suddenly. “Where is my cat? He isn’t in my plate, which means he’s up to no good.”

Shane snorted. “I had to go looking for him earlier. He found a spot in the living room with a good view of a tree.” Shane nodded to the room that was off to Ilya’s left. “Lots of birds and squirrels out there. He was just sitting at the glass, watching.”

“He’ll never want to go back to the city now. But at least he’s out of my hair.”

After they finished eating, while Ilya was still sipping coffee, Shane disappeared to the bedroom and then came back with a box wrapped in plain blue wrapping paper.

“I didn’t know what to get you for your birthday, so it’s not much. And if you don’t like it, it’s okay. I promise I won’t be offended and you can just—”

“Shane,” Ilya stopped him. “I’m sure I will love it.” He accepted the box and tore the wrapping paper off, then peeled the tape from the cardboard and opened it to reveal a navy blue journal, identical to the one he’d given Shane except for the color, plus one cylindrical-shaped tube and one small square-shaped box, both with the brand Baronfig printed on them.

“I didn’t know if maybe...you might want to write anything while you’re here. By hand, obviously. I know you have your laptop. But just in case,” Shane said.

Ilya opened the tube to reveal a sleek silver pen. It was six-sided, like a pencil, and made of a metal that gave it some heft. The little square box was a stand for it, made from the same silver metal. It was probably the nicest pen he’d ever held.

Ilya looked up at Shane. “Thank you. This is very thoughtful.”

“I know the pen you write with doesn’t really matter...you could write with anything, and it’d be great. But um...I don’t know. I like a good pen,” Shane said sheepishly.

“It’s perfect. I like a good pen, too. And a brand new notebook.”

It was a simple, though Ilya suspected expensive, gift. But it was special beyond words, coming from Shane, the only person who knew Ilya even wanted to write and had read some of it...something he tried not to think about too often because even though it was Shane, it still felt a little like a naked dream. That feeling of the most intimate parts of you being on display and scrutinized, nowhere to hide. He was laying out the most private and vulnerable pieces of himself to be perused by someone else, and that someone hadn’t turned away in disgust...he wanted more.

“Don’t feel obligated to use them, though. I just wanted you to have the option, in case you want to,” Shane was saying. “And just because it’s from me doesn’t mean you have to share your writing with me, okay?”

Ilya set the pen down in its stand on the counter and pulled Shane between his legs so he could wrap arms around his middle.

“I will always share with you.”

Maybe Shane knew that declaration for what it was because his lips were pressed into Ilya’s hair and his arms were tight around Ilya’s back, and it felt like the safest place in the world.

“What do you want to do now? It’s your birthday, you get to pick.”

“What are my options?” Ilya asked, Shane still pinned against him. “This?” He dropped his head so he could nuzzle Shane’s hip, cheek dangerously close to something else.

Shane laughed. “Yeah. We can also go for a walk or take the jet skis out. Or play video games.”

Ilya straightened up and gave Shane a look. “Video games on my birthday? Only if you let me win.”

“I can’t *let* you win. What would be the fun in that?”

“Mhm. Thought so. I choose jet skis.”

Ilya had been surprised that Shane even owned jet skis, and he suspected they didn't get used nearly as much as they deserved. He made it his own personal mission to change that. They spent the morning on the lake, riding around, racing...which Ilya insisted on because he kept winning. Eventually Shane couldn't take it anymore and went back to the shore, soaked and cold but happy, despite his losses. They sat on the dock together, legs hanging off the edge, feet skimming the water while the sun dried them off and warmed them up.

“It’s very nice out here,” Ilya said. “I see why you like it so much.”

“It used to be my favorite place. The only place where I felt like I could just be myself.”

“Used to?”

Shane looked over at him. “Still a favorite, but it’s tied now. With your place.”

“*Our* place.”

Shane nodded. “This is our place now too.”

Ilya wondered if these little declarations would ever stop bowling him over. He leaned over to kiss Shane, and it quickly grew into something deeper and hungrier, until they were laying on the dock, Shane on his back, Ilya leaning over him, propped on one elbow.

“We should stop,” Shane breathed between kisses. “Someone could come close on a boat or something.”

Ilya looked behind them at the expanse of rippling dark blue water, quiet and free of anything but birds.

“I don’t see anyone. It’s my birthday, and I want you outside.” He leaned in to kiss him again. “Tell me to stop and I will.”

Shane lifted his head and looked over the water, apparently needing to be sure. “Don’t stop.”

Somehow he knew Shane would say that. Shane liked this because he might have a bit of an exhibitionism kink, which Ilya secretly loved and would happily indulge in whatever safe way they could...like now. But Ilya liked it because having Shane outside in the sunlight doing *anything* was enough for him. He too loved One Good Memory and his apartment and this cottage, but it wasn't that long ago when he thought that's all they'd have...hiding behind closed doors, barred from being together anywhere else without Rose and Svetlana glued to their sides. This was a little peek at what may be open to them one day...without the public sex, of course. And Shane like this, his damp tan skin shimmering, his glowing brown eyes squinting against the sun, his red lips parted in pleasure and still smiling. The kind of beauty that inspired one to write words that stood the test of time.

His beauty shone like a flame, vital and bright, drawing my eye against my will. His mouth was a plump bow, his nose an aristocratic arrow.

Maybe one day Ilya would write some of his own. But just then, all he wanted was to see that beautiful face go slack with pleasure that only he could deliver. He shifted so his thigh was rubbing against Shane's cock, and Shane's against his. It was a shameless, desperate rutting against each other, while hands and lips and teeth were everywhere, nipping and sucking, moans coming from them both, the potential of boats forgotten.

"You like this?" Ilya whispered against his ear, the delightful shiver running through Shane's body always a gift.

Shane nodded. "Fuck yes."

"I think we will fuck outside again while we're here. Would you like that?"

"Yes. God, yes." Shane's voice was torn between a moan and a gasp, the idea clearly fueling his desire. "Please."

"Hm, against a tree? Right here, but you riding me? In the middle of the lake on one of the jet skis?" Ilya continued, kissing along Shane's neck as he spoke. "Out in the open but all mine."

He angled his thigh to give Shane maximum friction, and soon after, he felt Shane's body jerk against him, the warm spread of cum through the material of their swimsuits, and Shane's breathy voice moaning his name as his hands grasped at Ilya's back and pulled him in tighter.

"Fuck, Shane," Ilya moaned, his own orgasm pulled from him in a desperate rush, cock pushing wildly at Shane's muscled thigh. He dropped his face to Shane's neck, his sun-warmed skin soft against Ilya's lips.

He felt Shane's head lift, probably to check for boats, but then it thumped back onto the wooden plank without comment.

"Oh my god," he said eventually, voice still low but half-laughing now. "That was..."

"Hot?" Ilya offered.

“Yeah. Were you serious? About, um...doing that again? Out here?” Shane asked.

“Of course. Obviously we should be careful. Maybe at night? I would like to fuck you under the moonlight. Very romantic. Might inspire some poetry.”

Shane sucked in a breath and nodded, and Ilya wondered if it was just about the outdoors part or if maybe it was the potential poetry too.

Ilya was not a poet. Putting words on paper to say exactly the right thing was hard enough, but to give them rhythm too...their own movement and beat...that was another skill entirely. But sometimes Shane made him believe he could do it, despite the greater risk of sounding like an idiot. Shane would never judge his words with anything but love. And sometimes the things Ilya wanted to say were more than just words. Maybe he didn't need to hold them back. Love was making him bold.

Besides, nowadays, almost all capable people are terribly afraid of being ridiculous, and are miserable because of it.

Ilya rolled onto his back next to him, soaking up the sun for a minute. “I'm getting in the water.” He sat up. “You should too.”

“It's freezing.”

“Suit yourself. Your shorts will be glued to you.”

Ilya slid off the dock into the water. It was cold, even to him. But it felt good on his warm skin. A minute later, Shane splashed in beside him.

“Fuck,” he gasped.

“Come here,” Ilya held his arms out.

Shane plastered himself to him, and they bobbed together in the water, cum-stained shorts and messy hair and flushed cheeks, both of their gold bracelets glinting in the sun. Ilya laughed, the joy in his chest bubbling out of him, and all he could think was that this might be the best birthday he'd ever had. A perfect memory to keep forever.

-

They spent the rest of the day relaxing, and Ilya finally gave in and played the MLH game with Shane. Even though it was *his* birthday, he knew it would make Shane happy. And what an excellent choice that had been on his part. He was on a winning streak, and Shane was getting increasingly irritated, but in his cute, angry kitten way.

“You can't beat me with my own team,” Shane griped.

Ilya had chosen Boston, while Shane settled for Montreal. It wasn't going well for him.

“Look how good I am,” Ilya bragged. “You should call Hayden Pike and tell him he isn't even good in video games.”

Shane laughed. "I like Hayden. He's always been nice."

"He sounds very annoying in his interviews."

"Well, yeah. He is. But in the good-natured way...not the homophobic douchebag way. I think at least."

"Hm, maybe." Ilya privately agreed that Hayden didn't seem like a Kent type, but he was still annoying. Maybe Svetlana and her inherent dislike of Boston's rivals was rubbing off on him. Either way, Ilya was enjoying the hell out of beating his dopey animated likeness while Shane cursed next to him.

When Shane finally had enough, and they had to get ready to leave for the Hollanders' cottage, Ilya snagged Shane around the waist and pulled him into his lap.

"You've been trying to get me to play that game for months. Everything you dreamed of?" Ilya asked and then nipped the side of Shane's neck.

Shane squirmed on his lap, which was having too much of an effect on him. "I'm just rusty," Shane said. "We can play again soon. You can't have Boston, though."

"Fine," Ilya said. "You pick my team for me."

"I like playing it with you though," Shane said, and he shifted so he could turn around and straddle Ilya's lap instead. "I'd love to play with you for real. Like on the ice. If you ever want to...just the two of us for fun. I know you said it drags up bad memories, and I don't want that. But if you ever want to add some new ones..."

Ilya pulled him down for a kiss. "I think I would like that. One day."

"Really?"

"With you, yes."

The lure of easing some bad memories with good ones, with Shane, was strong.

"Okay," Shane said. Ilya could tell he was trying to hold in a smile, the way he was biting his bottom lip. "I'll fully respect if you change your mind. I'd love to share that part of me with you too, in that way, but even just this is enough," he said, nodding at the Playstation.

Ilya kissed him again and then stood up, Shane still wrapped around him.

"What are you doing?" Shane laughed.

"Taking you to bed."

"We don't have time. We need to leave in like 15 minutes."

Ilya sighed dramatically. "Okay, then I am taking you to the bed so I can kiss you one more time before we get ready."

At the edge of the bed, Ilya let Shane land on his back, his own weight dropping heavily on top of him and making good on his promise, all lips and tongue and Shane drawing him further in. Ilya pulled back, smiling at Shane's already unfocused eyes and the clear tent in his shorts.

"Better save that for later," Ilya said, giving him one more soft kiss before he went to change his own tented shorts.

Shane's parents' cottage was only a 10 minute drive. They pulled up at 6pm on the dot, and Ilya followed Shane up the walk, his nerves kicking in a little. He'd become very fond of the Hollanders very quickly, but there was still a newness there...both in how short a time he'd known them and how vastly different they were than his own parents.

As soon as they were through the front door and out of the entryway, Yuna was there, pulling him into a hug while David greeted Shane.

"Happy Birthday, Ilya," she said, and Ilya let himself be hugged. "We're so glad you two are here for this. We almost never get Shane for his birthday."

They swapped parents, and Ilya shook David's hand. "Happy Birthday. Hope you like chicken parmesan."

"I do, yes. One of my favorites."

David gave him a smile and clapped him on the shoulder as they walked toward the kitchen. "Shane told us it might be."

Once everyone had a plate and was settled at the table, Yuna looked over at Ilya and asked, "Have you had a good birthday so far?"

Ilya nodded. "Very good. Shane made me pancakes for breakfast. Then we took the jet skis out and sat on the dock for a while to enjoy the nice weather." He could feel Shane's death glare next to him and had to look down at his plate so he didn't laugh. "And then he made me play a hockey video game. Which I won."

"Not by much," Shane interjected.

Ilya patted his thigh under the table.

The chicken parmesan was delicious, and Ilya didn't let himself linger on how it felt for Yuna and David to make him one of his favorite meals on his birthday. Not yet anyway. Later he would linger and let himself feel the enormity of it.

They moved on to talking about Shane's coming out interview, and Ilya was relieved that Shane didn't seem as nervous about it.

"What about the store?" Yuna asked in his direction.

Ilya perked up. "I'm not too worried about it."

“What about the store?” Shane asked.

“Well, even though Ilya won’t be named in the interview, they’re going to figure out who he is eventually. And you’ve already posted about the store. Naturally people are going to be curious...both good and bad,” Yuna said.

“My store has always been queer friendly. My entire staff is queer. Maybe I will put a rainbow flag in the window again. I had one up once, but someone stole it. I just haven’t gotten around to replacing it.”

“Will that make it worse?” Shane asked.

“Other businesses do it too. And I don’t want anyone in my store who has a problem with it. Not worth it to me.”

Shane was looking at him, brows drawn in worry. “I’m sorry. I didn’t even think about how it would affect the store.” He looked down. “Fuck.”

“Shane,” Yuna said disapprovingly.

“Sorry. But are you sure that’s going to be okay? I should have talked to you about it more.” he said, looking back up at Ilya.

“Hey, you did. You told me exactly what would happen if we didn’t hide our relationship. I knew what I was getting into, and it’s worth it. But for the record, I think it will have a similar effect as your and Rose’s social media posts did, if anything. Maybe a few losers, but that is always a risk.”

Shane licked his lips and looked down again. Ilya reached up to stroke the back of his neck, and Shane leaned into him. Ilya gave him a quick kiss, drawing a smile from him. They both looked up to find Shane’s parents watching them fondly. Shane blushed, but the worry was gone. Ilya felt a hand on his knee under the table. He would never take for granted the ability to be this way with Shane in front of his parents.

After dinner, Yuna and David cleared the table and told them to stay seated. When they came back, Yuna was holding a cake. Ilya recognized the alternating light brown and cream-colored layers immediately.

“Hope this is okay,” said Yuna. “We weren’t sure what kind of cake you liked, so we have a chocolate backup just in case.” She set the cake in the middle of the table.

“Medovik?” Ilya asked, his voice edging toward a whisper, disbelief and...something else that was making it hard to speak.

“We didn’t make it,” David said. “I was going to try, but we figured for the first time we better leave it to the professionals. We drove into Ottawa this morning to get it from a Russian bakery. We got some other stuff for you boys to take back to the cottage with you too. Chocolate walnut babka, strawberry basil babka, and a few savory pies.”

Ilya was expending every bit of self-control he possessed to not tear up in front of Shane's parents. And still losing. His eyes were full, and his throat had gone impossibly tight.

"You did not have to go through so much trouble," he managed.

"It was no trouble at all. Next year we'll know better what you like," Yuna said kindly.

"This is perfect. I love honey cake. I haven't had it in many years. There was a bakery in Boston that made a good one, but they closed. Before that, not since..." He paused to swallow. "Not since my mother made it."

Yuna reached out and stroked a hand over his hair, something he'd seen her do to Shane many times, then sat back down at the table. It was that gesture that pushed a tear from the corner of his eye. He reached up and wiped it away quickly and hopefully inconspicuously, while David lit the candles.

The three Hollanders sang Happy Birthday to him, and it was the sweetest, most out-of-tune thing he'd heard in his life. He blew out the two candles, a two and a six, and wished only to keep this perfect little life he'd somehow stumbled his way into.

"This is really good," Shane said after a bite of cake. "Is it good for you?" he asked quietly in Ilya's direction.

"Delicious. I've missed it. Thank you again," Ilya said to the Hollanders. "It's perfect."

Ilya didn't think his birthday could get any better, but when they got back to the cottage later that night, after Vanya demanded a greeting, Shane dragged him into the bedroom and made him sit on the bed.

"I have one more gift for you. I hope it's okay." He dug around in the drawer of the dresser where they'd unpacked some of their clothes and came out with a wrapped flat rectangular object. "If you don't want this here, you can tell me. I just wanted..." he stopped. "Well, here. Open it first."

Ilya took it from him, smiling at Shane's nervous babbling. He peeled the paper back to reveal the back of a photo frame. The rest of the paper landed on the floor, and he turned it over to find a picture of himself and his mother. One of the ones he'd taken from his father's house. Irina looked radiant, her golden curls shining in the sunlight, Ilya next to her with ice cream. It was one of his favorites. She still looked the way Ilya always remembered her. Happy and carefree, the weight of the world probably already there but not crushing her yet.

"I want you to feel at home here. We can bring more stuff. Anything you want. But I thought for now, you should at least have this. Is it okay?" Shane asked, still standing in front of him.

Ilya set the frame on the bed and reached out until Shane came to him, allowing Ilya to wrap his arms around him and bury his face against Shane's chest. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Are you sure it's okay?"

Ilya nodded. "More than okay."

“It’s just a copy. I scanned it with my phone and got it printed. So the original is still safely tucked away at home,” Shane said.

Ilya finally allowed himself to linger. Mostly because he couldn’t hold back the wave any longer. He let it spill over, out of the corners of his eyes in tears and from the length of his body in a tremble and out of his throat in a sound stuck somewhere between a sob and a laugh. Shane hugged him tighter, and Ilya let it fill him up even more. So much love. More than he ever imagined. Everything he’d gotten from Shane, the meal and cake from the Hollanders, and the texts from Cliff and Svetlana, all his BU friends, John and Allen, even Mallory.

Shane moved back enough to tip Ilya’s head up by the chin. “You okay?”

Ilya nodded. “This is the best birthday I’ve ever had.” It was true. The childhood birthdays he could actually remember were tainted with feelings he didn’t even want to think about in this warm, safe place bursting with love. Vanya jumped up on the bed beside him, adding a little more.

“What did you get me for my birthday?” Ilya asked the cat who was walking on his lap, squeezing between him and Shane. “Hopefully a few hours of peace and quiet so I can collect the rest of my birthday presents from our Shane.”

“What would those be?” Shane asked, crooked little smile plastered on his face, which might have been enough of a gift on its own.

“Hm, I can think of a few things. But we can go watch the rest of the game first.”

“No,” Shane said. “We can skip it. They’re tied, it’s not a cup game.”

“You’ll skip hockey for me?”

“Of course. It’s your birthday. And like you said, you need to collect the rest of your gifts.”

Ilya scooped Vanya off his lap so he could pull Shane against him again. “You’ve given me more than enough.”

Shane dragged fingers through his curls, pulling a little at the tangles. “Guess I’ll take care of this on my own then.” He pushed his hips forward so Ilya could feel that he was already hard.

“Ah ah ah, I didn’t say I didn’t want more. You get naked while I get rid of him,” Ilya said, snaking an arm out to scoop Vanya up before he could dodge it. Shane moved away from the bed, and Ilya stood up with Vanya. “Go watch out the windows for a while, okay?”

Ilya took him to the living room and deposited him in the spot he’d been spending so much time in, hoping he’d stay put. He made it back to the bedroom and closed the door behind him. Shane was already naked and setting a bottle of lube on the nightstand. Ilya quickly stripped and grabbed him from behind, pulling Shane’s back against his chest so he could kiss his neck and run hands down his chest.

“My favorite present,” he said into Shane’s ear.

Ilya moved around him and got on the bed, lying down on his back. “Come up here.

Shane started to stretch out beside him, but Ilya stopped him. “Turn around and put your ass here,” Ilya said, patting his chest.

Shane gave him a slightly skeptical look, but he did it, settling his knees on either side of Ilya’s chest, facing away from him. He started to bend, clearly thinking they were going for 69. Ilya grabbed him by the hips and pulled him back, closer to his face.

“What are you doing?” Shane asked, looking down over his shoulder.

“Sit back,” Ilya said.

“What? No.”

“Please? It’s my birthday,” Ilya whined playfully. He’d gotten Shane almost where he wanted him, the swell of his ass just inches away from his face.

“I’ll hurt you. Or suffocate you.”

“At least I will die happy.”

Shane snorted. “Ilya.”

But Ilya pulled at his hips again, and this time Shane sat back, nearly on his heels, so the weight of him was just barely hovering above Ilya’s face. Ilya spread his cheeks and pulled him down the last few inches so Shane was sitting on his face and Ilya was licking his hole and Shane was already rocking into him, his response so immediate and shameless, Ilya was in heaven.

“Holy fuck,” Shane breathed, then, “Wait! Let me put the shutters down.”

Ilya stopped for a second. “No. Just turn the lamp off.”

Shane leaned over and flicked the lamp off, plunging them into semi-darkness, only moonlight illuminating the room, pale and silvery. It made Shane’s skin glow, and the room felt closer, more intimate. It seemed to also make Shane bolder. He sat back against Ilya and moaned at the first touch of his tongue again, and Ilya’s fingers were digging into his hips, pulling at him until Shane started rocking against him more, riding Ilya’s face while he reached forward to put a hand around Ilya’s cock.

Ilya moved his hands from Shane’s hips to dig into the curve of his ass, his fingers leaving little marks on his perfect skin as he massaged and pulled and pressed into him. His body may as well have been molded by gods, shining like the pale marble of the Statue of David in the moonlight. It deserved to be worshipped and appreciated for more than what it could do on the ice for the gain and entertainment of others. Ilya wanted Shane to know it was much more than that.

“Ungh, god Ilya,” he heard Shane moan, his voice trembling with pleasure as Ilya’s tongue pierced him and continued to push at him, even as Shane’s hips rocked faster, smashing him

into his face. Who needed to breathe when you could have this instead.

Eventually Ilya reached one arm out, feeling around on the nightstand until he had the bottle of lube. He managed to get some on his fingers while Shane fucked himself on Ilya's tongue...one of the single hottest things to ever happen to him. He pushed his hand up between his mouth and Shane, stilling him long enough to get a finger in, then let it take over, moving his mouth to kiss and nip the skin beside his hole instead. Once he had two fingers inside him, Shane started riding his hand with desperation, and Ilya wasn't ready for him to come yet. He freed his fingers and patted Shane's hip.

"Lean forward, and move up a little," he said.

It took Shane a moment to register what Ilya was asking, but then he leaned forward on his elbows and crawled forward, giving Ilya enough room to maneuver out from under him and get on his own knees.

"Is this okay? Your shoulder?" he asked before he continued.

Shane's head was on the bed, turned sideways, his eyes tilting up to look at Ilya. God, he looked angelic. His hair was a mess, his cheeks flushed, laid out in front of Ilya like an offering...a true gift.

"It's fine. Please," Shane said.

Ilya lined himself up and ran one hand over Shane's back, then leaned over him so he could kiss the spot between his shoulder blades as he pushed in. Shane moaned and shut his eyes and pushed back against him, and Ilya was freefalling, lost in Shane's body and his moans and the way his eyes shone in the silvery light every time they fluttered open. It was all the stupid romantic things, all the things about soulmates and time standing still and love so big it hurt. It was everything, and it seemed to build over time instead of dim because Ilya could have him this way every night, and it would never get old. It would always feel as special as the first time, and it made him believe in fairytales and true love and happily ever afters.

"You are everything, my Shane," he whispered. Shane's eyes flew open and Ilya suddenly needed to kiss him. He stilled his hips and pulled out, then helped Shane lower himself fully to the bed and turn over. He got Shane's legs up around his lower back and slid his cock back into him, this time their faces close enough to kiss, and kiss they did. Ilya moved his hips slow but hard and let his mouth mirror the pace, kissing Shane until they were both panting into each other's mouths with the exertion of what their bodies were doing together. Ilya was so close, his body hanging on by a thread.

One of Shane's hands moved up his back, dragging nails against his sensitive skin, until it landed in the curls at the back of his neck. He tightened his fingers, the slight sting quickly soothed by gentle fingers massaging his scalp as Shane pulled him closer, until his breath was ghosting along the side of Ilya's neck.

"Happy birthday, baby," Shane whispered against his ear, and suddenly, like a switch was flipped, Ilya was coming. His hips snapped hard and fast, and then he was spilling himself into Shane, and whispering his name over and over, unable to stop any of it, seemingly pulled

from him by some force beyond his control, which was apparently a term of endearment from his usually so practical but laconic boyfriend. He sure as fuck knew how to use his words when he wanted to. Whether it had slipped from him without thought while they were both at their most uninhibited or whether he'd planned it didn't matter. If Ilya never heard it again, the memory would be enough.

Ilya collapsed onto him, taking a moment to regain control of his senses. He was almost embarrassed that he came before Shane, something he never did. But holy fuck, his face was still hot from where Shane's ass had been smashing into him earlier and his heart was still hammering from *baby*.

"Sorry," he whispered and kissed Shane's neck while he let his cock slip from Shane's body. He quickly replaced it with two of his fingers, sliding in easily through his own cum.

"Are you kidding? That was so fucking hot," Shane moaned. He grabbed Ilya's hair again, harder now, and pulled him down for a kiss. Shane was nipping at his lips, pushing harder against Ilya's hand, fucking himself wildly on his fingers.

"You are fucking hot," Ilya groaned against his lips. "I would come again right now if I could."

He shifted so he could suck Shane's cock, getting a mouthful of salty precome. Shane was rocking between his fingers and his mouth and Ilya let him, taking as much as Shane wanted to give. He did his best to flick his eyes up to Shane's face, wanting to watch the moment his orgasm crashed into him. He felt it around his fingers first, Shane clenching around them, then in his hair where Shane was yanking hard, and lastly in his mouth as cum hit the back of his throat, all the while Shane's face was contorting into pleasure while he moaned loudly. Another gift.

He slowed his fingers, letting Shane come down before he pulled them out, then he moved up to press his lips against Shane's neck. He opened his mouth to say something, but all that came out was a happy sigh. Shane's hand was still trailing through his hair, soft and soothing now. Even though he wasn't the one who had just come, he felt boneless and weightless as he let himself rest against Shane...the day, the orgasm, Shane, it all caught up with him, and he wasn't ready to get up yet. He didn't need to worry though...as if he knew, Shane shifted so he could roll them over until Ilya was looking up at the ceiling, and then Shane's face was hovering over his. He had a well-fucked smile on his face, his hair sticking up, eyes still a little heavy-lidded.

"Was that a good birthday present?" he asked and leaned down to kiss Ilya.

Ilya sighed into his mouth. "The best."

"Good. Stay here," Shane said. He carefully lifted himself off of Ilya and went into the ensuite.

Ilya rearranged himself on the bed so he was at least laying with his head on the pillows again when Shane came back to clean him up. It was sweet when he did this, especially tonight. He wiped Ilya's stomach clean and then his cock, gentle fingers moving his foreskin

down, which nearly made Ilya squirm, but under Shane's soft touch just made his eyes close, savoring the care. He nearly drifted off between that and the time it took Shane to disappear and come back again, but when Ilya opened his eyes, Shane had his glasses on and a book in his hand, with a little booklight attached to it.

"Why didn't you put those on earlier?" Ilya asked. "I need a redo."

Shane huffed a laugh. "I don't think they would have stayed on."

"What are you doing?"

"Reading to you. It's your birthday. Unless you don't want me to."

"I want you to," Ilya said. "There is nothing I'd like more right now."

Shane settled in the bed next to him, and Ilya turned on his side so he could rest his head on Shane's shoulder.

"What are you going to read?" Ilya asked. The book was angled away from him, the moonlight not bright enough to see the back cover.

Shane turned the booklight on so it illuminated the cover: Giovanni's Room.

"You know I was rereading it while I could before the season ended. But um...I've been reading everything with a slightly different perspective now. And there were a few things that stuck with me more this time around. Because of you. I want to read one of them to you."

Ilya didn't know if his body and mind and soul could take much more today, already so sated and full and happy, but Shane's words still lit him up, and he snuggled in closer.

"I want to hear it."

"I know this book is kind of sad and heavy, so obviously none of that applies to us. But some of the feelings and..." Shane trailed off. "Anyway, you get it." He opened the book to nearly the beginning and began to read.

"...for the first time in my life, I was really aware of another person's body, of another person's smell. We had our arms around each other. It was like holding in my hand some rare, exhausted, nearly doomed bird which I had miraculously happened to find. I was very frightened; I am sure he was frightened too, and we shut our eyes. To remember it so clearly, so painfully tonight tells me that I have never for an instant truly forgotten it. I feel in myself now a faint, a dreadful stirring of what so overwhelmingly stirred in me then, great thirsty heat, and trembling, and tenderness so painful I thought my heart would burst. But out of this astounding, intolerable pain came joy; we gave each other joy that night. It seemed, then, that a lifetime would not be long enough for me to act with Joey the act of love."

Shane lowered the book and said, "Ignoring the sad part, because I can't talk about that out loud. But the rest...it's a lot like how you made me feel, all the time, but especially at the beginning. I was scared and...it was just like that, thirsty heat and tenderness so painful I thought my heart would burst. And joy...so much joy. You were so patient with me, and I

really appreciate that. Anyway, I wanted you to know that, and I liked the way it sounded here. Much better than I could have put it.”

Ilya rolled to his side so he could bury his face in Shane’s neck. How many times were his eyes going to betray him today?

“I was scared too,” Ilya whispered against his skin. “Maybe ‘exhausted, nearly doomed bird’ is accurate. Before that, I was just going through the motions, trying to convince myself I didn’t need more. And then you showed up and showed me what I was missing.”

Shane managed to shift to his side, head on the pillow, and put an arm over his waist, holding him tight face-to-face. “We needed each other.” He leaned closer, pressing their lips together. “There were more parts of that book that I highlighted, but I think we can save them for another time. I just wanted you to know that you’ve made my life so much better than I even knew was possible. And I love you. I hope you had a good birthday.”

“I love you too. This hasn’t been just the best birthday, but also one of the best days of my life,” Ilya said honestly. He didn’t add that most of the other days of his life that he counted among the best were also with Shane, and he hardly let himself wonder how many more days might join them. Memories upon memories.

Shane kissed his forehead and stroked his hair. Ilya felt so cared for, safe and warm in Shane’s arms, it was almost a brand new feeling. He drifted off holding it tight, like it might slip away in the night, like it always had before, and knowing deep down he didn’t need to worry anymore.

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The next days at the cottage were languid and indulgent. They spent a lot of time lying in the sun, or swimming in the cold lake, more Ilya than Shane. The cold water didn’t bother him, and he enjoyed kicking around while Shane laid on the dock or sat on a rock and watched, laughing at his antics and giving him fond looks that warmed Ilya from the inside out. They had sex everywhere and every which way, and within a matter of days, Ilya was pretty sure Shane’s mouth had touched every inch of his body and vice versa. They ate the babkas and pies Shane’s parents had given them, and that had been a treat for Ilya in more ways than one. They cooked together, watched the sunset, laid side by side on the bed or feet to feet on the couch while they read, either to themselves, deep in their own books, or out loud to each other. Besides being outdoors so much, it wasn’t entirely different from how they lived in Boston, but everything felt so much *more*. Slower and sweeter, and Ilya never wanted it to end, even as he missed One Good Memory.

He checked in with John and/or Mallory daily. The new person, Ren, was apparently doing great, and none of them had any issues so far. Ilya kept an eye on stock and sales through the store’s software on his laptop, and everything was on track. Svetlana had texted a few times, letting him know she’d stopped in to check on things and had nothing to report. It was a relief. He loved the store and wouldn’t trade it for anything, but he had wondered over the years if it could ever get to the point where it would self-sustain without him being present

24/7.

New York had won game 5 and lost game 6 of the cup finals, sending them all the way to game 7 with Los Angeles. The day of the final game, they enjoyed a quiet morning and afternoon, then made dinner together. Shane had offered to grill chicken for tacos, and Ilya made guacamole and salsa, and they ate outside. That novelty hadn't worn off yet, even though Ilya was being unfairly targeted by mosquitoes.

"Why are they only biting me?" he asked, slapping at his arm.

"You taste good?"

"So do you, and they're barely touching you."

"They know you're new blood out here."

"Well, I'm going in. To take a shower before the game."

"Okay," Shane said, leaning back in his chair, looking amused.

"Guess I'll have to wash my own back," Ilya said, as he picked up the empty plates and the bowls. "Bye." He pushed the glass door open and nudged Vanya back with his foot. He'd been getting a little too brave, waiting by the doors like he might try to run out in search of birds. Ilya knew with certainty that Vanya did not have the survival skills to be outside by himself, pampered apartment cat that he was.

Ilya loaded the dishes into the dishwasher and then went to start the shower, knowing he wouldn't be alone for long. Shane didn't disappoint. A minute after Ilya stepped under the water, strong arms were squeezing him from behind. They allowed themselves to be distracted in Shane's huge shower with its multiple showerheads until they were both flushed and too hot inside the steamy glass and stone walls.

When they finally made it out of the bedroom, clean and dressed in comfortable shorts and t-shirts, the NY-LA game had just started. Shane was locked in, shifting every so often with the intensity of what was happening on tv. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, when someone was close to scoring, and he leaned back dramatically against the back of the couch every time there was a questionable call, or someone was doing something he deemed 'a stupid move.'

Ilya enjoyed the game for the most part. He didn't really care much who won, though he secretly thought Hunter was a pretty decent guy, based on his very boring interviews and his scandal-free career. Maybe he reminded him a little of someone else, even though he wouldn't be saying that out loud again. Though the Jon Snow comparison had also been pretty spot on, if he did say so himself.

"What the fuck was that," Shane griped when Bennett let a goal through that did, even to Ilya, seem like 'a stupid move'.

"He is only human, I guess," Ilya said. "They're still up by 1."

“But look at Hunter, he’s already flagging. They need Bennett to pull out his weird, practically supernatural shit.”

By the end of the second period, New York was down by 1. Shane kept shaking his head.

“They’re going to blow it. Look at him, he’s letting the pressure get to him.”

Ilya watched as Greg Huff scored, with an assist from Hunter, tying them up again.

“I don’t know,” Ilya said. “He looks determined to me. You look like that sometimes. Like nothing else exists in the world but you and the puck. It’s kind of sexy.”

Shane looked over at him, his eyes going wide, then narrowing. “When I do it, or Hunter?”

Ilya laughed at the little edge of jealousy because it was cute and entirely unnecessary. “You obviously. Hunter is not *my* type.”

“He’s not mine either.” Shane rolled his eyes. “But...”

“Yes?”

“I think maybe I had a crush on him, back before I even got drafted. I loved watching him. He’s actually better now, when he’s at his best, but he was more consistent then. He was the kind of player I wanted to be.”

“Should *I* be jealous?”

“Of course not. God, can you imagine two MLH players trying to date? The whole league would lose their minds.”

Ilya didn’t want to think too hard about Shane dating an MLH player, but he did agree...that would shake not only the MLH but probably the entirety of the pro-sports world. It was something that happened in women's sports, but certainly not men's.

“Good thing I quit then, huh?”

Shane looked over at him, his expression showing genuine concern. “Don’t say that. I mean...I’m glad you did what you wanted, but we would have figured it out no matter what.”

Ilya smiled at how serious he was being. It was sweet, and he wondered if it was true. Then he reminded himself that nothing good ever came from playing the *what if* game.

On tv, the teams were making their way back to the ice after the last intermission. The third period didn’t start well for the Admirals after LA scored a goal right away, putting NY down by 1.

As the third period progressed, Shane’s interest seemed to be waning, and he had his phone in his hand.

“Marly said they’re definitely driving in on the 2nd and staying until the 5th,” Shane said while he typed something back. “We can go restock groceries that weekend.”

“Won’t you want to go alone? People around here will recognize you, yes?”

Shane looked torn. “I mean...I doubt anyone around here would take and post pictures though, and I guess it wouldn’t matter if they did. I think it’ll be fine.”

Being able to go grocery shopping with Shane felt very important somehow. One day soon, if things went according to plan...

“Oh shit,” Shane said, eyes back on the tv.

They were tied again, the clock was about to hit 1 minute, but Hunter was on a breakaway, moving fast, cutting through the LA defense like nothing could touch him. The rest was so fast Ilya almost didn’t see him hit the puck, but he saw the LA goalie move, and then the Admirals were all watching the clock as it ticked down, 3, 2, 1.

“Wow,” Shane said, looking over at him. “He really did it.”

“One more MLH golden boy with a cup win,” Ilya said, leaning over to grab Shane’s wrist and pull him almost into his lap. Shane turned so that his thighs were draped over Ilya’s, legs going perpendicular across the couch. “Next year it will be back to my favorite golden boy.”

Shane smiled at him, and then it fell, leaving worry in its place. “I hope so. I feel like... maybe I have to win it next year. Prove to them I’m still the same person. Like it’s the only way they’ll accept me.”

Ilya smoothed a hand over his hair. “You don’t owe anyone anything. You are still the same person, still the best player in the league, whether you win 10 more cups or 0. You don’t have to prove you’re worthy of anything just because you’re gay.” Ilya wrapped his arms around him. “If people don’t accept you, it’s because something is wrong with them, not you.”

Shane nodded and leaned forward to let his head fall to Ilya’s shoulder, but Ilya could feel the tension still. He held onto him while they watched NY celebrate on screen. They’d finished passing the cup around, and the ice was full of family members, helmets and gloves scattered everywhere. The camera kept cutting to Scott Hunter, who was patting teammates on the back and making his way through the crowd.

“Are you ready to go to bed? We could start one of the other new books tonight,” Ilya offered.

He’d been making his way through *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* and reading passages out loud that he thought Shane would like to hear, including: *You do not know how fast you have been running, how hard you have been working, how truly exhausted you are, until someone stands behind you and says, 'It's OK, you can fall down now. I'll catch you',* which had led to Shane laying his head in Ilya's lap while he quietly stroked his hair.

Meanwhile, Shane had been reading *White Nights* by Dostoevsky, by his own choice. Ilya had recommended that one to start his foray into Dostoevsky's work, and he was so deeply pleased that Shane had been enjoying it.

"Yeah, that sounds good," Shane said, but he made no move to get up yet, still watching the post-game coverage. "What is he doing?"

Ilya looked up. Hunter was standing on the ice apart from everyone else, looking up into the seats, a strange expression on his face.

"Is his family there?"

Shane shook his head. "His parents are dead. I've never heard that he's in a relationship or anything. He's one of the few big names who never seems to be dating an actress or model. But maybe he is."

Ilya watched as he beckoned to someone, the camera panning over to the crowd. There was no obvious woman in frame. Instead, there was a man stumbling out of his seat and down the stairs. A very attractive man who looked like he was very unsure about whatever was happening. *Surely not...*

"I don't think there's an actress or model," Ilya said.

"Who is that?"

"I think...we are about to find out."

Shane swung his legs off Ilya's lap so he could lean forward and watch. Ilya was practically holding his breath. Now that he had more pieces of the puzzle, those looks on their faces were starting to make more sense. Maybe Shane was about to be a little less alone before the world even knew.

"What the fuck?" Shane said loudly as Scott Hunter kissed a man on live television.

Ilya laughed, disbelief and amusement and joy and a whole host of things he never expected to feel while watching a Stanley Cup final. They were literally watching history be made. He turned to Shane, expecting a similar spread of emotions, but Shane looked...confused...and maybe pissed off? He stood abruptly and looked at Ilya with his jaw hanging open, one finger pointed at the tv.

"Is he...did he just...what the fuck?"

Ilya's own face pulled into confusion now, his smile turning to a frown, brows knitting. "Yes, he just kissed a man on live tv. This is good, right?"

"Good?" Shane scoffed. "But...I was supposed to...how did..."

The words were tripping out of him, and Ilya finally understood what was happening. He couldn't help it, he laughed again.

“Oh, Shane. You’re mad because Scott Hunter beat you at being gay?”

“Well...yeah. I mean, now everyone’s going to think I was just copying him. I was supposed to be the first one.”

Ilya cocked his head, but his expression softened. “You were worried about coming out because it put a target on you. You were going to have to face it alone. Now you don’t have to.”

“Yeah, but...” Shane paced in front of the tv. “My interview is going to look so lame now.”

Ilya snorted. “Mr. Competitive, come here, please.”

Shane shot him a look, but he walked over and Ilya yanked him down into his lap again.

“I think your interview is going to be very good. And now it won’t be so explosive. Scott Hunter kind of did you a favor. He will take the brunt of it, and when they get to you, they’ll already be used to the idea.”

Shane took a long breath through his nose and then nodded. “You’re right. I know you are. But...fuck. That was really brave,” he jerked his chin toward the screen. “I thought I was being brave, but...”

“You are. You are the bravest person I’ve ever met. You already told your team, and now they can tell all the other idiots in the league that you were gay first.”

Shane laughed. “Okay, well, when you say it like that.” He let his forehead lean against Ilya’s. “Scott fucking Hunter is gay?”

“Well, he definitely likes men. That was a good kiss.”

“Ours would have been better,” Shane said, just whiny enough to make Ilya laugh again.

“Of course it would have. You can kiss me on live television next year, when you win.”

Shane leaned back to look at him, and Ilya could see the thoughts racing.

“Hey,” Ilya said, cupping his jaw. “I was kidding. You never have to do that.”

“I would. I’m not ashamed of you. I just...didn’t even know it was an option. Oh my god, Hunter is going to be the talk of the league forever. A cup and a gay kiss on the ice all in one night...jesus. Almost makes me want to go to the awards.”

“You still can,” Ilya said.

Shane looked thoughtful for a moment, then shook his head and said, “No, I can’t. Marly will tell me if anything happens.”

“You should talk to Hunter, at least. Maybe you can tell him about you and the interview before it comes out. Let him know he’s not alone?” Ilya suggested.

“Fuck. Yeah, I should.” Shane started to reach for his phone where he’d left it on the coffee table, but Ilya gently grabbed his wrist and pulled it back.

“He’s still on the ice. He will be busy for hours. No rush.”

“Yeah, right. Okay. I’ll email him tomorrow.”

Shane still looked like he just lost a Mario Kart race, and Ilya couldn’t help the laugh that reached his throat.

Shane shoved his shoulder and said, “Shut up. It’s not funny,” even as he started laughing too. “How the hell did this even happen?”

“There are probably several queer players in the league. Imagine what you and Hunter coming out will do. You’re not just two of the top players, but also probably two of the most well-known. I think if you ask some random people who are not hockey fans to name five players, almost all of them would include you two. This is good.”

Shane nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s true.” He still looked like he was fighting it.

“Hey,” Ilya said. He brushed Shane’s bangs back, made sure he was paying attention. “You’re allowed to feel how you feel. It’s okay to be disappointed.”

“I don’t even know why I am. I don’t want to be in the spotlight. Like you said...he did me a favor.”

“Yes, but you had your plan, and now Hunter has stomped his big dumb feet on it,” Ilya said. Shane smiled and rolled his eyes at that. “Everything will be okay.” Ilya paused for a second. “But still a little funny.” He pulled Shane in for a kiss before he complained again.

Shane kissed him, and then they were both laughing. “He really did win at hockey and being gay all in one night,” Shane said, letting himself go limp against Ilya. “No wonder I had a crush on him.”

“Ahem.” Ilya dug his fingers into Shane’s side enough to tickle, causing Shane to squirm in his lap.

“*Had*. Still past tense. I’m just saying...it makes sense.”

Ilya snorted. “Yes. Too bad your boring, hockey-playing Jon Snow is taken now.”

Shane leaned back and grabbed his phone, then started typing something.

“What are you doing?”

“I want to see that again.”

“The kiss?”

“Yeah.”

Ilya scoffed dramatically.

“You don’t want to see that again?” Shane asked. “Plus, I want to see what they said about it. I was too distracted.”

Ilya admittedly did want to see it again. As Shane played the footage, which was already posted everywhere, he tried to look at the people in the background. Some of them were comically surprised, but he didn’t see many with obvious disgust. Most of the visible faces belonged to family and friends of the Admirals, and thus probably knew Scott Hunter personally. But it was still a slight relief.

Shane replayed the footage several times, then started clicking around to other websites that had quickly slapped together headlines, and eventually he ended up on twitter. Ilya could see some of the tweets were supportive and sweet and funny, but there were others that weren’t. When Shane’s thumb started moving faster, scrolling and scrolling, his face gone too serious, Ilya gently took his phone from him, locked the screen, and set it down.

“Maybe that’s enough for tonight?” he asked.

Shane looked on the verge of being upset again, and he nodded. “Yeah, probably.”

“What do you need? Want me to distract you until you forget about Scott Hunter for a while?”

Shane nodded. “Please.”

Ilya pushed him down on the couch until Shane’s head was on the throw pillow and he kissed him hard, tongue exploring enough to make Shane moan, which was interrupted by a low meow from right beside their heads. Vanya was standing on his back legs, front paws on the couch, looking at them.

Ilya sighed. “Here comes the fun police.”

Shane reached up to pet the disturber of the peace, which Ilya felt was encouraging bad behavior.

“Go away. We’re busy,” he told Vanya, who ignored him entirely and rubbed his face against Shane’s palm, purring like an engine.

“Maybe Vanya and I are busy now,” Shane said as Vanya climbed fully onto the couch beside his head and laid down.

Ilya nuzzled against Shane’s neck and made a whiny noise, but he was pleased to see that Shane was sufficiently distracted for now. Shane’s other hand landed in his hair, mimicking the way his other hand was petting Vanya.

“You’re petting me like a cat.”

“Well, you’re just as whiny as he is.”

Ilya laughed and bit the curve of Shane's neck, which was enough to pull his attention away from Vanya and continued to devolve until Ilya had to drag him to the bedroom and close the door behind them. He made sure Shane wasn't thinking about Scott Hunter for the rest of the night.

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The next day, Shane spent two hours writing an email to Hunter. Ilya had looked over his shoulder a few times, and it seemed that Shane was writing and rewriting the same sentences over and over again. He didn't interrupt, though. Shane needed to do this, and Ilya was glad he wasn't going to be alone. Even having just one other player stand with him would help when it came down to facing a bunch of homophobic hockey players, and worse, hockey fans. Shane asked him to read the email before he finally sent it. It was simple and to the point, but Ilya could feel the emotion of it too, and he was sure Hunter would as well.

Shane had still been slightly on edge for the rest of the day, and Ilya had to drag him away from ESPN and social media a few times, reminding him that the opinions of random strangers, a lot of which were loud and terrible, didn't matter. There weren't many public reactions from actual MLH players yet. Though Marly had texted the previous night while Ilya was busy making Shane forget what the Stanley Cup was. He'd said much the same as Ilya...this was a good thing, and he was glad Shane wouldn't have to be alone out there. It seemed to help. By evening, Shane was more relaxed, back to his usual overly competitive but playful self while they kicked a soccer ball around.

Ilya expected that to continue the next day, and it had at first. They enjoyed a slow, lazy morning of blowjobs in the shower and breakfast made together that they ate outside with cups of coffee. Ilya gave in and played Super Smash Bros. for a while and barely even complained when Shane wouldn't let them stop until he won an acceptable number of rounds.

By late afternoon, Shane had started getting restless again, picking up his phone every so often and studying it intently while his face dipped into something that looked like worry or nervousness. Ilya assumed he was reading about Hunter again and let him be, knowing he needed to get it out of his system.

The weather turned nasty while they were making dinner, thunder rumbling every so often, rain pelting the glass. Vanya seemed just as curious about that as he had been about the birds and was pacing along the back wall of the living room while they ate. Shane was watching the rain too. His eyes strayed to the glass on and off during dinner. Afterward, Ilya had looked up from where he was loading the dishwasher to find Shane standing by the back door, staring out into the darkness, illuminated every so often by a flash of lightning.

"What are you worried about?" Ilya asked eventually.

"Hm? Nothing. I just didn't know the weather would be bad tonight," Shane said, stepping away from the glass.

"Were you planning to go outside?"

"Huh? No. Just looking."

Ilya wasn't sure he believed that, but he let it go. "Let's go watch tv for a while?"

Shane nodded and followed him to the living room. Ilya pulled up the Showtime app on the tv and started the next episode of Queer as Folk. They'd started watching it together before the playoffs and were still making their way through. Sometimes it was good foreplay, sometimes just a good chance to reflect on how far things had come since then, and how far there was still to go.

Shane started fidgeting after a couple of episodes. He'd reached out for his phone a couple of times and then snatched his hand back, as if he'd suddenly remembered something. Ilya was going to ask if he was okay when Shane sat up.

"I'm gonna go take a shower," he declared.

"Okay. Want me to come?" Ilya asked, already pausing the show and sitting up.

"Uh, no, more than just a shower," he said quickly, giving Ilya a pointed look.

Ilya nodded and sat back again. "Let me know when you're ready for me."

Shane gave him a smile that he probably thought was normal, but Ilya could tell he was still thinking about something else. At least some good sex would probably help him relax, so Ilya watched him walk to the bedroom and close the door behind him. He grabbed the remote and closed out of Showtime, then found a nature show about a pair of wolves, lifelong mates surviving in Alaska.

He was so thoroughly engrossed in the show, he didn't realize until the 60 min runtime had elapsed that Shane was taking a while. Ilya was just getting ready to go knock and make sure everything was good when he heard the bedroom door open.

"Ilya?" Shane said loudly.

Ilya turned the tv off, pet Vanya where he was loafing in front of the glass, and headed for the bedroom. The door was closed again when he got there, Shane nowhere to be found. Ilya twisted the doorknob and pushed the door open, only to find a disorienting collage of flickering lights in the otherwise dark room. His eyes swept the perimeter, taking in the hundreds of candles lining every surface. Scattered across the dresser and nightstands, along the baseboards, their reflections dancing in the glass, making it look like there were even more of them. The rain was still coming down hard outside, creating a symphony of sound that gave rhythm to the twinkling lights.

And there was Shane, standing in front of the bed, illuminated by the soft yellow light of what Ilya quickly realized were fake candles, and if his mind wasn't being overtaken by what was happening here, he might have laughed at that because it was very adorably Shane. But there was no laughter right then, only something warm, molten even, zinging through his body. Shane had his thumbs in his pockets, hair swept messily off his forehead, and Ilya's favorite crooked smile on his face.

"Hi," Shane said nervously. "Close the door. Please."

Ilya reached behind him and closed the door, turning to make sure Vanya wasn't there. Then he looked back at Shane and swallowed hard. Shane held a hand out, and Ilya took two big steps forward, until he was close enough to tangle their fingers together tightly, needing something to hold onto.

"Um...so...I was going to do this outside. But then the weather...I didn't even think to check, but I also couldn't wait any longer, so..." Shane looked down and took a deep, shaky breath. "So yeah, sorry it's in here instead..."

Ilya squeezed his hand. "Shane."

"Wait," Shane said. "Don't say anything yet. I practiced this, and I need to do it before I forget everything or..." He licked his lips. "Give me a second."

Ilya waited, holding his breath, wanting Shane to hurry up and also wanting to freeze whatever this moment was forever. The brink of something, but he didn't want to assume.

"Ilya," Shane started, looking down at the floor between them before he lifted his head and his eyes found Ilya's. "I didn't know when I walked into One Good Memory for the first time that it was going to change my whole life. I still remember seeing you behind the counter. It was like one of those moments they write about...time practically stopped when you looked up at me, like...like the whole world shifted. *My* world. Maybe it was love at first sight, I don't know. But whatever it was, I'm so glad it happened." He paused and bit his bottom lip while he breathed in, then he continued, voice thick and shaky. "Every minute since then has been the best of my life. *You* are the best thing in my life. You're everything to me...a shore worth swimming to, the only person I'd like to say goodbye to before I die. You make me better and not ashamed. You're half my soul and my whole heart. And...at the end as at the start, and through all the in-betweens, I love you."

All the little lights around him had gone shimmery, blurring as if he was seeing them through water, because he was. Then Shane dropped to one knee, and Ilya could only suck in a sniffling breath and try to keep his legs beneath him.

"Ilya Rozanov," Shane said, his voice still wavering but steadfast, "will you marry me?"

He'd pulled a small box from his pocket on the way down and popped it open in time with the question. Ilya couldn't see the details, only the ring shining like a beacon, reflecting the candlelight. He wanted to be closer, and his legs were ready to give out anyway, so he sank to his knees in front of Shane.

"Yes," he said, voice breaking as he leaned in, not knowing where he was going, but Shane was there, both hands on his face, the ring set down somewhere, and their lips were crashing together just as lightning flashed and thunder rumbled gently outside, unlike the loud claps from earlier, like even mother nature had decided to celebrate them.

It was a deluge of things...he felt happiness of the deepest sort, cherished and proud that Shane had collected little bits of the books they'd read together, their own little love story perfectly cobbled together through words gifted by others and even more of their own making. The candles and the rain and the tears tracking down his cheeks, the way Shane's big

hands were gripping his face and their lips were moving together, messy and imperfect in their rush to be connected, but right and perfect in how they always fit together, like they were made to be there.

When they finally broke apart, Shane laughed, breathy and high, still full of nerves but also disbelief and maybe joy, and Ilya knew he'd never forget that sound.

"Oh my god," Shane breathed, leaning in until their foreheads touched. "I love you so much."

"I love you too," Ilya managed, even though he wanted to say so much more. Shane Hollander had rendered him nearly speechless.

Shane picked up the ring box and pulled out the ring. Now, closer up, Ilya could see the band was solid gold and beveled on the edges, but otherwise unadorned. Simple but beautiful.

Ilya held out his hand and let Shane slip the ring onto his finger. The metal was almost warm, and it slid into place like it had always been there, a perfect fit.

"I know it's kind of plain, but I figured we could add something later if we want. That we pick out together," Shane said. "If that's okay."

"It's perfect. But we need to get one for you."

"I got one. I just, uh...it's in my bag still. I wanted to make sure I'd need it first."

Ilya smiled and cupped his jaw. "You thought I would say no?"

Shane shook his head. "No, not really. But it felt like bad luck to assume."

Ilya shifted so he could sit on the floor against the bed. "Can you get it now?"

Shane stood up, wobbling just enough to show that the nerves were either still there or slowly leaving him. He went to his suitcase in the corner and dug around until he fished out an identical little box and brought it back to where Ilya sat. Ilya grabbed his hand and pulled him down until he was straddling Ilya's lap. He needed Shane close for this. Shane handed him the little box, and Ilya opened it to remove the ring, a twin to the one that now sat on his own hand. He'd let Shane put it on his left, so it would reside near the gold bracelet...two reflections of their connection made solid.

Before he spoke, Ilya let words run through his mind, deciding which ones were good enough for this moment, and whether they'd be his or someone else's. He picked up Shane's left hand in his and held it gently while he spoke.

"The day you walked into One Good Memory was the best day of my life. At least it was right then. But you keep giving me more best days, a whole lifetime full of them already. Every time I think we've reached the best one, here you are, offering me another." Ilya closed his eyes and breathed a moment, willing himself to get the words out before he fell apart. "All the things we've read together, all the words I've ever read...none of them are enough. They're an approximation, a good placeholder maybe, little pieces of this thing...but never enough for how much I love you. I was an unfinished book, all the ink still wet, sentences

with no ends. None of my words had any meaning yet. And you showed up and made me whole...you made sense of me, and..." Ilya let out a shaky breath. "You made me believe I was worthy of being loved."

"Ilya," Shane said, voice soft and thick with tears. "You were always worthy of being loved."

"But you chose to, even when it was hard."

"That was never the hard part. That was the easiest thing in the world." Shane leaned in to kiss his forehead, a thumb brushing under his eye, where he knew a tear was hanging. Then he pressed Ilya's face against his neck and hugged him tight. "And those words were enough for me."

Ilya pulled back enough to fit the ring onto Shane's finger, then lifted his hand to press a kiss to his palm. They sat together for a while, touching and kissing while the rain serenaded them and the candles left their wet eyes shiny and bright. Another perfect memory.

"How did you get all these candles here?" Ilya asked eventually. "I didn't see them in your luggage."

"Oh, I had them shipped to my parents' cottage and asked them to bring them here. They were in one of the guest room closets. I moved them to our closet this morning."

"Your parents know?"

Shane nodded. "I told them I was planning to propose. They were really happy. They love you too."

Ilya blinked rapidly and nodded, unable to say anything to that.

"At first I wondered if I should do it at home. Maybe in One Good Memory since that's where we met, and being surrounded by books seemed kind of fitting. But...as much as I love it there, I wasn't sure if proposing in your place of work was as romantic as it could be?"

Ilya huffed a laugh at that before Shane continued.

"Then here I was going to line the dock with the candles and do this outside, under the moonlight. Because that did sound romantic. I've been dying to do it since we got here honestly, but I wanted to make sure I was prepared. And I didn't want to overshadow your birthday. And then the whole Hunter thing threw me off. So I waited until today, and I was nervous but ready. And then the fucking weather," Shane snorted. "I could have waited until tomorrow, but I just didn't want to wait any longer...so that's why I did it in here."

"It's perfect. The most romantic thing that's ever happened to me. I think the rain is a nice touch." Ilya put one hand at the back of Shane's neck and pulled him in close, almost a kiss. "And now I can do this without worry."

He kissed Shane and then shifted to the side so he could lay back on the floor, pulling Shane down with him. He slipped one hand beneath Shane's t-shirt to caress the smooth skin of his back, wanting nothing more than to be as close to him as possible right then.

Hands roamed and shirts came off, the need in both of them building quickly. Ilya pushed a hand down the back of Shane's pants to pull him in tighter, both of them hard and rocking against each other. He pushed one hand between Shane's cheeks, searching for the spot, only to find it already slick, a finger slipping in his hole with ease. Ilya broke their kiss to look at him in surprise.

"No wonder you were taking so long in here."

Shane grinned and bit his lip. "I thought about putting a plug in, but then I realized I'd have to live with that for the rest of our lives. Anytime we talked about it, I'd have to remember that I proposed to you while wearing one."

Ilya burst out laughing. "You'd never be able to tell anyone with a straight face."

Shane rolled his eyes, then moaned because Ilya's finger was still inside of him. "Just knowing that I almost did is probably going to haunt me."

"Mm, no. Very sexy. That part is only for us to know." Ilya removed his hand. "Let's move to the bed."

They removed the rest of their clothes, and Ilya realized there was an extra blanket on the bed already, made specifically for these activities. Shane certainly had been prepared.

Ilya pushed Shane gently down on his back, stopping for a moment to admire the way his skin glowed gold in the candlelight, his eyes shining with little pinpricks, like stars in a dark sky. Even his freckles were perfectly lit, standing out like little works of art that Ilya wanted to get lost in. He must have been staring too long because Shane drew his knees up and slipped a hand between his own legs, and Ilya watched as he pushed two fingers into himself, drawing a moan from both of them. Ilya quickly slicked himself and knelt between Shane's legs, taking a second to lick the bead of precome from the tip of his cock before he moved Shane's hand out of the way and replaced it with the head of his own cock. He used it to smear the lube around Shane's hole, taking his time.

"Ilya," Shane said impatiently. "I already did that part. Come on."

Ilya didn't need to be told twice. He held himself steady and pushed in, their bodies once again fitting together like they were made to be there. He leaned down and let their lips slot back into place while Shane wrapped his legs around Ilya's back, one hand settling into his curls, the other digging into his lower back. Shane's fingers tightened in his hair, and Ilya kissed him deeper while he thrust hard. It was still gentle and sweet, but also claiming and a little desperate, both of them trying to slow down and savor it while their bodies raced for a finish. Shane was pushing against him to meet every thrust, and even over the constant tapping of the rain and the occasional thunder, the sound of their bodies meeting was audible in the room, mixed in with soft moans and whimpers, and the gasps of breath taken between kisses until they couldn't hold those any longer.

"I can't believe I get to have you for the rest of our lives," Shane said, looking up at him with the kind of reverence that would bring Ilya to his knees if he wasn't already there. "Yours."

“Always. My Shane.”

Ilya didn't know if it lasted minutes or hours, he was lost in the deep, dark pools of Shane's eyes and the way their bodies rocked together and the way the candles and the rain and Shane's warm, tight body made it feel like they were existing out of time and space, a world made just for them, and if they wanted, maybe it would go on forever.

Shane's fingers tugged at his curls, making him focus, and he realized they were both so close. Shane's cock was dripping precome in a pool on his stomach, and his legs were tightening around Ilya's waist, pulling him closer, like he couldn't get close enough. Ilya kissed his neck and his shoulder and his chest, licked at his nipples, but he eventually had to push Shane's legs further up and make room for himself so he could find the right spot on each push of his hips. He knew he found it when Shane's mouth opened wider, the noises coming from him so perfect and precious and hot, and Ilya could feel his orgasm threatening to burst out of him at any moment. He reached down and stroked Shane's cock, his fist wet with cum almost immediately as Shane curled around him, pulled him closer again, always clinging to him like this when he came, and it was still one of Ilya's favorite things, and now he'd get to have it forever. His Shane, his safe place, each other's safe places. It sent him over the edge, and he let Shane pull him down, their sweat and cum-slick bodies touching in every place they physically could. He rubbed his cheek against Shane's, his hips finally stilling and his body going immediately loose and probably heavy, but Shane had him wrapped up tight, and no part of him wanted to move anyway.

They stayed that way long enough for Ilya to start going soft in Shane's body and slip out, both of them squirming a little at the sensation, but not enough to separate. Ilya kissed Shane's face and his lips and pushed the sweaty bangs off his forehead. Even in the fluttery dim light of the fake candles, he could see how flushed Shane's chest and face were. He was stunning. It was a little like he looked after a long hockey game, but the way all his features were soft and slack and sated, his satisfied, almost shy half-smile...that was a look only Ilya got to see.

“I don't think a towel is going to be enough tonight,” Ilya said, feeling his own sweaty curls plastered to his head. “Shower?”

Shane nodded, but his eyes fluttered shut again as he sighed happily. “When I can move.”

Ilya rolled off him, the cool air of the room prickling against his chest and stomach. “You recover. I will go see what our cat is up to, make sure he isn't wreaking havoc, and then I'll start the shower.”

Ilya kissed him once more and then got up and made his way out of the bedroom to find Vanya. He didn't have to go too far. Vanya was at the back glass wall in the kitchen, watching out the window while his tail flicked ominously.

“What are you up to, you little weirdo?” Ilya asked. He squatted down next to him. “You will be very happy to know that Shane is going to be your dad for real now. He already was, but now we can tell people that.”

Vanya meowed loudly and got up to rub against his leg.

“Yes, I know. I’m happy too. I think you knew he was sticking around before I did, huh?”

Ilya pet him for a few minutes, then made his way back to the bedroom, where Shane was climbing out of the bed.

“Ready?” Ilya asked.

“Yeah. What’s he up to?”

“Staring out the window. He’s very happy about the news.” Ilya held up his left hand.

Shane grinned at him. “I hope so. I’m only marrying you for him.”

Ilya laughed and grabbed him around the waist, dragging him in close. “I am legally binding myself to you just so you can beat me at video games and gang up on me with the cat?”

Shane cocked his head. “I can think of a few other reasons.”

“Only a few? I could think of reasons until the end of time.”

Shane laid his head on Ilya’s shoulder. “Me too.”

They made it to the shower and washed each other...their hair, their bodies, stopping to touch their rings and kiss. They dried each other with fluffy towels, and Shane took extra care with Ilya’s hair, gently patting it with his hair towel and then combing his fingers through it, lingering where he didn’t need to while Ilya practically purred like Vanya. Shane had left him to finish up while he gathered all the little fake candles to turn them off and put them away. It was getting late when they finally pushed the blanket off the bed and tucked themselves beneath the clean sheets. The rain hadn’t let up, but it had slowed, providing a perfect soft patter for reading and sleeping.

“I thought a lot about what we could read tonight. But I think I got so wrapped up in trying to pick the perfect thing, it was stressing me out,” Shane said.

Ilya wasn’t surprised somehow. “Nothing to stress about. We already said the important things tonight.”

“Yeah. But still. I thought about Call Me By Your Name because that was the first one for us. But their story is so sad. A lot of the ones we read are sad. I kept coming back to Whitman. I used it to tell you I love you, and it’ll always be really special because of that...so. This time I’m going to actually read it. If you want to hear it from me.”

Ilya turned on his side and draped one arm around Shane’s chest and one leg over his thighs. “I always want to hear anything from you.”

Shane pulled it up on his phone and began to read the familiar words, but Ilya still felt like he was hearing them anew.

“When I heard at the close of the day how my name had been receiv’d with plaudits in the capitol, still it was not a happy night for me that follow’d,

And else when I carous'd, or when my plans were accomplish'd, still I was not happy,

Ilya closed his eyes and listened to Shane read. He heard the words and took them in while a little slideshow of all the days they'd spent together so far played through his head.

*“And when I thought how my dear friend my lover was on his way coming, O then I was happy,
O then each breath tasted sweeter, and all that day my food nourish'd me more, and the beautiful day pass'd well,
And the next came with equal joy, and with the next at evening came my friend,
And that night while all was still I heard the waters roll slowly continually up the shores,
I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands as directed to me whispering to congratulate me,
For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night,
In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me,
And his arm lay lightly around my breast – and that night I was happy.”*

Shane put his phone down and snuggled further into the bed and into Ilya, pressing lips to the top of his head, and Ilya could only exhale. Happy and so content.

“This night I am happy. Every night with you.”

“Me too. With you. And him too,” Shane said, as Vanya hopped onto the bed beside them.

He walked around, stepping on Ilya's side with his pokey little front feet so he could look over them...a lord surveying his peasants.

“Get off,” Ilya said. Vanya did get off, but Ilya doubted it was because he'd said it. Vanya made his way around the bed and settled somewhere near their feet.

“Do you think he'd walk up the aisle at our wedding?” Shane asked.

Ilya's stomach gave a surprised but happy little dip. He'd almost forgotten that proposals come with weddings.

“He would probably walk over hot coals for you,” Ilya said. “I think he would run down the aisle just to reach you, no matter who else is around.”

“He loves you more. I'm just newer and nicer.”

“Hmm, maybe. It's okay, though. I'm not jealous. I'm glad he loves you as much as I do.” Ilya squeezed him tighter. “I think he knew you were permanent the first time we met you.”

“Well, at least someone knew what was going on.”

Ilya laughed. “Yes. Very smart. Like his dads.”

Shane made a happy little noise and then said, “I can't believe we're getting married.” His fingers stroked down the back of Ilya's neck. “I don't have a plan for that. But I want to be small and quiet, just the people we're close to. If that's okay with you.”

“Yes, that’s what I want too. I think we can take our time. You’ve had a lot of big things happen lately, and more coming. This will give us something to look forward to.”

Shane nodded against him. “Yeah, that sounds good. I can’t wait, though. To be married to you.”

“Me too, любовь моя.”

They fell asleep pressed together under the sheets while the rain continued its soft melody outside.

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Shane woke the next morning smiling, the room filled with the soft light of sunrise, the rain long gone. He reached over to find Ilya’s side of the bed cold and realized the covers had been carefully tucked around him. Shane made a quick pit stop in the bathroom, pulled on some clothes, then went to see where Ilya had gone. He found the rest of the cottage quiet and empty except for Vanya, who had taken up his usual spot at the glass, watching for birds. Shane stepped out onto the back deck and finally spotted Ilya. He was sitting on the dock, shirtless in the cool morning air, hair glinting like spun gold in the rising sun. He was hunched over, and Shane couldn’t tell what he was looking at from there.

He quickly went back inside and made coffee, filling two mugs and adding cream and sugar to Ilya’s. Then he grabbed a blanket off the back of the couch and draped it over his shoulder so he could carry the two mugs carefully outside and down the steps, all the way down to the lake. As he got closer, Ilya turned to look at him, a happy smile on his face, and Shane saw that in his lap was the navy blue journal, held open by the silver pen. There was writing on the pages, blocks of it, and Shane knew exactly how those letters would look in Ilya’s neat hand.

“Good morning,” he said, handing Ilya his mug and setting his own down so he could drape the blanket around his shoulders. Ilya took one end and tucked it around himself.

“Morning,” Ilya said. “Thank you.”

“Am I disturbing you? I can go back in if you want some time to yourself.”

Ilya shook his head. “No, stay. I only came out because I woke up early and couldn’t fall back asleep. I didn’t want to wake you.”

“You’re writing.”

“Yes, a little. You were right, this is a good place for writing. And you are a good muse.”

“Me?” Shane asked, his voice squeaking a little.

“Of course. I told you, I only started writing again when we met. You made me feel so many things...they had to go somewhere. That hasn’t changed.”

Shane leaned into him. “Can I read it?”

“Yes. I promise, you can read every word I write from now on. They’ll all be for you.” Ilya set his mug down and wrapped one arm around Shane’s waist.

“You must really love me.”

“You know I do. Ask any writer if they let other people read their journal and bits of unfiltered writing. They will think I’m crazy.”

Shane turned his head, finding Ilya’s lips. “Thank you. For trusting me with that.”

“I would trust you with my beating heart outside my chest, Shane Hollander.”

Shane felt his own heart squeeze inside his chest. “That was a little bit poetic.”

“It was a little bit cheesy, but thank you.”

"Is it poetry?" Shane asked. "What you're writing, I mean." He nodded to the journal.

"Some. A few random thoughts, maybe a few things I wish I could tell my mama. About you. Some notes about my abandoned novel. But yes, also some attempt at poetry. I want to try, but I haven't got it quite right yet."

Shane took a sip of his coffee. “Will you write more? While I sit here with you?”

“Yes. I would like that,” Ilya said. He picked up the journal and took the pen in his hand. “It won’t be as exciting as watching hockey.”

“I watch hockey all the time. The excitement has worn off. Watching you do anything is better.”

Ilya smiled, and it was sweet and maybe a little self-conscious, but Shane could see something else in it too, something that made him want to tell Ilya just how much he loved everything he did and how proud he was all the time. But he had time for that. All the time in the world. So instead, he sipped his coffee and watched the sun move higher above the lake, painting them in pink and gold while Ilya wrote, the words flowing out of him. The pages filled with ink, and every so often, Ilya would look up at him, soft smile still on his face, and Shane mirrored it, knowing that if ever there were enough words to describe this love between them, Ilya would be the one to find them.

When Ilya finally set the pen down, the sun had cleared the lake, and everything was shining, including them.

In the darkness, two shadows, reaching through the hopeless, heavy dusk. Their hands meet, and light spills in a flood like a hundred golden urns pouring out of the sun.

Hi! Thanks for reading! This ended up way longer than I was expecting! I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. I've been unemployed for several months, which sucks, but at least it has coincided with HR & my need for these two precious idiots to fall in love in every universe. This AU has been so special to me, & all the love has been so appreciated. If you're disappointed in the ending, please don't tell me :)

I added a disclaimer to ch 1, but I'll repeat here: this fic is meant to be cute & romantic, not pretentious. I do not pretend or intend to be an authority on queer lit. This is a love letter to some of my favorite things, i.e., queer lit & books in general. If this fic inspires you to pick up a book or provides a new quote to enjoy, then I have accomplished all I want here.

This one was always meant to just be about them falling in love over books, & I always intended to end it at the cottage...quiet and intimate, like the rest of their story has been. Ilya finally accepting the love he deserves (instead of what he thinks he deserves) & Shane fully accepting himself & both of them just figuring out how to love themselves & each other and having fun doing it. Ilya letting go of some of his past to make room for new memories (even hockey [for fun] is on the table, yay), & Shane coming to terms with the fact that he doesn't owe anyone anything just bc he's gay (maybe he's still figuring it out, but he's getting there). Now he won't have to go through hell alone...& I do think him and Scott coming out at the same time would change things a bit (we can hope). I didn't want to write past the cottage & get into all of that, because that's just not what this story was about, but it is fun to think about. Even with that looming, this is still a very happy end for them. They will get married, be happy, keep reading to each other until the end of time.

So there you have it, books and love. The kind of love I don't know if I really believe in, but in the wise words of Ilya Rozanov (via me), maybe everything ever written is a truth for someone (the distinction between 'a truth' and 'the truth' is an important one). Maybe that kind of love is out there. Either way, I loved writing it, and these versions of them are so precious to me. And Cliff! Don't even get me started on good friend Cliff Marlow. I love that guy. He was a joy to write, as was my favorite menace, Vanya.

I did create a series in case I want to revisit these book nerds. It'd probably be in the form of one-shots that are mostly reading & smut (Shane's about to get into his kinky mm era 🍷), maybe a literary honeymoon idkkk.

If you want to read about them being equally soft & in love, but where Shane is the one who didn't go pro & Ilya did...I wrote that too [The Minor Fall](#), [The Major Lift](#)

Their rings were inspired by [this one](#)

[This is the pen](#) (I personally have the less expensive Squire Classic)

Shane's proposal references:

shore worth swimming to= Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda

the only person I'd like to say goodbye to before I die= Call Me By Your Name

You make me better and not ashamed= Giovanni's Room
You're half my soul= The Song of Achilles
my whole heart= [i carry your heart(i carry it in)]
At the end as at the start, and through all the in-betweens, I love you= This Is How You Lose The Time War

Books mentioned in this chapter:

Captive Prince by C.S. Pacat

Special Delivery by Heidi Cullinan

The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo by Taylor Jenkins Reid

White Nights by Fyodor Dostoevsky

Giovanni's Room by James Baldwin

Call Me By Your Name by Andre Aciman

Poems mentioned:

When I Heard at the Close of the Day by Walt Whitman

Quotes:

"His beauty shone like a flame, vital and bright, drawing my eye against my will. His mouth was a plump bow, his nose an aristocratic arrow." - The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller

"Besides, nowadays, almost all capable people are terribly afraid of being ridiculous, and are miserable because of it." - The Brothers Karamazov by Fyodor Dostoevsky

"In the darkness, two shadows, reaching through the hopeless, heavy dusk. Their hands meet, and light spills in a flood like a hundred golden urns pouring out of the sun." - The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller

[Book list doc](#)

threads: shadow_lilies1 (most active)

tumblr: shadowlilies1

twtr: shadow_lilies

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[Art inspired by "Someone to Love" by Shadow_Lilies](#) by [sk_inspired \(skargasm\)](#), [skargasm](#)

[Restricted Work] by [klarauch](#)

[Cover for Somebody to Love](#) by [blondietrying](#)

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