

Do You Want Me Too?

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Do You Want Me Too?

by [hopefulrain9192](#)

Summary

“Right,” he responded, “Shane. It’s – my name is Shane.”

“Shane,” Ilya’s mouth curled into a smile. “It is very nice to meet you,” his eyes tracked down to the label sewn on his front jacket, S. Hollander. “Shane Hollander, paramedic.”

or: Ilya is the Ottawa Centaur's star player. Shane Hollander is a paramedic. What starts as one hour together becomes years of chasing, longing and - despite their best efforts otherwise - falling in love.

Notes

I know nothing about being paramedic and even less about hockey. I tried to research but also decided to just live a little! What's a meet-cute without some mistakes and inaccuracies.

I am planning for this to be five chapters, but we will see what happens! Tags to be added. Rating is for future but basically certain smut. Hang tight.

Chapter 1: Counting your blessings

The game on this particular, blustery November evening began perfectly normally – or, normal for Ilya, which in this case meant a tidy two points in the first period alone.

But it ended, infuriatingly, with Ilya strapped to a gurney and being wheeled out of the building against his will.

“I said I am fine,” Ilya said through gritted teeth.

“I don’t care,” Harris said cheerfully, patting him absentmindedly on the arm.

One of the team’s medical staff, a pleasant but unyielding woman named Andrea, rolled her eyes at Harris, saying, “Harris, you shouldn’t even be down here. It’s hardly a situation that calls for comms.”

“Maybe not,” Harris grinned, “but one that I think calls for a friend.” He reached one hand out to pinch Ilya’s cheek. Ilya dearly wanted to slap his hand away – as it were, his shoulders were currently completely immobilized, so he had to settle for snapping his teeth at Harris’s outstretched fingers. Harris let out a shocked yelp that turned into a laugh.

“You’re too happy about this,” Ilya grumbled. “You’d think you don’t want your own team to win.”

“Of course I do.” Harris sounded exasperated. “But I have been telling you for *months* that you have been running yourself ragged and that you need to rest and take care of yourself or you would – what’s that?” he said in an exaggerated voice, tilting his head, “that’s right, *injure yourself*.”

“Well then you were wrong,” Ilya said grouchy. “I did not injure myself. I was injured by big, stupid St. Louis wingman. Idiot man too dumb to see puck and hit me instead.”

“Ilya,” Harris huffed.

“Or maybe is not that he is stupid, but vengeful –”

“Vengeful?” Harris repeated incredulously. “First, when did you start speaking like a gothic novel, and second, why would Fischer be mad at you? He’s a new recruit. You’ve never even played against him.”

“Because he is very ugly,” Ilya said, as if he was explaining something incredibly obvious, ignoring Harris’s snort, “and I am hot. And to add insult to injury, he also has to live in St. Louis.”

“Right,” Harris said drily, keeping pace with the moving gurney. “And he’s just desperately jealous of you getting to live in the bustling center of culture that is the city of Ottawa...?”

“Ah,” Ilya warned. “We do not speak bad of Ottawa. It is why I have nice, shiny Canadian passport and do not have to rot away in a Russian prison for corrupting, impure heathens.”

“Plus two Stanley Cup rings.”

“Eh,” Ilya said casually, “that was not so much Ottawa’s gift to me, but my gift to Ottawa.”

This earned him a light smack on the back of the head, to which Andrea loudly chimed in, “Harris, I’m begging you to remember that Ilya is a patient right now!”

“I barely touched him,” Harris said, though upon receiving a withering glare, blushed and hurried to add, “sorry, Andrea, won’t happen again.”

“Yes, Harris,” Ilya said, adopting a grave tone. “I am very sick and injured, and you are annoying me. Go away.”

“Please,” he scoffed. “Like you said, you’re fine.”

“He is *not* fine, he’s likely dislocated his shoulder and he might have even torn –”

“I have torn nothing,” Ilya said, waving his hand dismissively. “I would feel much worse and be much meaner to Harris if I had torn something.”

“Well, sorry to say you’ve still earned yourself a luxury ambulance ride over to the hospital,” Andrea said firmly. “They need to rule out a tear or a rotator cuff injury. I’ve stabilized it for now, but you need an MRI before we’ll know what comes next.”

“I do not want an ambulance,” Ilya huffed. “Is embarrassing.” He could hear how whiny and stubborn he was being, but, wallowing in his disappointment, felt powerless to stop it.

He did, however, feel a twinge of guilt for Andrea and resolved in the back of his mind to send her one of his nice bottles of vodka as an apology gift. She was heartier than most of the grown men on his team, being one of the few people in his orbit that did not want to water down a 50-dollar glass of vodka with cranberry juice. The last time he’d seen that happen, he had snatched the glass right out of Bood’s hand and promptly locked the rest of the bottle away from “you fragile Canadian toddlers.”

“You’re getting the ambulance, so stop complaining or I’ll tell the whole team you were acting like a baby.”

Perhaps she didn’t need his pity. Ilya’s mouth twitched with a poorly suppressed smile; he thought he’d add a box of chocolates onto the gift for Andrea’s girlfriend.

Brady, a newer member of the medical team and a man of few words, had been contently ignoring them thus far, but now called out, “headed out, now. Harris, you’ll have to stay here.”

He then threw open the door to the back parking lot without even a look back in their direction. Ilya couldn’t help but swear; winter had arrived early and viciously this year. The icy wind whipped ruthlessly around him, sending his matted, sweaty curls into a frenzy.

“It is not enough that I dislocate my shoulder?” Ilya gasped. “I must freeze to death, too?”

Harris had stopped at the doorway, both arms coming up to wrap around himself. He called out to Ilya from a safe distance, “Svetlana already called, she’s going to meet you at the hospital and bring you home. And so help me god, Ilya, *rest*. Recover. Your A’s have got the team, just –” he hesitated, toying with a level of sincerity he knew Ilya hated, “focus on taking care of yourself, for once.”

“I take care of myself perfectly fine,” Ilya said through chattering teeth, but he doubted Harris could hear him over the wind and, anyways, the door had already swung shut.

Ilya had never given much thought to the ambulance that was a legally-required fixture at all NHL games, and regarded it with great distaste now. Ignorant to his feelings, the ambulance team swarmed him, their hands moving over him in a whirl.

After a few initial, “how are you feeling, can you close your fist for me, are you experiencing any pain,” the medics reverted to speaking over and across him. Ilya didn’t mind – they might as well have been speaking another language for all he understood. Ilya, as a matter of steeling his patience as well as attending to the deep desire to distract himself from the cold, focused steadily on reading a poster on the side of the vehicle describing the warning signs of sepsis.

“...suspected anterior shoulder dislocation –”

“– high energy fall, hand was outstretched...”

“Motor function is present...”

The rumble of static was his first clue that something was amiss, but Ilya’s mind was halfway through the SEPSIS acronym – *‘P’ is for passing no urine* – so he missed the start of the message.

“...female patient, unresponsive and not breathing. CPR is in progress, AED unknown. Paramedic Service, please respond.”

Ilya had never been one for ballet. He’d given it his best try, a few times, in the hopes of pleasing his mother, but in the end, he was too restless. After getting told off one too many times for kicking the seat in front of him, his mother took him by the hand after the closing curtain, saying, *when you’re older, Ilyushechka, we will try again*. That day never came. But he thought now that what he was witnessing had some strange resemblance to a dance; the people in front of him straightened like marionettes on a string, then, with just a passing breath, they launched into movement.

Andrea and Brady took one look at each other, and Ilya heard Brady say, “*the AED*,” before they both sprinted back inside.

The remaining paramedics, it seemed to Ilya, wove around each other in perfect rhythm. One was slinging a kit around his shoulders, while another pulled a heavy-looking backpack out

of the back of the ambulance. A third disappeared into the truck momentarily and returned with a carrier labeled '*Airway bag.*'

They headed determinedly in the direction of the building, and for a moment Ilya had the wild thought that they were just going to leave him out there, forgotten, before he heard,

“You’re on cover here!”

And then they were gone.

A man – the last man, the only paramedic not rushed to whatever emergency was happening inside – was already positioned behind Ilya’s head and, without wasting another second, started pulling him back inside.

“Sir, I’m taking you back inside for now. Sorry about this.”

“What’s happening?”

“There is an emergency inside the stadium,” the paramedic explained, his voice steady. “An older woman in the stands... it’s a critical incident that has to be attended to before an injured shoulder.” They crossed the threshold back inside, to Ilya’s relief. His face felt uncomfortably numb. He was pulled several meters into the corridor, then into a side room – a rarely-used, nearly empty office – before the gurney was parked and he heard it lock into place.

The paramedic circled around, finally coming into view. Ilya noticed first the sight of a red-tipped nose. Ilya’s eyes tracked up his face to a set of brown eyes. They were shiny, whipped into near-tears by the wind, but Ilya thought they seemed remarkably warm. Ilya found, suddenly, that he was very grateful he was at least in a seated position in the stretcher, propped up instead of lying flat like a helpless fish.

“I am sorry, sir – we’ll get you on your way as soon as we can, but –”

“No,” Ilya interrupted. He chastised himself internally, forcing himself to soften his tone. The last thing he needed was a hockey blog claiming they’d overheard him berating an Ottawa city first responder. “I mean, of course. I am fine, I keep telling them this. Heart attack must come first, any idiot would know this.”

“It’s a suspected cardiac arrest, actually,” the man corrected him, seemingly on impulse. Then he snapped his mouth shut, looking embarrassed. Ilya liked the way the golden skin of his cheeks – covered with an intriguing smattering of freckles – turned faintly pink. He wondered what else he could do to this man to brighten his cheeks; he needed something to entertain himself.

“What?” Ilya asked.

Ilya was actually asking more about why the paramedic seemed self-conscious at correcting him, but the man took a deep breath, looked up at the ceiling and said, “a heart attack and a cardiac arrest aren’t the same.”

“It is not?” Ilya was side-tracked now, surprised.

“A heart attack is a circulation thing – a blockage, usually – but cardiac arrest is when your heart stops. A heart attack can lead to cardiac arrest, but not necessarily.”

The tops of his ears had gone red as he was speaking, visible through the strands of black hair tucked behind them. Ilya wasn't sure why, but he found he liked that very much.

“Thank you for explaining,” Ilya said, hoping it came off as sincere. He wanted to put him at ease, and was rewarded with a short, grateful glance his way. “And either way, do not worry about me. The doctors have me all wrapped up, like a Christmas ham,” the man laughed, and Ilya couldn't help but smile at him, “I will keep for many hours.”

The paramedic looked relieved, saying, “I appreciate your understanding, sir.”

“Sir?” Ilya frowned. “What is with this, sir?”

“What do you mean? It's – it's polite.”

“It makes me sound like ancient, rickety old man,” Ilya said. “You call me Ilya, yes?”

“Ilya,” he nodded, like he was rolling his name around in his mouth. “Sure.”

“And you?”

“Sorry?” His nose – still a lovely shade of pink – crinkled slightly, and his eyes narrowed in Ilya's direction as though he was vaguely suspicious of his intentions.

“Your name,” Ilya said slowly. “God, how rude are people to you normally?”

The paramedic laughed, then he covered his mouth with his hand like he was shocked by his own impropriety.

“You'd be surprised,” he said, shaking his head. Then he hurried to add, “but it's not their fault, usually. If we're showing up, most of the time it's because something has gone very badly wrong. People aren't in the right state of mind.”

“Still, is no excuse to be rude,” Ilya said, conveniently ignoring that he'd been rude to Andrea not ten minutes ago. But that didn't matter, because he wanted to see the pretty paramedic smile again. “So, then – your name?”

“Right,” he responded, “Shane. It's – my name is Shane.”

“Shane,” Ilya's mouth curled into a smile. “It is very nice to meet you,” his eyes tracked down to the label sewn on his front jacket, *S. Hollander*. “Shane Hollander, paramedic.”

Shane opened his mouth to respond, but before he could there was another crackle against his shoulder. He turned away, going back into the hall while murmuring into the receiver.

“So,” Shane returned to Ilya after a couple minutes. He looked a little strained, and something else, too, though Ilya couldn't quite place it. Sheepish, maybe. “I'm sorry, but you're going to have to hang tight for a little bit.”

Ilya's heart clenched involuntarily. "The woman? Is she – ?"

"Yes, but don't – it's alright," Shane explained. "My colleagues have got her, and they're on their way down. But they're going to have to take her in the ambulance, meaning they're going to need to send another one down for you. And we're stretched a little thin tonight, and as you're stable –"

"Is ok." Ilya said, and he found, to his own surprise, that he meant it. "I can wait. I am in no rush."

Shane smiled again and Ilya felt – well, like this strange feeling of satisfaction, like a voice whispering in his head, *there it is*.

"You might as well sit down," Ilya nodded to the sad, peeling office chair behind him, "since you and I are about to spend some time together." A thought struck him, "unless you have to leave with your team?"

Shane wavered for a moment, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, before saying, "No, I'm staying," he shrugged in a way that Ilya thought was meant to look nonchalant, if not for the fact that he was holding himself so stiffly Ilya was surprised he didn't hear his joints creak. "We can't just leave you alone, so I'll stay to get you handed off to the next team."

"Very kind of you." There was a flicker of something in Ilya's chest.

"Just doing my job."

"So, Shane Hollander," Ilya said, "are you going to sit?"

"I think just Shane is fine," he chuckled nervously, dragging the chair over and dropping into it.

"Just Shane, hm? You are famous enough to go by one name?" Ilya teased lightly. "You are like Prince? Madonna?"

"No, no obviously not," Shane sputtered, wonderfully flustered now. "That's not what I meant."

"Is okay, just Shane, it is good – I like to know when I am in the presence of very important people," he delighted in watching Shane roll his eyes and huff loudly. "You are best paramedic, in Canada, I bet. Other paramedics whisper when they see you coming."

"Would you stop, that's not at all what I meant, and you know it –"

Ilya was grinning now. His father used to snap at him, *you just love pushing people's buttons*, and – whatever faults his father had – Ilya could not deny this.

"Just Shane, smartest and prettiest paramedic there ever was," and now, Ilya knew, he was doing more than pushing his buttons, and he watched carefully, "all the girls must be crazy for you. Desperate for you."

Shane flushed a deep red now, breathing loudly through his nose and averting his eyes.
“Would you *fuck off*.”

Ilya let out a shout of laughter at the horrified look on Shane’s face, but in the back of his mind he was cataloging Shane’s every micro-expression.

“Sorry – that was so unprofessional, oh my god,” Shane stammered, eyes sliding back to Ilya.

“Is fine, Shane,” Ilya laughed in a would-be casual way. “I get what I ask for. I try to annoy you, and you get annoyed. Is hardly your fault.”

“Why annoy me, then?” Shane challenged him, sounding incredulous.

“Because,” Ilya leaned forward, as much as his current state would allow, and dropped his voice into a conspiratorial whisper. Shane leaned in slightly as well, though in his case it came off more instinctual than intentional. “I thought it would be fun.”

“Fun,” Shane said slowly, “is not usually how people describe me.”

“I don’t know,” Ilya said, letting his eyes roam his face. “I think you might be all kinds of fun.”

Shane blinked.

Ilya thought – well, he thought he knew, but he had (rarely) been wrong before. And, spotting him clenching his fists, Ilya also got the distinct impression that Shane was a bit like a spooked horse, and might bolt at any moment.

“I’m sorry, Shane,” Ilya said, trying to sound chastened. He sat back fully, trying to dispel the tension. “I will behave,” he added, “promise.”

“Why do I feel like your promises don’t count for much?” said Shane. He dropped back into his chair as well, but was still eyeing him with interest.

“Ah, no, Russians always keep their promises,” Ilya said sagely.

“I’ve never heard that before,” Shane said, raising his eyebrows doubtfully.

“How many Russians do you know?”

Shane gaped for a moment, then conceded, “okay, fair enough. None.”

“No, no, Shane,” Ilya admonished. If only he had his arms free so he could wag a finger at him. “You know me, yes?”

“The only thing I know about you is that your name is Ilya,” Shane said.

“And that I am a professional hockey player.”

“Well,” Shane rolled his eyes, “obviously.”

Ilya thrilled at the glimpses of a bratty interior hidden underneath the stiff, professional surface, and wanted to excavate it with great enthusiasm.

“Is that really all you know?” Ilya asked. He was genuinely curious – not if Shane knew his stats or awards; he didn’t care about that. But he’d had a rough and very public landing in Ottawa four years previously. He could still smell the acrid stench of melting plastic that had billowed off the very creepy, but highly inaccurate effigy of himself that was burned by his very own (former) fans outside of TD Garden.

“Well,” Shane shrugged, oblivious to Ilya’s inner monologue, “yeah, kind of. What,” he teased then, “should I be fawning over you, or something? Please, Mr Rozanov, can I get your autograph – is that what you want?”

The words ‘*Mr Rozanov*’ sent an electric thrill down Ilya’s body. He made a valiant effort to keep himself under control, but he might have shivered.

“You were the one sitting outside the stadium like a little fan boy –”

Ilya felt very satisfied at the renewed round of sputtering out of Shane.

“Fan boy – fuck off, I am *working* –”

“No need to be embarrassed, if you’re very nice to me I will take a selfie with you.”

“I wasn’t even watching the game – I was *busy* –”

“Busy? Busy doing what?”

“I – nothing, it doesn’t matter –”

“Tell me.” Ilya modulated his voice slightly. “Please, I would like to know.”

Shane shook his head. “I was studying, okay? Not very exciting, is it?”

“You have to study – what to stay a paramedic or something? Keep yourself fresh?”

“No – I mean, yes, we do – but that’s not what –” Shane took a deep breath, seemingly willing himself to stop tripping over his words. “I’m in med school. Final year.”

“Med school?” Ilya repeated, eyebrows up. “Paramedic Shane Hollander is going to become Doctor Shane Hollander?”

“Yes, or – that’s the plan, anyways.” Shane shrugged and cast his eyes down, but he looked pleased.

“Shane Hollander is genius, yes?”

“What?” Shane looked nonplussed.

“You ride around in ambulance, saving people’s lives, rescuing kittens from trees –”

“The kittens we leave to the firefighters, actually –”

“Then you turn around and go to school –”

“I’m mostly in placement at the hospital, now –”

“And this does not kill you? Two jobs at once?”

“It’s tried, a couple times,” Shane said wryly. “I don’t pull as many shifts as I used to, but for a long time it helped. Kept me focused, and there’s so much I learn on the job that I can translate into clinical practice. Plus,” he chuckled, “there’s the money. I really enjoy getting paid so I can pay for rent and groceries.”

“See what I mean? Genius man says he works two very hard jobs on top of each other and somehow it makes him better,” Ilya said. “You make me feel very inadequate.”

“Inadequate, please,” Shane scoffed. “Top scorer in the league, two cup wins in the last four years –”

“*Ah hah*,” Ilya exclaimed triumphantly. Shane paled when he realized his mistake.

“No, don’t even start –”

“You are a fan,” Ilya said smugly.

“No, I’m not,” Shane blustered. Rolling his eyes at Ilya’s snickering, he repeated, “I’m *not*. I’ve never been into hockey much, but I just – picked it up, I guess – I’m on this shift a lot –”

“You have been here before?” Ilya asked, surprised for some reason. The idea hadn’t occurred to him, but he pictured it now; Shane, huddled in his ambulance while Ilya skated only feet away, completely oblivious to his existence.

“Yeah,” said Shane. “Especially the last year or so. My co-workers are nice enough to let me have it when –”

“They give you this shift? You beg to come see your hero –?”

“It’s usually a very quiet assignment,” Shane interrupted loudly. “And they know I need to study, so they are very thoughtful and gracious, two things I’m sure you’re very unfamiliar with.”

“Ah, okay, okay,” Ilya said. “I understand.”

Shane gave him a long, suspicious look. “Good, yeah... I’m glad.”

Ilya’s eyes lingered on the constellations of freckles stretched across Shane’s face. Ilya forced himself to take a hard look at what he was doing. It was no secret to himself – or anyone around him, apparently, given the way Harris had been needling him lately – that he had been lonely. He did not want to mess with this kind, pretty man just to soothe his own aches. But, on the other hand...

“If you ever wanted to, ah, see the game from inside instead,” Ilya said casually, “I could make that happen for you.”

Shane didn’t respond, his eyes widening slightly.

“If you want,” Ilya continued, keeping his voice light. “It would be easy.”

“I don’t – that’s nice, thank you...” Shane trailed off for a moment. “But you’re probably going to be out for at least a few weeks, right?”

“Yes, probably,” Ilya admitted. “But – you could see the rest of the team play, yes? They are not me but they are not bad.”

Shane let out a breathless little laugh. His eyes flicked over to Ilya’s.

“I think... if I were to go, I’d wait, if it’s the same to you. Until you’re back on the ice. I’d prefer to see that. To see you.”

Ilya felt dizzy. He hoped his voice sounded steady when he said, “Yes, is fine. Yes.”

“I’m still not a fan,” Shane said, adopting a stern tone.

“No, of course not.”

“It would just be a matter of professional interest. Clinical outcomes of a dislocated shoulder, you know.”

“I understand.”

Shane opened his mouth to speak again, but before he could they were both startled at the abrupt sound of crackling on Shane’s shoulder. Like he was pulled out of a trance, Shane leapt to his feet, bustling out of the room. Ilya heard voices in the hallway, and then Shane shouted, “yeah, down here, thanks guys.”

Their bubble well and truly burst, Ilya resigned himself to the stream of new faces flowing into the room.

“Sir,” the word didn’t have nearly the same effect coming now from a kindly, middle-aged man, “sorry for the disruption. We’re going to get you out of here now.”

There was a flurry of movement, hands blurring and waving over his face. A stern-looking woman was now asking him to rate his pain on a scale of one-to-ten, and before he could even consider the answer, they were on the move. Moments later, Ilya was greeted again but the angry rush of wind against him. Ilya screwed up his eyes in an attempt to keep them from watering.

It was only when safely ensconced in the back of the truck that he thought to look around, waiting for Shane to jump in. But then the door slammed loudly shut behind them.

“Where is the paramedic that was with me, Shane? He’s not here yet.”

“Don’t worry,” the older paramedic said, buckling himself in. “Shane’s team is on their way, they got their patient to the hospital so they’re swinging back around to get him now.”

“He is not coming with us?” Ilya felt something that, ridiculously, felt like a stab of panic.

“Nope,” the man’s lips popped loudly on the ‘p’, “but I promise, you’re in capable hands with us.”

Ilya ground his teeth together, looking away stonily. He would not have guessed, an hour ago, that the most maddening part of the evening would *not* be his injury.

But he thought, as he tried to console himself, *how hard could it be to find Shane Hollander?*

Chapter 2: Open Doors

Chapter Notes

Welcome back! After a brutal week at work I somehow churned this out in the last couple days. There are probably errors that I might come back to fix at some point.

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

Ilya had been ushered into a private hospital room immediately, the staff murmuring into his ear as they rushed him past a few lounging photographers who had been hoping to catch a picture of him injured. As far as he could tell, the bed he was in was nothing special, except it was surrounded by walls and a door, instead of just a paper curtain.

Ilya held a flimsy plastic cup of water in his one free hand, trying not to grip too tightly, lest the water come slopping over the sides as it had five minutes previously.

“Mr. Rozanov,” a nurse greeted him, striding into the room confidently. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” he said in response. He’d already been asked this question upwards of ten times, and he’d said the same thing each time. But this time, the nurse was impossibly young, Ilya thought, (*could she even be qualified to work here?*) and had bright, keen eyes, flicking over his face with great interest.

“Do let me know if I can help you,” she said. Her hand came to rest on Ilya’s forearm. He stared down at it for a moment, her nails a bright purple, though her skin looked tight and dry. “I know... well, you might not enjoy hospital settings.”

Before he could respond – or even consider much about the implications of her words, a sharp, lightly accented voice sounded at the door, “Ilya.” Svetlana, with her American mother, had only traces of a Russian accent.

The nurse whipped her hand back, spinning on her heels and taking a good look at the new intruder. Taking Svetlana in, with her halo of curls and high cheekbones, the nurse went slightly pink and bustled out of the room without another word.

Svetlana shook her head ruefully, plopping herself down in the hard plastic chair at Ilya’s bedside. She reached over into the open packet of pretzels that Ilya had been grazing on. Despite their many years in North America, they slipped back into Russian without a moment’s hesitation.

“Those are mine,” Ilya said with a frown.

Ignoring him, Svetlana said through a mouthful of pretzels, “a nurse, huh?”

“You’re not going to ask how I am?”

“You’re fine. So, the nurse?”

“Stop it,” Ilya scoffed, annoyed. He tried to bat Svetlana’s hand away from the bag, but she clenched onto his wrist with her sharp, impeccably done nails until he hissed and withdrew in defeat. “There is no nurse,” he insisted, examining her clawmarks.

She shrugged, now moving to steal his water as well. “You could do worse. She was very cute.”

Ilya hummed as if to say *if you say so*. “I don’t care. And anyways, she wasn’t interested like that.” He picked up a pretzel, and started to scrape off individual salt crystals with his nails.

Now it was Svetlana’s turn to scoff. “Do not be stupid, Ilya.”

“It is true,” Ilya said, now grinding the crunchy pretzel into a fine dust. “It was just pity.”

“Yes, pity that she couldn’t climb onto your lap and –”

“Svetlana, enough.”

She cocked her head at him, looking at him curiously while she absentmindedly wiped salt and crumbs onto Ilya’s hospital gown. She didn’t respond to Ilya’s protests – *would you stop, you demon* – but twisted her mouth thoughtfully.

“It does not always have to be this way.”

Ilya, who was halfway done with rolling up the bag of pretzels to toss into the garbage can, refused to look at her.

“You are lonely, Ilya.”

“Why does everyone keep saying this to me,” Ilya muttered.

“Because you are,” she said. “And I’m sorry if showing up at the hospital is a reminder that you shouldn’t just wait forever –”

“I’m *fine* –”

“Not everyone cares,” she said firmly. Now, her sharp nails found their way into his matted curls. Normally she would complain about the sweat and salt making its way under her nails, but not today. Today, she just scratched gently, and Ilya couldn’t help but close his eyes for a few seconds. “You do not have to be alone forever.”

“I am not alone.”

“Anya does not count. She is a dog.”

“She is my daughter,” Ilya said, sounding offended, eyes snapping back open, “and your goddaughter, if you remember.”

“Dogs do not have godparents,” Svetlana laughed, ducking her head to dodge Ilya’s outstretched hand reaching to tug on her curls. They’d had this argument many times.

“And I have my friends,” Ilya continued. “I am not just by myself all the time.”

“Uh huh,” she said doubtfully. “And what about when you want to get your cock wet, hm? What then? Because you know I cannot fuck you anymore, I cannot stoop so low as to fuck a Canadian. Papa would never forgive me.”

Ilya suppressed another eye roll with great difficulty. It had been several years since he and Svetlana had been anything even approaching sexual. She had transformed, when he had most needed it, into a sister, in a way that there had been no going back from.

Ilya flopped back into his bed dramatically, which he regretted when he felt a stab of pain through his shoulder. “You don’t have to worry about that,” he said, a ghost of a smirk on his face. “I get what I need.”

“What you need... yes, I am sure what you need are random, nameless encounters over and done with by four in the morning.” Svetlana waved one hand dismissively through the air, as if to illustrate the meaninglessness of Ilya’s current sex life.

“It works,” Ilya said defensively.

Now, her tone turned gentle. “For now, Ilya, maybe. But not forever.”

“What do you want from me?”

“I want you to let yourself be happy,” she said simply. “If you ever meet someone that... makes you feel something. I want you to be brave enough to let yourself feel it.”

Unbidden and unwelcome, Shane’s face flashed in Ilya’s mind. He thought of the irresistible pull to make Shane laugh, to poke and prod at Shane until his cheeks burned and he stuttered over his words. He thought of the way his body tightened when their eyes met.

“What has happened?”

“What?” Ilya asked, startled from his momentary reverie. “What are you talking about?”

She was eyeing him with great suspicion. “You have stupid, dreamy look on your face. Why?”

“You are crazy,” Ilya scoffed, averting his eyes wildly. He cast around looking for something to focus on, and had to settle for reading his own hospital bracelet which, unsurprisingly, carried no information that was not already known to him.

“Did you meet someone?” she asked shrewdly.

Ilya's eyes snapped to her in alarm. "You are a witch?"

The laugh she let off was surprised but delighted. But before she could say anything else, a tall man in a white coat with the heaviest set of eyebrows Ilya had ever seen knocked on the open door.

It took an annoyingly long time for the doctor to explain what Ilya had already expected. A full sling for two weeks. Two more weeks of careful rehab and physical therapy before he was re-evaluated to return to the ice. Four weeks, maybe six, before he was back in full contact.

"Yes, yes," Ilya said impatiently. "I promise to be good."

"Now, I want you to hear me, Mr. Rozanov," the doctor said, looking stern. Or perhaps it was just his eyebrows that made him look that way. "The healing process is not to be rushed. I understand you tweaked your shoulder in August."

"August," Svetlana interrupted, sounding annoyed. "Ilya, you did not tell me."

"It was nothing," Ilya said irritably. "I was practicing."

"Practicing," Svetlana grumbled under her breath, "five hours a day, in the offseason no less."

"I need to stay in shape! It is my job!"

"I would hazard a guess that you were going beyond the job," the doctor – Dr. Peters, maybe – responded. "The amount of repeated stress on your shoulder is increasing its instability. It puts you at greater risk for injury, as we saw tonight."

"I was hit. I went down. It happens."

"Yes," the doctor said drily. "And sometimes, when you're not careful, you don't get back up," Ilya gaped at him, "I am telling you, Mr. Rozanov, that what you need is to mind the letter of your physical therapy plan. If you don't take care of yourself, I think you will regret it."

The doctor left without saying goodbye. Ilya wondered if Shane's bedside manner was any better.

Ilya spent the following hour sniping back and forth with Svetlana in Russian.

"You are lucky I was visiting," she said.

"You go back tomorrow."

"I could stay," she shrugged.

"You can't stay," he huffed. "You have a job. How do you expect to sell cars in Boston from Ottawa?"

“If I say I can stay, I can stay.”

Ilya couldn't leave until he was visited by the physical therapist, but as he lazed around in his room – Svetlana had gone, under protest, to fetch him a diet coke – his mind wandered back to Shane. He knew it was wholly illogical, but he hoped that Shane might somehow appear in his room. The fact that Shane had clearly been working, in between studying for a very intense, very stressful job, did not elude him, but he sometimes just had to enjoy his fantasies.

“There it is, again!” Svetlana reappeared in the doorway, diet coke in hand.

“*What*, Svetlana?” said Ilya, exasperated.

“The stupid look!” she exclaimed.

“It is nothing! Give me my soda.”

“Ah, no, you get nothing until you tell me,” she proclaimed, waving the can around in the air.

“You're going to make it fizz,” he complained. “And it's very mean to withhold from me on my sickbed.”

“Sickbed,” she rolled her eyes. “I only got it for you because you threatened to smoke a cigarette if I didn't.”

“I still might.”

“You're in a hospital,” she said, finally relenting and handing the soda over, “and you will tell me now.”

“There is nothing to tell,” Ilya hesitated for a long moment, but then Svetlana sighed dramatically and he figured he was probably going to give in either way, so he might as well spare himself the trouble. So he told her, keeping his voice light and his eyes determinedly away from hers, about the beautiful man with the pretty freckles.

“Are you going to try to find him?”

He shrugged. “He is too good for me, probably. I don't know.”

“Ilya, you sound like you are in love.”

“In love,” he scoffed, “I met him a few hours ago.”

She just hummed to herself, one finger lightly tracing the back of Ilya's hand. “Does he know?”

Ilya looked up at the ceiling. “I don't know. Maybe? It doesn't matter, he wouldn't want to have to deal with my drama.”

Svetlana looked at him sharply. “Ilyusha,” she started, forcing him to look at her. Svetlana saved the diminutive for her most serious moments, when she wanted him to really hear her. “That is not why I asked.”

“Why did you ask, then?”

“Because,” she said, sounding frustrated, “you always talk yourself out of being happy. I don’t want to watch you do that again.”

“Don’t watch then.”

She breathed out hard through her nose. “You’re impossible.”

“Yes,” Ilya admitted. “That is true.”

The next afternoon, Ilya sat at his kitchen table and stared at his laptop screen. His shoulder ached, and Svetlana’s voice – as it so often did – was ringing in his head.

He *was* lonely. He knew that. But his own yawning sense of emptiness was not enough of a reason to go barging into someone’s life. Ilya knew, quite well, the consequences of giving into his own impulses.

He wasn’t going to call. There, decision made.

He brought a pack of M&Ms to his mouth with his one free hand, ripping it open with his teeth. Distracted, he pulled much too hard, and the candy went skittering all over the floor. Ilya let himself close his eyes for a minute but then, sighing, he went to his knees, feeling one-handed over the dusty floor and being forced to pick them up one-by-one.

This is humiliating, he thought grimly. He was at least grateful Anya was in the backyard; he didn’t think his ego would ever have recovered from trying to wrestle chocolate out of a dog’s mouth which, in his current state, would have almost certainly ended with him losing.

He wished, then, that he’d let Svetlana stay. But he’d sworn he would be well taken care of, with various members of the team having promised him (well, they promised Svetlana, after she left a very brisk voice note from Ilya’s phone in the Centaurs group chat) and Bood had assured her he would make an appearance that evening.

But, well, there was nothing that made him feel quite so alone as wobbling on the balls of his feet, one arm strapped to his chest while he scooped up his pathetic excuse for his dinner off the floor.

“Fuck,” he said out loud to himself.

His phone rang, an embarrassing Britney Spears song at full volume, programmed after Ilya lost a bet to Hayes at their first practice of the season. Ilya heaved himself to his feet.

“What?” Ilya said by way of greeting,

“Well, hello to you too, princess,” came Bood’s amused-sounding voice. “What’s got your panties in a bunch?”

“That’s homophobic.”

“You’re not gay.”

“Biphobic, then,” Ilya said, putting the phone on speaker and tossing it onto the kitchen counter. He resigned himself to rummaging through his pantry, hoping to find something to eat that was both quick and easy to make with one hand.

“Don’t be annoying,” said Bood, his voice tinny over the speakerphone.

“You’re hardly one to talk.”

“Rude, too, today!”

“I’m not,” Ilya snapped. Then he sighed, “sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Bood said. “Are you upset, then, about being out for a few weeks?”

“Of course, but it’s fine.”

“Hm... how upset?”

Ilya couldn’t decide whether to be touched or irritated. He settled for a bit of both.

“Don’t worry,” he said, taking a deep breath. “I will be back in a few weeks. You haven’t seen the last of me.”

“Well, good. Anyways, I was calling because I’m leaving for your place in a few minutes. What do you want for dinner?”

A spark of warmth lit in Ilya’s chest.

“Ah... thanks, Bood. You don’t have to come over —”

“I thought I said to stop being annoying. I’m coming because I want to come. Besides, I’m a little scared of Svetlana.”

“Everyone is,” Ilya said reasonably. “But... yes, okay. That’s very nice,” before he could sound too emotional, he rushed to add, “mostly because the only thing I can find here is floor chocolate and an open package of ramen with the spice packet missing.”

“What’s floor chocolate?” Bood asked, sounding confused.

“Nothing,” Ilya said, kicking a few loose M&Ms under the refrigerator. “Get me whatever, I don’t mind. See you soon.”

Ilya rounded the kitchen counter back to his table, where his laptop was propped open. Ilya was happy that Bood was coming over. He was grateful his friends cared about him. But still,

Ilya stared at the phone number on the screen.

Four months later

The club was so dark, and packed so full of swaying bodies, that Ilya could hardly see the blurry outlines of his teammates. He thought he spotted Barrett, but then again his and Harris's faces had been wielded together most of the evening, so it was difficult to tell.

Bood was standing next to him, facing the bar. He was waving his hands again, pointing at a bottle and then miming taking a drink.

"He's not listening," he shouted into Ilya's ear. "He –" Bood hiccuped, "is ignoring me."

Ilya glanced back tiredly. "He's not a bartender."

Another shout that reverberated into his ear drum. "What?"

"He's standing on this side of the bar, idiot," Ilya shouted back.

Bood looked momentarily stunned, then shrugged. "I'm going to sit back down, you get it."

Before Ilya could protest – *what, am I a bottle girl, now?* – Bood squeezed between two couples grinding shamelessly on the dance floor and disappeared.

"Children," Ilya muttered to himself. Turning back to the bar, he tried to remind himself that this was a good night. They deserved to celebrate.

"One ginger ale, please."

Ilya snorted to himself. He couldn't help but crane his neck a bit, wanting to catch a glimpse of whoever it was that was ordering a plain ginger ale at a nightclub so grimy that no less than three separate people had already come up to offer to sell him drugs.

Leaning forward, he saw first the black hair, and he thought of Shane. That happened more often than Ilya would like to admit, considering he'd only met the man once. He shook his head, as if trying to physically cast the thought away. Then, the man turned, and he saw, in flashes timed with the pulsing lights, bright, brown eyes and – even from here – a gentle sweep of freckles splayed over broad cheeks.

"Shane?" he said stupidly. He snapped his mouth shut, but it was too late. Shane picked his head up, looking around to see who had called his name. It took only a second for their eyes to meet.

"Ilya?" He sounded as stunned as Ilya felt. He said something, too quiet for Ilya to hear.

"What?" Ilya asked loudly. Shane took a step towards him, and Ilya felt his body sway. He forced his feet still, but wasn't sure if he'd wanted to move back or lean desperately closer.

“I said, what are you doing here?” Shane asked, head tilted towards Ilya’s right ear.

“Me?” Ilya asked, eyes flicking over him. Shane’s expression was curious and open. “Well, I could ask you the same thing.”

“It would be a fair question,” said Shane.

“You are not normally one for clubs?” Ilya asked. He might have guessed, somehow.

“No, not usually.” Shane’s finger tip was clicking nervously against the rim of his glass. Ilya was so close he could see each of his eyelashes.

Earlier that day, at the end of their game, the Centaurs charged into the locker room with a relentless, vibrant energy. Haas had knocked over a barrel of gatorade in his excitement, and Young and Dykstra had ended up in an enthusiastic wrestling match for control over the spotify account blaring over the speakers.

Ilya had looked around and, though he felt satisfied and relieved, also felt a world apart from the guys around him. Barrett had noticed – one of them always did – and coaxed him into a smile by promising to have Chiron visit Anya over the weekend. But that feeling – that *buzzing* under their skin – eluded him.

He felt it now.

“Do you – would you sit? For a minute?” Ilya heard himself say, nodding to an empty table in the far corner of the room.

Shane didn’t turn to look. “Yes,” he said instantly. He took a breath. “I mean, sure.”

Ilya had to resist the impulse to take his hand.

The table was tucked away, set mercifully apart from the overhead speakers and far enough from the crowd that they didn’t have to shout to hear each other. It was a small, circular table set against a rounded bench. They sat so close that their knees bumped together.

“So,” Ilya said, tipping his drink towards him, “Shane Hollander, paramedic.”

Shane laughed, ducking his head down. “It’s just Shane, remember?”

“Yes,” Ilya grinned at him, “oh, yes, I remember.”

“Do you?” Shane asked lightly, one finger rounding the top of his glass slowly. Ilya watched it move. “I’m surprised.”

“Surprised,” Ilya repeated slowly. “Why? If anyone should be surprised, it is me.”

Shane raised his eyebrows, looking at him curiously, then went back to staring into his drink.

“I do not think it is poison,” Ilya said lightly, trying to break the tension. He lifted one foot off the ground to cross his legs, and he heard the squelching sound of his shoe unsticking

from this truly disgusting floor. He paid extra mind not to accidentally tap his foot against Shane's clean, tan pants. "It is just ginger ale."

Shane groaned, and the sound of it shot right through Ilya. He rubbed his face with one hand. "You heard that?"

"Yes," said Ilya, "it's very cute."

"Don't make fun of me," Shane frowned.

Ilya studied him for a moment. "I'm not making fun of you. Why do you think I am?"

He shrugged. "I don't know... people have..." he took a breath. "I know I'm not, like, loads of fun. I can be, um, kind of a drag sometimes, I guess."

Shane's eyes were fixed resolutely on a strange, purplish stain on the table, and Ilya made a mental note to be careful where to rest his arms.

"Someone has said this to you?" Ilya asked. He ducked his head slightly, trying to catch his eye. He wanted Shane to look at him.

"Yeah, I – I guess."

"And you believed them?"

This prompted Shane to raise his head, bewildered. "What do you mean?"

"What, someone says it and just, poof, it's true?"

"No," Shane laughed nervously, "obviously not, but, like..."

"Like?"

"He knew me, so – it must – well, whatever," he stumbled. "It doesn't matter."

"I think it does matter," said Ilya. Feeling bold, he reached one hand out slowly. Shane watched his approaching hand, but when he didn't move, Ilya rested it lightly on his arm. "It sounds like you need some better friends."

Shane blinked. "Maybe I do."

"So," Ilya said, tone lightening, pulling his hand back, "tell me, just Shane. If you are not a club person, why come out tonight?"

"Oh," Shane sounded distracted, eyes having tracked Ilya's retreating hand, "it was a big day. We're celebrating."

"Ah," Ilya exclaimed, raising his glass, "me, too."

"Really?" Shane asked, curious, "what are you celebrating then?"

Ilya chuckled, swishing the vodka around in his glass before realizing it was mostly just ice, now. “Of course you do not know.”

“Oh, sorry,” Shane was relaxing into his seat now, “I forgot how much you love fan service,” he was sporting a lovely shit-eating grin now, too, “Mr. Rozanov, I’ve followed your every game, if you shake my hand I’ll never wash it again –”

Ilya barked out a laugh, “I do not need it,” he decided to chance his luck, “but if you wanted to call me Mr. Rozanov again, I would not stop you.”

Shane had been giggling to himself, but at that his eyes darkened slightly, roaming over Ilya. He tipped his head back, resting against the wall. “Tell me, then,” he said, head lolling forward. “Why are you celebrating?”

“We made it into the playoffs,” Ilya explained. He watched Shane’s face and had a strong suspicion that this meant very little to him. “Very early for it to happen.”

“Congratulations,” Shane said, lifting his glass and tipping it in Ilya’s direction. Ilya nodded humbly. Shane’s nose was scrunched, his eyebrows pulled together as he thought hard. “Do you think you’ll win the... trophy?”

A startling, full body clench of affection gripped Ilya in that moment. “The Cup,” he corrected him, trying to keep his voice steady.

“And you?” prompted Ilya. “Why are you celebrating?”

“It was match day,” said Shane, with no further explanation, and Ilya was delighted by the fact that Shane had no clue what it meant to make it to the playoffs, but presumed Ilya would have even a chance in hell in understanding that the fuck a ‘match day’ was.

“And that is... what?”

“Right, sorry! It’s when final year med students get matched to their positions for their first year as a doctor. Like, to see if you get into the specialty you want.”

“Oh,” Ilya said, astonished. “That is a very big day. I can see why you are celebrating.”

“Yeah, I thought I was going to throw up when I opened my letter,” Shane said. “It’s the most nervous I’ve been in ages.”

“What specialty did you want?”

“Emergency medicine.”

“And what specialty did you get?”

Shane repeated, “emergency medicine,” but this time he looked smug. He drained the last of his ginger ale trying to cover his smile.

“Ah, I would have expected no less from genius man, Shane Hollander.”

Shane laughed at that, but Ilya thought he was secretly pleased. “It was everything I’d dreamed of,” he admitted shyly, “after all this work...” he drifted off, his eyes going hazy.

“What do you like about emergency medicine?” Ilya asked. He thought it seemed like an incongruous choice, somehow. He was well aware he didn’t actually know Shane, but he wanted to. He wanted to go rooting around in his brain and catalogue every last thing he found there in a special lock-box only for him (though perhaps he’d keep this particular desire to himself).

“You don’t think I seem like the type?”

Ilya only shrugged.

“You wouldn’t be the first to think so... everyone in my life seemed to think I was destined to be, like, a surgeon or something where I’m just locked in a room with someone who can’t talk back,” he gave a dry laugh, and it sounded a bit bitter, “but it’s hard to describe,” Shane said, sounding thoughtful now. “I think I like to find order within the chaos, you know?”

“Tell me more,” said Ilya earnestly.

“When everything around you is crazy, and someone needs to act, to *move*, and that someone is me... it’s... satisfying, somehow? That’s how it was as a paramedic, at least,” he explained. “It’s like I’m taken out of myself, in the moment. It’s actually a relief, because I only need to focus on that one thing, nothing else matters. No hemming and hawing, you just have to trust yourself.” The words had burst out of him. He looked at Ilya then, reddening slightly. “That probably sounds silly,” he said, trying valiantly for a casual shrug.

“It does not sound silly at all,” said Ilya. His hand found its way back to Shane’s wrist. His fingertips burned. “It sounds very familiar, actually.”

“It does?”

“Yes,” Ilya said simply. “And either way, it seems obvious now. It’s in your eyes, like I can,” he waved his hand at Shane, trying to find the right words, “see it, I think. See you.”

Shane looked at him now, his face naked and open. Ilya thought he looked... grateful, maybe? But there was something else there, too. Shane’s gaze danced over Ilya’s face before coming to rest on his eyes. The moment stretched in front of them, feeling impossibly long, Ilya was sure that the buzzing under his skin... that Shane felt it too.

He could feel himself wanting, desperately, to lean forward, to bring their faces closer together, to feel their noses brush...

Steeling himself, hating himself, Ilya wrenched his hand back. Shane did not want him, he’d made that clear.

“I think,” Ilya said grandly, smacking his hands on the table, “that this calls for a proper celebratory drink.” He got to his feet, gesturing at Shane to stay in his seat. “Another ginger ale, Doctor?”

“I’m not a doctor quite yet,” said Shane, looking dazed, “and... no, I’ll have whatever you’re having.”

“Are you sure?” Ilya asked, eyebrows raised. “I don’t mind. I will even get you top-shelf ginger ale. Best in house.”

Shane laughed again, but said, looking up at him with wide eyes, “yes, I’m sure. I’d like to celebrate... with you, if that’s okay.”

Ilya felt his stomach drop. “Yes, of course. I will be right back.”

After a quick panic at the bar, in which Ilya hastily bought two expensive, Russian glasses of vodka because it turned out he knew very little else about alcohol (like, for instance, what mild-mannered, ginger-ale-drinking Canadian men might like), Ilya was sliding back into his seat.

He laughed, but not unkindly, at Shane’s first sip, which was too large and ended with him spluttering all over the table. He patted Shane on the back in a patronizing sort of way, prompting Shane to elbow him hard in the ribs. Shane cared not at all when Ilya complained he’d already taken enough abuse to the ribs on the ice, eventually settling back into his seat to take slow, tiny sips while making easy conversation.

Ilya caught snippets of Shane’s life (his parents live in Ottawa, being a paramedic had inspired him to apply for med school, and, weirdly, that he held a deep obsession with Ritz crackers) and filed them away carefully for further study later.

Eventually, when their glasses had run nearly dry, Shane asked, “So your shoulder healed okay, then?”

“Yes, fine,” Ilya said.

“I’m glad,” Shane said, nodding, “I was hoping it had.”

“You were thinking about me?” Ilya said, letting the words come out light and teasing. He expected Shane to scoff and roll his eyes and make another joke about being his biggest fan, but instead,

“Yeah.” It came out shy. “I did, yeah.”

“Huh,” Ilya said, clinking the remaining ice cubes in the glass back and forth. They were mostly melted now, but it gave him something to do with his hands. “And what did you think about?”

“Oh,” Shane huffed a laugh. He looked down at the table. “Nothing in particular.”

“No?”

“No,” Shane shook his head, “except of course,” he said, looking at Ilya with an air of forced teasing, “that you never followed through on your promise.”

Ilya tilted his head as he felt the air leave his lungs. “What?”

“I’m just joking,” Shane rushed to say, sounding nervous, “obviously. About how you said you might get me a ticket for a game. Like, of course I knew you were joking then.”

Ilya expended an enormous effort into keeping his face calm, though his fingers were tapping against the table rapidly. “I was not joking,” he said slowly.

“Right – not necessarily joking, I mean, but you had loads going on, it’s fine to forget –”

“I did not forget,” Ilya said firmly.

“Right... what? So... I mean, it’s fine, like if you just didn’t want to –”

“Shane,” Ilya interrupted. “You did not call me back. I assumed you did not want to?”

Shane deflated into his seat, looking nonplussed. His mouth opened, then shut again. After a few seconds, he said, “What are you talking about?” It sounded almost angry.

“I called your work,” Ilya said, trying to modulate his voice. “I left you a message.”

And he had. On that day, not even 24-hours after the incident, just having hung up on Bood and in a moment of madness, Ilya had given in.

“Hello, Ottawa Paramedic Service.” The voice had clearly belonged to a young woman, who sounded very much like she wanted to be anywhere else.

“Yes, hi, I’m calling to... can I... could you help me?” Ilya had said, cringing. Ilya, who was hardly ever ruffled, could not believe how stupid he sounded.

“Um. I can try? What do you need?”

“I am looking for a paramedic,” Ilya had said. He had been glad it was just a phone call, because his cheeks were burning. “I met him yesterday. Shane Hollander.”

“Give me a moment, please,” there was a sound of clacking on a keyboard and the smack of chewing gum, “and what about him? Did you want to file a complaint?”

“No,” he had said hurriedly, “no, he was great. I wanted, ah, to thank him.”

“That’s very nice, sir,” the clacking got more aggressive, “I’m happy to leave a message for you –”

“I was hoping to get his phone number,” Ilya had said, trying in vain to sound casual, “so I could say it to him myself.”

The clacking stopped.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can give out personal information of the staff,” she said uncertainly, “don’t you think?”

Ilya was mystified as to why she was asking him. “Right, of course.”

“Right... so, a message, then?”

“Yes, okay,” Ilya had said. “I... ah, I guess that I called. And said thank you.”

“Wait,” she had gasped, finally coming to her full attention, “are you Ilya Rozanov?”

Ilya had considered lying, briefly, but knew there was little chance of getting away with it.

“Yes,” he had said shortly, hoping to dissuade her of any further questions. It did not work.

“Wow,” she had said. “I’m a big fan, I should be thanking you for bringing two cups to Ottawa –“

“Oh, well. Yes.”

“And some of the team was at the accident with you last night, huh? Jealous of them,” she had said obliviously. “But nice of you to think of them.”

“Ah, right,” Ilya had said, feeling cornered. He could hardly tell her he didn’t give two fucks about the rest of them (an uncharitable thought, yes, but he felt it was fair under the circumstances). “Yes, they were... they were all great. But please send the message to Shane.”

“Okay, and is there anything else you’re wanting to say?”

“No,” he had said without thinking. “Just to say thank you, that’s all.”

He left her with his phone number and hung up. Ilya had left his phone’s ringer on full volume for days afterwards. It grew extremely tiresome, having *Toxic* blare from his phone every time Svetlana, a teammate or the mobile pharmacist called. But still, every time it went off he would feel a rush of hope, snatching his phone up, only to be disappointed. By the time a week had gone by, Ilya had felt like a fool.

And now here was Shane, staring at him like he’d grown two heads.

“I never got a message,” Shane said vehemently. “Never.”

“I left it at your work,” Ilya said indignantly. “With... I don’t know her name. Young. Chewed gum. Uh... a girl?”

Shane groaned and hung his head. “Fuck me. Kristen.”

“Who is Kristin?”

“She was on reception for a few weeks. She was a temp. We could have put a duck on reception and it probably would have done a better job,” he looked at Ilya, “what happened, exactly?”

Ilya explained – leaving out some of the more pathetic details – and by the end, Shane was shaking his head so much he looked like a wet dog.

“If you were lucky, she might have passed the message off at random to someone who was working that night – whether they were at the scene would have been beyond her interests or abilities – but more likely it didn’t leave her damn computer. And,” he said, glaring at Ilya now, “it doesn’t sound like you made the message particularly important.”

“I left my phone number,” Ilya said indignantly, “why would I do that unless I wanted the person to call me back?”

“I doubt she even wrote it down. Why didn’t you call again?”

“Ah, you wanted me to make a show of myself?” Ilya asked sarcastically. “She recognized my voice, I was one phone call away from her selling a story about how Ilya Rozanov was stalking his paramedic. More updates at 11.”

“Well!”

“And you did not think to check?” Ilya asked, astonished at his lack of foresight, “with duck girl on reception, you did not think to ask?”

“I didn’t know,” Shane said defensively, “she only worked a few hours in a whole week, and honestly –” Shane clammed up.

“What?” Ilya asked, prodding at him, “what, Shane? You might as well tell me, at this point.”

“Well,” said Shane, exasperated, “I could hardly be surprised! You’re a professional hockey player, and I was – I am – nobody, basically. I just thought you’d teased me a bit because you were bored, and that was that.”

Ilya frowned, distracted. “I do not like this,” he said, waving in Shane’s direction, “this thing where you talk bad about yourself. Like – a drag, a nobody.”

Shane’s cheeks flushed a deep pink now. “But seriously, you’re an elite athlete –”

“Yes, and you are very beautiful man with a beautiful brain,” Ilya said impatiently. “We are both high achievers at this table. I wanted you to call.”

Shane slumped back in his seat. “Fuck.”

“Fuck,” Ilya agreed.

They both sat there in silence for a minute, glancing at their hands, which had somehow found themselves resting against each other again.

It was Shane that spoke first. “You called me beautiful.”

“I did.”

“...is that a joke?”

“No,” Ilya said carefully. “It is definitely not a joke.”

Shane’s tongue slipped out, unconsciously wetting his lips.

“So, you came out with your classmates?” Ilya asked suddenly.

“Yeah,” said Shane, his eyes wandering over to the dance floor, “some friends from school, they said if not tonight, then when? And I just knew if I didn’t go I would never hear the end of it.”

Ilya glanced around the club, wanting to see if anyone’s eyes were on them.

“And you?” Shane asked, “You came with your team?”

“Most of them,” Ilya said. He forced the next words out. “I do not think it would be the best idea for people to see me leave with... people talk,” he tried to explain, “they take pictures. It would be messy, right away. I don’t want that for you. Or,” he admitted, “for me, right now.”

“Hm,” Shane hummed, looking back around the club. “It would be hard to leave without anyone noticing,” his eyes slid back to Ilya, glinting and focused. “There is a bathroom in the back. With a lock.”

Ilya wouldn’t have been more shocked if Shane told him he had just spontaneously sprouted a tail.

“I’ll see you in a few minutes.” Then, Shane stood up, and strode purposefully towards the back where there was a bathroom marked ‘out of order’.

Ilya took several deep breaths, letting three slow, painful minutes pass. Then got up, and his feet carried him towards Shane.

Chapter End Notes

Not long now :)

Please let me know what you think! Comments + kudos keep me going :)

Chapter 3: Missed opportunities

Chapter Notes

I've added in another chapter to my estimated length - it's my best guess but this is an evolving process! We get to learn a bit more about what brought Ilya to this point in his life. Shane will get a turn soon!

CW: we're trying to earn the 'E' rating here! Plus light mentions of self-harm (not current).

I hope you know all comments get read and enjoyed and leave me kicking my feet happily.

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

The fierce press of soft lips met Ilya before he even had a chance to fully shut the door. Gasping, Ilya froze in place while Shane's hands came up, one to cup his cheek while the other curled into his hair.

Struggling to pull himself away, Ilya broke the kiss after a couple tries, feeling a strange, aching stab of longing when Shane's lips chased his.

"I just," he panted against Shane's lips, "I have to –" his breath caught when Shane nipped at his bottom lip, "*fuck* – I have to lock the door."

Shane looked put out, which Ilya found unreasonably cute, but he let Ilya step far enough away to click the door lock shut. Ilya, still facing the door, took a precise, steadying breath – he felt alarmingly disoriented and firmly told himself to get a grip – before he turned back to him. This time, it was Ilya's hands that shot up, grasping both sides of Shane's face and holding him in place, nose to nose.

"Fuck," Ilya murmured. He took stock of him; Shane's lips were pink and shiny with spit. His eyes were dark, with his pupils blown wide, and they were locked onto Ilya, unwavering and desperate. "You're so fucking beautiful."

Shane's cheeks flushed, but he tilted his head to press his face into one of Ilya's hands. Then – Ilya just barely maintained his composure – Shane turned his head, mouth open, to suck Ilya's thumb into his mouth. Ilya let out a shaky breath; Shane's eyes slid shut, his head bobbing slightly. And, somewhere inside his chest, Ilya splintered open.

"Christ," Ilya muttered. "Who are you?"

Shane smiled a little around his thumb. He gave it one last, hard pull and then lifted his head.

Ilya squared his shoulders, grasping at the quickly-fading hope to regain some semblance of control, and pulled Shane's face to his. He kissed him, and it was – well, Ilya didn't have the words. It was messy and hurried. It was aggressive, a little, their teeth clicking together in their rush to get closer, sink deeper into each other. His tongue probed into Shane's mouth, and was greeted in turn, their tongues sliding together eagerly.

It was all of those things, yes. But, taken each in isolation, it would have been nothing Ilya had not had before; mostly forgettable experiences boiled down until nothing remained in his memory but lips and wandering hands. This, though – this, Ilya would remember. This, Ilya was sure, would work its way into his skin, his veins, into his every cell.

The feeling wasn't just a buzzing, anymore. It felt almost like a cramp, strangely enough – like his hands were aching with excess emotion, like it had overflowed out of his chest and came crashing down through his fingertips. Shane's fingers left an invisible trail as they traced their way down his body – behind his ear, then a tickle on the back of his neck, light brushes on the back of his arm. When they reached his waistband, dipping his thumb to swipe at the skin pulled taut at his hips, Ilya moaned involuntarily, jerking forward without realizing it.

Ilya tore himself away, looking at Shane with wild eyes. He braced Shane with both hands behind his elbows and pushed forward – steady, but gentle – so he took several steps back, until he bumped up against the wall behind them. But Ilya lost control just as quickly as he'd gotten it – Shane's hand had found its way back into his hair, and, curls clenched in his fingers, he tugged Ilya's head back, exposing his neck.

Shane's mouth fell to Ilya's neck, starting with a gentle nip on his pulse point and moving to drop wet kisses trailing downwards.

"Fuck," Ilya gasped. "*Shane.*"

Shane hummed, vibrations rippling across his neck. Ilya wondered dimly if Shane could feel his frantic pulse against his lips.

Ilya dropped his hand to rest on the bulge between Shane's legs, pressing and palming against him. Shane moaned, dropping his forehead against Ilya's shoulder, his breathing turning harsh. Shane tipped forward onto the balls of his feet as Ilya gripped him through his clothes. Gratified, Ilya unbuttoned his pants and shoved his hand unceremoniously into Shane's boxers.

Their moans, low and heavy, mingled in the shared air between them.

Shane was fully hard, heavy and hot against his hand. Relishing the feel of him, Ilya gripped his cock and gave him an experimental stroke upwards.

"Oh, shit," Shane whined, and Ilya *loved* it, loved that he could make Shane whine like that. "Fuck, do that again."

Ilya braced one hand on the back of Shane's neck, holding him tightly against his shoulder, and used his other hand to stroke him slowly. He dipped one finger onto the slit of his head,

enjoying how Shane's hips rocked forward automatically. He found a bead of moisture there, and rubbed it gently with his thumb. Shane was making small squeaks, muffled against his collarbone. Curious, now, what other sounds he could coax out of him, Ilya sped up, jerking him more vigorously.

"Fuck, yes... ah, fuck, Ilya," Shane moaned.

Shane's hips thrust into Ilya's hand. He let it continue for a minute or two but, sensing a rapidly-approaching cliff, Ilya pulled his hand from Shane's cock. Shane made a disgruntled noise, but was quickly stopped short by the sight of Ilya dropping to his knees.

Shane's cock, freed now with his pants shoved down mid-thigh, was red and angry, bobbing in front of Ilya's open mouth. Ilya leaned forward and, very slowly, licked from the base all the way to the tip. When he got to the tip he pulled away, drinking in Shane's frustrated sigh, and dropped his head to carefully suck one of his balls into his mouth.

Shane gave a tiny yelp, and Ilya snapped his eyes to his face – their eyes meeting, a quick but clear, *everything okay?* Shane's eyes were wide, glazed but bright, his mouth gone slack, and just managed a nod.

"That's so –" Shane breathed in hard, steadying himself, "so fucking good."

Ilya rolled his ball gently in his mouth, sucking lightly, and moving one hand to stroke the sensitive skin underneath. He was rewarded with a moan above his head, which grew in volume and intensity as Ilya trailed his fingers backwards.

Ilya had a suspicion, but he wanted confirmation. He lifted his mouth to suck at the head of his cock – Shane cried out above him – while one finger continued its exploration. He moved slowly, waiting to see if Shane tensed or spoke. But Shane just tipped his head back, hitting the wall with a dull *thunk*, his expression one of bliss.

His finger found its target – Shane's tight, clenched hole – and he very softly circled the rim.

"Ah, yes, Ilya, yes – *fuck*."

Shane's hole fluttered under his fingertip; Ilya chose that moment to press down more firmly while simultaneously driving his mouth down onto Shane's cock, deep enough that it hit the back of his throat.

The sound Shane let out made Ilya very grateful that the club's music was so loud he could feel it pulsate through the floor. Still, he looked up with heavy, lidded eyes, pulled off and murmured teasingly, "*quiet*."

"Fuck off," Shane said, sounding out-of-breath and delirious. "Get the fuck up here."

Ilya lifted himself off his knees after giving Shane's dick a parting kiss. He fell back to Shane's lips, who returned his enthusiasm with equal measure.

Shane's hands fumbled for the buttons on Ilya's pants. "Why the fuck are these so tight?" Shane muttered, the words muffled as Ilya continued to steal kisses between stuttered breaths.

“How can your balls breathe in these things?”

Ilya huffed a laugh. “I wasn’t expecting to –” but he cut himself off with a groan when Shane’s hand found his cock and started stroking him ruthlessly.

He felt lucky to still be upright, let alone form complete sentences. Ilya set himself sink into the feeling of his hand on his dick, his breath on his neck, of *Shane, Shane, Shane*.

“I wish I had – had stuff,” Shane murmured into his ear.

“Stuff?” Ilya tried to laugh, but, with Shane’s hand delivering another hard stroke, it came out closer to a moan.

“You know what I mean,” Shane huffed. “But I don’t walk around with lube in my pockets.”

“That is too bad,” Ilya agreed truthfully. His hands clawed at Shane’s back. “Fuck... wait – stop –”

Ilya could feel his balls start to tighten, too soon. Shane took his hand back instantly.

“Was that okay?” Shane’s lips were swollen and pink, but there was a touch of concern now coloring his face.

“Yes, very okay,” Ilya said, grinning, tweaking Shane’s nose between his fingers. Shane smiled back, relieved. Ilya kissed him once, quick but fierce. “Turn around.”

The way Shane spun on his heels without hesitation made Ilya impossibly harder. Shane was now facing the wall, and Ilya positioned him until Shane had both hands bracing the wall, his chest leaning forward. His bare ass – round and muscular, and Ilya couldn’t help but wonder when Shane found the time to work out – was on display, his pants still bunched around his thighs. Ilya pushed his own pants down low enough to free his cock, and crowded in behind Shane.

Ilya leaned his hips up against Shane slowly, giving him ample time to move or protest. When he didn’t, Ilya rocked his hips experimentally against Shane’s ass.

Shane moaned, panting hard as he dropped his head.

Taking that as a good sign, Ilya took a small step forward, using his hand to spread one of Shane’s ass cheeks apart so he could nestle his cock between them. He stared down at it for a moment – if ever Ilya had seen something more erotic, he couldn’t remember it now.

Then Ilya ground his hips forward, his cock moving inside the crease of Shane’s ass.

“Ah, *fuck* – Ilya. Yes. Again.”

“Yes,” Ilya gasped, “fuck, yes.” Grinning wildly, Ilya thrust again, carefully, positioning himself so Shane would feel the weight of him, the pressure against his hole.

Shane cried out again. Ilya stuck two fingers into his mouth, and Shane sucked on them gratefully, letting them stifle his moans.

It was taking every ounce of control Ilya had to keep his thrusts careful and restrained. He rocked his hips against Shane, grinding into him, but was mindful not to devolve into frantic rutting on the sensitive skin of Shane's ass.

Shane, for his part, seemed to be doing everything in his power to break down Ilya's self-control. He sucked his fingers greedily, moaning and panting, and jerked his hips back, seeking more friction against his hole.

Ilya withdrew his fingers from Shane's mouth, using them to grasp the hair on the back of his head and tug him backwards, wanting to graze his teeth against Shane's ear.

"Ah, fuck, Ilya –" Shane heaved, "I can't – I'm not going to last much longer."

"Yes, fuck, Shane," Ilya panted. He released his hair and reached his hand around, but instead of going straight for his dick he went first to hold his hand in front of Shane's mouth. Without having to explain, Shane spat onto his hand. *Dirty boy*, Ilya thought, delighting in it.

Ilya brought his wet hand down to Shane's cock. He wasted no time now, jerking him, fast and hard. "Come for me, Shane. Come on. I want to see it, fuck."

Shane cried out again, and Ilya could tell he was on the brink. Ilya quickened his own hips, his cock grinding against Shane's crease, his balls slapping against his ass.

Shane came first, with a wild, biting moan, his eyes screwed tight and his hot release spilling over Ilya's fist. Ilya couldn't look away, entranced by it, relishing the sight of his hand milking it out of him.

It was enough to send Ilya hurtling over his own cliff, shouting into Shane's neck. At the last moment, he grabbed the bottom of Shane's shirt and shoved it upwards, so his cock was spurting over the wide, muscular expanse of Shane's back instead of his clean blue polo shirt.

Delirious and spent, Ilya's body slumped forward, and he breathed hard against Shane's back for several moments. Shane seemed in no better of a state, his arms folded onto the wall, his forehead, sweaty and red, leaning against his forearms.

"Fuck," Shane said weakly. "That was..."

"Yes," Ilya agreed breathlessly.

Wrenching himself upright, Ilya kept one hand on Shane's shirt, keeping him still. He pulled a couple wads of toilet paper together – the first he used to swipe against Shane's back, gathering up most of his cooling release. The second he wet under the tap, then brushed it gently against his back, clearing any lingering, sticky remnants.

"Thank you." Shane's voice was quiet now, sounding utterly wrung out.

“You’re welcome.”

Shane turned around, leaning his back against the wall, pulling his pants up. He looked down at the buttons, but Ilya could see his hands trembling. Tentatively, Ilya rested one hand on top of his to calm the tremors.

“Are you okay?” he asked quietly. “I didn’t hurt you?”

Shane looked at him, startled. “No,” he said as if it was obvious. “Definitely not,” the words came out in a disbelieving puff of laughter.

“Was... okay, then?” Ilya asked, still feeling little tremors pass through Shane’s hands.

“Yes – I’ve never...”

“You’ve never...?” Ilya asked. A horrifying thought occurred to him. “Have you never –?”

“Jesus, Ilya,” Shane huffed, rolling his eyes. “Relax, my first sexual experience isn’t in this dirty bathroom at age 27, thanks very much.”

Ilya released a breath, relieved. He didn’t think Shane would be thanking him for letting his first partnered orgasm be a handjob at the back of a sticky club.

“No, it’s...” Shane said slowly, “it’s just never been quite like... that, before.”

“That?” Ilya thought he knew what he meant, but his own curiosity – and perhaps his ego, if he were being honest – wanted Shane to explain for himself.

“I’m not normally someone who could hook up at a club – like, at all.” Shane said, his ears going red. “But you were just – I mean, it was just –” Shane took a breath, looking a bit frustrated, “it was good. Really good.” When Ilya didn’t speak right away, Shane looked alarmed. “But maybe it was just me –”

“No, Shane,” Ilya interrupted him. “It was not just you.”

Shane relaxed into a shy – but satisfied – smile. Ilya leaned in to kiss him, but it was different, now. It was slow, a soft meeting of lips, sweet and curious. Ilya’s hand was on Shane’s cheek before he even knew what he was doing. When they broke apart, Ilya held his face close for a moment, flicking his eyes between Shane’s mouth – open and plump – and his eyes, which were searching his. Searching for what, he wasn’t sure.

“We’re going to have to leave the bathroom eventually,” Shane said at last.

Ilya groaned, resting his forehead on Shane’s collarbone. “Why?”

Shane laughed, rubbing the back of Ilya’s head. “Unless you want to live in the bathroom?”

“Sounds great.” Ilya didn’t move, enjoying the caress of Shane’s hand through his curls, not caring for now if it was all too good, too comfortable.

“I guess –” Shane started, hesitating for a moment, “I think we should leave separately? And I think my friends will be looking for me by now. They’ll get nervous if they can’t find me.”

Ilya lifted his head. “Yes... same, I think. But...” Ilya tilted his head, “maybe we can exchange numbers? No having to rely on Kristina, this time.”

“Kristen,” Shane corrected reflexively. “And...” a flash of something crossed Shane’s face. Ilya’s stomach tightened nervously. “Yeah – of course.”

A couple minutes later, numbers punched into each other’s phones and one final kiss exchanged, Shane cracked the door, peeking out. Satisfied the coast was clear, he shot one last smile to Ilya and darted away.

Ilya had agreed to wait a few minutes before following. He sat on the broken toilet – which thankfully had a lid – and waited for his racing heart to slow. The buzzing was still there.

As was so often the case in Ilya’s life, the euphoria was short-lived. Ilya woke up around noon the next day to 28 missed calls – never a good sign – and 63 unread messages. His stomach dropped before his brain had fully chugged to life, Ilya scrabbled for his phone. In his rush, he typed in the wrong passcode twice. Cursing under his breath, he got it on the third try.

From Bood. *Who gives a fuck about them. Ignore them. Call me.*

From Harris. *It’s only the trashy tabloids. It’s nothing, and I’m all over it.*

Nothing. Ilya could have laughed. ‘Nothing’ didn’t usually come with two dozen calls before 8 in the morning. Feeling a bit like a man approaching the noose, Ilya opened his browser and typed in his own name.

Ilya Rozanov: Spotted with first man since scandal, suicide attempt.

“Fuck,” Ilya shouted, kicking the blanket off in a rush to sit up. He hunched over, scrolling frantically.

Four and a half years after Ilya Rozanov was caught unawares in a compromising position with prospective Boston recruit Mikhail Gusev, he has been spotted canoodling with a man for the first time.

In 2014, Ilya Rozanov was a rising star for the Boston Raiders at just 23 years old, capturing the attention of fans and securing a place in the starting line. But at the training camp that September, it didn’t take long for Rozanov to catch the eye of Russian prospect Mikhail Gusev, age 20, who was attending as a free-agent with the hopes of winning the favor of Boston’s coaches.

They couldn’t have expected that a rogue fan with a camera phone would catch Gusev on his knees for Rozanov in a deserted hallway. The resulting uproar won Gusev nothing but a one-way ticket back to Russia, where it’s been rumored he has since retired from hockey.

The Raiders management – understandably upset that their first-line center had provoked several rounds of protests and boycotts from a vocal group of staunch Catholic fans – had been expected to leverage their morality clause to nullify Rozanov’s contract when news broke that Rozanov had been hospitalized.

Many people have presumed that guilt or shame drove Rozanov into the waiting arms of the Massachusetts General Hospital’s Psychiatric Service, where a hospital porter confirmed for the Boston Globe – anonymously – that Rozanov was being held following a suicide attempt.

There were angry, traitorous pricks of tears behind his eyes but, gritting his teeth, Ilya scrolled past the next several paragraphs. Having lived it, he had no need to have his own worst memories re-told to him through the gaudy lens of *Bleacher Daily*.

The now-Ottawa Centaurs center has never made any public statement about his sexuality, though reports state that he has discussed his bisexuality freely among friends and the team’s administrative staff. Yet, in the years since, Rozanov has only ever been spotted with women –

“I wonder why,” Ilya said furiously.

– though none have ever lasted long enough to make a re-appearance, with the exception of model and luxury car saleswoman Svetlana Vetrova, who is thought to be a long-time friend. Word had spread that Rozanov’s interactions with men could possibly be a once-off with Gusev alone – sparking questions about the nature of their relationship and, perhaps, cast a shadow over Rozanov’s intentions with an unsigned rookie three years his junior.

But last night, several patrons of Coyote Nightclub, in downtown Ottawa, reported that Rozanov was spotted in very close quarters with a man.

“They had their heads together all night, laughing and staring at each other,” club customer, Niki Grace, shared with us. “I was making out with one of the Centaurs players, so I knew he had to be around somewhere. I was surprised to see him off in the corner with some random guy.”

“You can go right off and *fuck* yourself, Niki,” said Ilya, “and you have a slutty name, too,” he added maliciously.

There are no confirmations on who the mystery man is, and the photos provided to the Daily were too dark to make out any identifying details.

“Oh fuck, thank god,” Ilya groaned, eyes closing. He gathered himself for a moment, then forced himself to finish the article.

But whoever he is, we can only guess what insider knowledge Rozanov has let slip about the scandal that – more than his stats ever had – cemented him into hockey history, for good or bad.

Ilya took several deep breaths. He opened his text thread with Svetlana, where there was one message waiting for him in Russian.

Those fuckers.

Ilya shook his head and wrote back,

Can you please look for me – are there any articles or posts anywhere that have a name or a visible photo? Anything.

Three dots appeared immediately.

Give me twenty minutes.

Ilya couldn't stand to sit and stare at his phone for twenty minutes, so he forced himself to his feet and dragged himself down the stairs.

When he reached the foot of the stairs, he crouched down to scratch Anya behind the ears, who looked up at him happily, her tail wagging in a lazy kind of way. Looking at her, content and oblivious, he stupidly thought he might cry.

He went through the motions of making himself breakfast. Two white pieces of bread into the toaster, a pan heating on the stove, waiting for his standard four scrambled eggs. He cooked them mindlessly and, when he was done, he shoveled them into his mouth without tasting them. Twenty minutes passed. Ilya washed the dishes. Another twenty minutes. Ilya scrubbed Anya's food bowls (she trotted after him hopefully).

When his phone chimed, he launched himself across the counter. Feeling jittery, he picked up his phone with baited breath.

Nothing. No names, no pictures, no other details. I checked everywhere. I have been to corners of the internet I shouldn't even know exist.

Tension seeped out of him like poison drawn from a wound.

Thank you.

It was only another moment before his phone vibrated again.

Don't let them ruin anything for you, Ilyusha.

Ilya didn't respond, turning his attention to the Centaurs group chat – which was responsible for the bulk of the missed messages. He skimmed through it – there were a few texts asking if anyone had seen the article, followed by a firm mandate from Bood that there was to be no gossiping in the team, and could they please use their fucking brains and think about the fact that Ilya was in the chat, and then the conversation quickly moved to trying to sniff out who among them was guilty of making out with 'Niki Grace.'

Ilya hit the call button next to Barrett's name.

"Jesus, man, finally," came his voice on the other end. "We were giving it until one p.m. before someone went over."

“I sleep late,” Ilya said, trying in vain to sound casual, “you all know that.”

“Yes, that’s why I wasn’t at your door at 8 a.m.,” Barrett said impatiently. “Are you okay, man?”

“I am fine,” said Ilya, his voice tight.

“Are you sure? I can come over –”

“No, I said I am fine,” he said, one hand rubbing the back of his neck. He put Barrett on speaker phone and opened the Centaurs group chat again, firing off a short message.

This disturbed my beauty sleep but otherwise I am fine. LaPointe, you should probably get yourself checked – your dick and your brain, please.

Barrett must have seen it, because he chimed in, “LaPointe really does have the worst taste. I saw her taking a video of themselves while they were kissing and she had her eyes open the whole time. Like making out with a Chucky doll.”

Several messages came flooding in. There were a couple of nice messages to Ilya, mostly from the younger players – *good to hear from you, Cap!* – but most of them had turned their attention to LaPointe’s embarrassing history of one-night stands, the last of which had threatened, upon waking up in his bed the following morning, to blackmail him unless he wanted people to find out about their affair. She had looked fairly let down when he informed her that he was not, in fact, married.

LaPoint protested in the chat, *I thought she really seemed interested*, but there was little sympathy as team members fired back their responses.

Interested in going viral on instagram, maybe.

As long as that’s the only viral she’s got.

Don’t be gross.

“Okay, so... crisis mostly averted, maybe?” Barrett said tentatively, bringing Ilya back to their conversation. “Have you... did you... was that guy someone you know?”

“It is nothing,” said Ilya. “Or, I guess it is nothing now.” He knew he sounded bitter, but he didn’t care.

“What does that mean?”

“It was one conversation and he nearly gets outed in a newspaper –”

“Oh, Jesus, is he closeted?”

“I don’t even know!” Ilya snapped. “And I probably never will.”

“Don’t be like that,” Barrett implored. “You can’t just let these shit-stirrers run your life.”

“I think,” Ilya sighed, twisting a ruined chew toy in his hands while Anya circled his ankles, “I have ruined enough people’s futures for one lifetime.”

“Fuck off with that self-pity shit,” Barrett said, exasperated. He made a noise to continue, but then a voice came from behind.

“Is that Ilya?” Ilya could hear Harris ask.

Barrett clearly turned his head, his voice becoming quieter. “Yeah, he –”

But he couldn’t finish his sentence before there was a shuffling sound and then Harris’s voice was in Ilya’s ear.

“No one legitimate is going to pick this up,” Harris said briskly. “Bleacher Daily is such trash.”

“So it won’t show up anywhere else?”

“Well...” Harris hesitated.

“What?” Ilya pressed.

“I’m saying ESPN isn’t going to bother, it would make them look terrible. And the major papers wouldn’t either –”

“They reported at the time –”

“Yes, but that was different,” Harris explained patiently. “It was such shit timing. The anti-gay laws in Russia were in the news, and with Gusev – going home... well – it was a ‘breakthrough’ moment.”

Ilya remembered someone saying that to him at the time. Even though Ilya had long been well known in the hockey world – enough that he’d known to be careful, though it turned out to not be careful enough – mostly he could live his life in relative peace. Within hockey circles, yes, word would travel fast, and he would be recognized in public sometimes – but in truth, hockey players usually had an easy enough time blending in. Maybe it was because they typically had half their faces covered by a big, ugly helmet – or perhaps hockey just wasn’t popular enough to make his personal life of any real public interest.

But – as his publicist at the time explained – the scandal was a perfect storm. Mikhail, a poor son of Russia, abandoned by the American teams and shipped off home in a torrent of bad press and to an unknown, terrifying future. Protest signs waved and Rozanov jerseys burned in front of TD Stadium, a journalist’s dream photo opp (though Ilya had felt tearfully, embarrassingly grateful for the counter-protestors who showed up with cut-outs of his face with rainbow flags plastered on). All set against the background of international outrage pointed solidly in Russia’s direction.

It had, as Harris said, ‘broken through’ to the mainstream media, who used it mostly as a hook to write long, opining articles about the state of LGBT acceptance in the US or the retrenchment of social rights in Russia. And that was before Ilya had found himself mostly

sedated, hands curiously strapped to the bed railing, looking at Svetlana's wet face through half-closed lids.

"There was too much to capitalize on, then," Harris went on. "But it's not like that now. They've moved on. And no paper worth its salt is going to run a story about how you had a conversation with a man."

"And papers not worth – I don't know that phrase, whatever – the shitty ones?"

"Maybe a couple might re-print what they see off *Bleacher*," Harris admitted, "but it's still hardly a story. They're just trying to get a few clicks off whatever scandal they can dig up again."

Ilya was staring at the ceiling, willing himself not to let the gathered tears fall. He kept his voice fairly steady, saying, "thanks, Harris. I guess I should just let it pass."

"Yes, definitely," Harris agreed. "I've been in touch with your agent, she's already got two hands around their necks, threatening to never again so much as confirm whether or not you exist."

"Farah is good like that," Ilya chuckled in spite of himself.

"Fuck 'em," Harris said.

He and Barrett echoed their goodbyes and hung up.

Ilya sat at his kitchen table, phone in hand, staring at the black screen. Gathering his remaining courage, he unlocked it and scrolled through his missed notifications. He didn't find what he was looking for in his messages, so he went over to his call log.

Missed call, Shane Hollander. 9:23 am.

With a lurch of nausea, he turned his phone over, tossing it between both hands. But then, before he could second-guess himself too much, he hit his name. Shane answered after two rings.

"Hello?"

"Shane. I –" Ilya didn't know what to say. "You saw?"

"Yeah," said Shane, sounding nervous. "I saw. My friends put it in the group chat."

Fuck. "They know it was you that –?"

"No," he interrupted. "It was just that they thought it was crazy it happened at the same club. They didn't know... they didn't even notice I'd gone anywhere, last night, actually. Except for one, she might... well, she hasn't said anything to me."

"Okay," said Ilya slowly. "That's good, then?"

Shane didn't say anything for a few, painful seconds. "I didn't know."

Ilya didn't have to ask what he meant by it. "No?"

"No," said Shane firmly. "I mean, I guess my parents were right about me living in my own head," he let out a little laugh, "at the time, I was knee-deep in med school applications. I mean, my mom called me once just to check in, but I was right in the middle of studying for my last go at the MCAT. I shouted at her for ten minutes straight. I was a monster."

"I can't imagine you shouting at your mother," Ilya said with a small smile, trying to picture it, "polite, Canadian man?"

"Trust me," said Shane dryly, "I wasn't then, for months. If someone even breathed wrong in my direction I would have knocked their teeth out."

"You sound like you would have made a decent hockey player."

Shane laughed. "But I just – I had no idea, alright? I didn't know you'd gone through all that."

"Is fine," Ilya shrugged, blinking again. "I was hoping you didn't know, I think."

"And... are you okay? Must have been a shitty morning."

"I was asleep for most of it," Ilya said lightly. "But then, yes, very shitty. But I am okay. I am..." he hesitated, "more worried about you. I did not mean to drag you into my mess."

"I'm fine," said Shane. "They didn't actually get my name or anything, so it's all... all in the clear, right?"

"Yes," Ilya said slowly. "This time... yes, they did not see you."

He waited, holding his breath.

"Right. This time," Shane said after a moment. "Could we talk, do you think? Face to face, I mean. There's some stuff... I'd like to tell you."

Ilya frowned. Did Shane feel the need to let him down gently? Too much of a gentleman to end their nothing-relationship over the phone? He wanted to deflect, to hang up before Shane could worm his way ever further into his subconscious, but in the end, Ilya was weak. He wanted to see Shane again, even if it was just one more time.

"You can come here," Ilya said. "There is a gate to the whole community, I'll give you the code. Even if there is anyone out there, no one will know who you're going to see, and my house is very private."

"Okay," said Shane simply.

"Did you mean – today, was it?"

“Oh, no, sorry,” Shane said. “I can’t today. Would Friday night be okay? I checked the schedule and saw you have a home game the next night.”

Ilya felt a bit startled at his thoughtfulness. “Yes, okay. Friday.”

Three nights away.

They both said awkward goodbyes and hung up the phone.

The next three days passed painfully slowly. The press had quickly lost interest, especially when Ilya refused to comment (“No,” Harris had said wearily, “you cannot offer them a middle finger as comment.”) and the team – after a few nervous glances – moved rapidly on as well.

They were approaching the playoffs, and despite their two previous Stanley Cup wins – most recently just the last year – they were gunning for a third. There was excited, anxious chatter about being the first team since the 90s to bring home back-to-back championships.

Ilya felt in something of a daze. He went through the motions, and he wasn’t playing badly, necessarily, but he earned himself a few extra barks from Wiebe than he normally would have.

He got home on Friday after morning practice with four grocery bags in hand, each filled to the brim. Anya yapped at him, bumping her wet nose against his shin. She jumped, trying to lodge her head into the bags.

“Anya, down,” he said. It had no effect, her front paws scrabbling at the plastic. “Svetlana is right, I do spoil you.” She barked happily.

After shooing Anya into the backyard, he went about unpacking the bags with a growing sense of embarrassment.

He and Shane had not discussed what exactly they were going to do this evening. In fact, Ilya had a sinking suspicion Shane might be coming over to say gently, “look, it’s all just a little too much...”

So why, then, did Ilya buy all the ingredients he needed to cook the one dish he knew well, plus two bottles of wine (one red, one white, just in case) and a plethora of random snacks that he was now positioning around the kitchen as if they always sat there.

He stared blankly at the bunch of bananas now resting against the coffee maker. He didn’t even *like* bananas.

Ilya at least had the sense to not actually prepare dinner in advance, but that didn’t stop him from imagining himself standing in the kitchen with an apron and a ladle (did he own either of those things? He wasn’t sure) while Shane laughed and ran out the front door.

Finally, mercifully, Ilya got a buzz on his phone at 7:30. He smiled to himself – Shane was exactly on time. Ilya's hands went up to smooth his already perfectly-set curls. He was wearing a blue cotton shirt and loose-fitting black track suit bottoms.

See, he was very *casual*.

Shane bustled through the door, the March wind having whipped his face into a ruddy, bright red.

“Hi,” said Shane, “should I take my shoes off?”

Ilya was about to say no, since he didn't really mind, but then the unbidden thought that it would make it harder for Shane to leave too quickly crossed his mind. Even as he chastised himself, he said, “if you don't mind.”

Shane toed off his right, then his left sneaker, then followed Ilya back into his kitchen.

“Do you want anything to drink?” Ilya asked, resisting the impulse to wipe his sweaty palms on his pants. “I have water, ginger ale... whatever.”

“Um, no, I'm okay.”

Ilya had already had one hand reaching for the fridge door, and it swung back to hang lamely at his side. “We can go into the living room, then.”

That's how they found themselves sitting on Ilya's couch, close but not too close, Shane angling his body ever so slightly in Ilya's direction.

“So, you wanted to talk?” Ilya prompted him. He just wanted to get it over with, now.

“Yes,” Shane said distractedly. “I...” he was looking at Ilya, and his tongue snuck out to wet his lips. “Yeah, I want to talk.”

The fact that, in his next conscious moment, Ilya was splayed back against the couch with Shane straddling his hips, his tongue down his throat, perhaps should not have been a surprise. It was Shane who pulled back, cheeks red and a look of dazed surprise, and said,

“Shit – no, I did want – sorry,” he awkwardly scrambled off Ilya's lap with an air of disappointment. He ran his hands through his hair, glancing back at Ilya with an expression of poorly-concealed longing. “Fuck. I'm just going to go sit over there.”

Shane shuffled over to the arm chair, which was sitting a safe distance away. He sat down and folded his hands very primly in his lap.

Ilya, who felt something akin to whip lash, rubbed his face roughly, perhaps to redirect some of his blood upwards. With a steadying breath, he stared over at Shane.

“Okay,” Ilya said, crossing his arms. “What did – what did you want to say?”

Averting his eyes at the last second, Shane blurted out, “I'm sorry.”

Even though Ilya had thought he was prepared, his stomach dropped. *Relax*, he thought to himself sternly, *you barely even know him. It's fine*. He crossed his arms over his chest and pressed his lips into a thin line to stop himself from frowning.

"It's fine, you don't –" Ilya took a deep breath, "you don't have to explain. You don't owe me anything –"

"No," Shane cut in, sounding horrified. "It's not that – I just –"

"What then?"

"I – I like you."

"You like me?" Ilya asked, taken aback. His mind churned slowly, trying to make out Shane's meaning. "And... you're sorry about that?"

"Yes – no, I mean – I'm sorry about everything that happened to you. Not that I read much," he hurried to add, embarrassed, "like, only that one article, but still, that must have fucking sucked. God, that sounds so casual, sorry –"

"Shane," Ilya said gently, putting him out of his misery. "It's fine. We don't have to talk about it."

"No? But –"

"I'd rather not," Ilya said delicately, "right now."

"Right... okay. Of course."

"So – is that – ?"

"No, okay," Shane said, squaring his shoulders. "I wanted to tell you. I matched – I've been placed for my residency, you know?"

"Yes?" Ilya asked, having been told this already. "Emergency medicine?"

"Yeah, exactly... except, I didn't say –"

"What?"

"The placement is in Montreal," the words came out in a single breath.

"Oh." Ilya blinked. "Montreal."

"Yeah," Shane said slowly. "My top two were Montreal and Ottawa. I went back and forth between the two, for first place, but then I thought... well, I didn't have anything keeping me here, and it could push me out of my comfort zone..."

The rapid machinery whirring in Ilya's brain was finally starting to clunk into place. Shane was moving away.

“I understand,” he said, surprising himself. But Ilya did understand. He had arrived in America at 19, with two suitcases and a shaky grasp of the English language. It was terrifying, but he’d also needed it, at the time.

“And the first year is insane, you know,” Shane continued.

“Insane like how?”

“Like, 100 hours a week, no sleep, all stress.”

“Sounds... not healthy?”

Shane gave a dry laugh. “It’s not.”

“So you are saying this because...?”

Shane took a deep breath. “It’s just – maybe I’m being stupid, assuming that – that there was something, maybe? Between us?”

Ilya laughed, but it was kind. “Is not stupid, Shane. I followed you into that bathroom, yes?”

Shane blushed. “Yeah, okay... anyways. I should have told you about Montreal, when you asked about the match. But I couldn’t help myself. I just wanted to, I don’t know, stay in the moment with you, I guess.”

“Is understandable,” Ilya shrugged, feigning casual. “I am very hot.”

“Shut up, asshole,” Shane rolled his eyes. “It was more than that. I wanted to be with you.”

“I wanted to be with you, too,” Ilya said quietly. He knew where this was going but, while he should have known better than to hope, he couldn’t quite extinguish the last ember burning away in his chest.

Shane flashed him a weak smile. “But...”

“But.” Ilya said, like a confirmation.

“I’m going to be lost in a sea of shit this next year. People say it’s intense like nothing else. Like I won’t even have time to eat or sleep, let alone anything else,” he said. He looked at Ilya to gauge his reaction, but Ilya kept his face carefully neutral, “and it would have been one thing, if I was in Ottawa. But with me in Montreal and you on the road so much... we wouldn’t even be able to get to know each other, really.”

Sensing the need to give Shane some kind of reaction, Ilya nodded slowly. Though he did understand, truly, he also felt a horrible stab of regret at the four months he’d wasted. Four months where, maybe, Shane might have been convinced to rank Ottawa number one. Four months that might have ended with Shane living and working within minutes of him, a life where they might have been able to squeeze out spare minutes and hours between the chaos.

“And, well,” Shane said, looking down at his hands, “I can’t afford to get... distracted. And you,” he glanced at Ilya, his eyes burning, “seem like one hell of a distraction.”

Ilya wondered what Shane meant – the distraction of his face potentially being plastered across tabloids and twitter accounts? The distraction of Ilya’s scandal and untamed, public life? Or, maybe, it was the *something*. The something between them, that would be the distraction.

Ilya wasn’t sure he wanted to know, so he wasn’t going to ask.

“Are you mad at me?” Shane interrupted Ilya’s train of thought with an anxious voice.

“No, Shane,” and Ilya thought wildly, privately that he didn’t think he could ever be mad at Shane, “I understand, I think.”

“You do?” Shane sounded doubtful.

“I trained for ten years to get to the NHL draft. It was everything I had worked for. Every second of my life all for that moment. And then, at the beginning, I had to prove myself, over and over. The pressure was a lot, but it was also... satisfying, I guess. I was built for it. I would not have let it go to waste, and I do not want you to let this go to waste. This is like... your draft, yes?”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“Except you will save lives,” Ilya chuckled, “and I hit pucks with a stick.”

Shane shrugged, blushing lightly, “I’m not sure how many lives I’ll be saving at the beginning. More just watching the people who actually know what they’re doing save lives.”

“Ah, I do not believe this,” Ilya said, shaking his head. “And I don’t think you do, either.”

There didn’t seem to be anything else to say. Shane, bracing his hands on his knees, stood up, and Ilya did the same. Shane stood in front of him and, clearly lost for what to do, awkwardly stuck his hand out.

A smarter man, a more careful man, might have let Shane just walk out the door right then. Unfortunately for Ilya, he was neither smart nor careful, and, like the force of two magnets pulling together, he was reaching for Shane, who was reaching right back.

“Just to remember me by, yes?” Ilya murmured.

The next several minutes passed as if he was in a fever dream. Shane straddling his hips. Lips meeting, wet and undignified. Both of their cocks out, rubbing together frantically. Shane gripping them both in one hand, stroking hard. Ilya spurting over Shane’s hand, who used his release to slick his hand and bring himself over the edge. Their foreheads leaning together, their breaths mingling, for one long moment.

And then the door was shutting behind Shane, who had glanced back just at the last second, so Ilya could see a few last freckles before he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

yearning incoming!!

I think Shane's intensity would be the same in this universe, just coming at a different place and time.

Chapter 4: Shane

Chapter Summary

Two years through Shane's eyes.

Chapter Notes

Say hello to Shane's POV! This chapter truly took on a life of its own. It was longer than I'd planned but it felt like this part of the story needed to be told in its entirety.

This feels like a bigger swing, so I really hope you like it! Let me know what you think :)

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

Two years later – April 2021

Shane strode into the function hall – decorated in a garish purple and with oddly limp balloons – with steady hands and the certainty that tonight, come hell or high water, would be different. Tonight, he would get what it was that he wanted.

He scanned the room intently. It was only partially full, Shane having arrived only minutes after the stated ‘doors opening’ time on the invitation.

So he would have something to do other than wipe his sweaty palms on his pants, Shane took refuge in the bathroom. He thanked whoever was watching over him that it was a single-person, lockable one where he could stare at himself in the mirror and mouth the words he had been practicing for the last few weeks.

Tonight would be different.

Shane drifted back out to the event, which was a benefit for the Canadian Paramedic HELP Fund. Shane still volunteered as a paramedic, sometimes, and anyway, it was a worthy cause.

Though, if he were being honest, he had not been entirely motivated by the general value of emergency funds for paramedics and their families. Shane had seen Ilya's name on the guest of honor list for the evening three weeks ago. He thought that probably meant Ilya had donated quite a lot of money, for whatever reason. But Shane didn't really care how Ilya ended up on the guest list; he'd bought his ticket three minutes later.

The beginning of the benefit was largely uneventful, though the room swelled as people crammed themselves into the too-small room. Then, Shane tensed at the sound of heightened chatter behind him. Without even turning around, Shane knew Ilya had arrived.

Ilya didn't see him at first. He was dressed in a smart, deep blue suit and was surrounded by a bustling group of people. Some of the other Centaurs were in attendance, it seemed. Bood and Barrett flanked Ilya, as they so often did, like two large, impeccably dressed birds on his shoulders.

Shane turned his head back around before Ilya could spot him. He looked down at his hands and took a steadying breath.

July 2019

When Shane's mom asked how his first day went at the emergency medical center in Montreal Hospital, Shane let out a dry, wrung-out laugh.

"You didn't enjoy it?" she asked, worried.

Shane had collapsed on his couch, feeling every inch of the salt dried onto his skin from the sweaty, sticky day. The backs of his hands were rubbed raw, and he picked at what looked suspiciously like dried blood under his fingernails. *How did that even get there through my gloves*, he wondered.

"I've been up since four in the morning," Shane said wearily. "I'm not sure how much I was meant to enjoy today."

"But you were in the emergency room parts of last year, right?"

"Yeah," Shane said as he heaved himself off the couch. "At a three month placement. This is different," he explained, scrubbing hard at his hands. He wondered if his knuckles might start bleeding.

"And it was bad? Honey, maybe you should re-consider, maybe something like a family physician –?"

"Mom," he cut her off wearily. "I am where I want to be. I think I just caught a bad day."

It had started out oppressively enough, with the summer humidity pressing in on him before he escaped into the aggressively air conditioned emergency department. He hadn't even managed to badge himself in before a woman fainted in the hallway next to him. Shane was shouting for assistance as he rolled her onto her side.

"Tell me why," Shane had said furiously on the phone an hour later, "on *earth* EMS declined to transfer her to a hospital?"

"She said she had been a bit anxious lately – she was stable –"

“Stable my fucking ass,” Shane exclaimed, “how would you know, you didn’t perform an ECG! She came in dangerously tachycardic –”

“Dr. Hollander,” came a voice behind him. “Can I speak to you for a moment?”

Shane gave a hurried goodbye and turned to his attending, Dr. Zhang. “Sorry, Doctor.”

“Apologizing already?” She looked vaguely amused. “You don’t even know what I was going to say.”

“Right, sorry – uh... right.”

“Look, I understand your frustration, but that kind of phone call doesn’t usually help things,” she said, gesturing to the phone. “You were a paramedic, right?”

“Yes,” Shane said stiffly. He just couldn’t help himself. “That’s why I think they should have known better.”

“Hm,” she nodded. “Fair enough. But in the future let’s see if there are more productive ways to fix mistakes, alright?”

“Yes, Dr. Zhang,” he said.

She eyed him carefully. “And good catch. She’s stable now.”

Shane suppressed a smile. “Thank you.”

After a morning of feeling a bit like a banana being run over by a passenger train, Shane dragged himself into the break room, pouring coffee down his throat without tasting it.

“Hollander,” a senior resident bumped him in the shoulder. “Nice job out there.”

Shane smiled weakly in return. The conversation quickly moved on, Shane mostly ignoring it in favor of rummaging around for his turkey sandwich buried in the fridge.

“No,” he heard one of the nurses say, “I was off that weekend, I went home for the parade.”

There was a chorus of booing, then he said defensively, “you’re just a bunch of sore losers.”

“What’s this?” Shane asked, taking a seat at the battered table with them.

“Oh,” the nurse brightened. “You should be on my side! You’re from Ottawa, right?”

“Yeah,” Shane said, confused.

“Well, I went back for the Stanley Cup parade last weekend –” another loud boo, “why doesn’t Montreal try winning even once and then you guys can shit talk all you like! Anyways, did you see the game?”

Shane felt his stomach flip. He busied himself unwrapping his sandwich, averting his eyes and saying, “I’m not really into hockey.”

Now, this was technically true but also not entirely honest. No, Shane had never before been into hockey. He knew very little about the rules and nuances of the game – despite his dad’s best efforts. But he *had* watched the championship game, every second of it. His eyes tracked Ilya across the screen. Shane had winced when Ilya was thrown into the boards, and found himself rubbing his own knee in sympathy when Ilya limped off the ice.

Shane had thought, briefly, about texting Ilya as he watched families and loved ones stream onto the ice, crowding around the cup.

He had considered texting a second time when he saw footage of Ilya giving an interview a couple days later. He wanted to ask Ilya how his leg was healing, because he was still holding himself in this strange, stiff way. But instead he just stared at the black screen on his phone.

But now, in this crowded, dimly lit – two of the overhead light bulbs were burnt out – staff room, Shane wasn’t going to be saying any of that. He kept his head down and let their voices wash over him.

“Shane, incoming.” The voice was coming from Iris, who was bouncing excitedly in the doorway. She and Shane had been in medical school together and his relief when they had both secured a place in Montreal had been unimpeded – well, for the first few hours, at least. “Patient with a torn off leg!”

A second-year resident by the name of Dr. Malik Sayeed was in the room already.

“Can I give you the leg to hold?” he asked.

Shane wondered if he was being tested. Considering he’d once arrived to a scene of an accident where three drunk frat boys had held hands and jumped off the roof together – missing the pool below by an astonishingly wide margin – this wasn’t too much of a test. “Yeah,” he said, reaching his hands out.

Malik grinned at him under his face shield, splattered with blood. “Not a weak stomach, then?”

“I wouldn’t be here if I did,” Shane said, calm even while he held a severed leg in his hands.

“Well,” Malik said, glancing at Shane, “then I’m glad you’re here.”

Shane smiled in response, hoping that was sufficient.

“Nightmare for him,” Malik said, turning back to the patient, “hopefully they can reattach it. Wouldn’t be fun to come to and realize you’re down a leg.”

Shane inexplicably thought of Ilya.

The first November as a resident brought cooler weather and irresistible flashbacks to meeting Ilya one year previously.

Shane was also painfully aware that the Ottawa Centaurs would soon be playing a game in Montreal. He still – as he insisted futilely to Iris – did not watch hockey and only knew this because his coworkers were talking about it. And *no*, please don't check the private tabs on his phone.

"Where is your head today, Dr. Hollander?"

Shane startled, dropping his tablet, which was thankfully encased in a thick rubber padding, and knocking over an open water bottle in his rush to pick it up.

"Sorry, Dr. Zhang," he said hurriedly, mopping up the water and muttering apologies to the desk nurse, who was frantically grabbing sheets of paper in between shooting him the stink eye.

"Everything okay?" Dr. Zhang asked, watching the scene with interest. "If you're not yourself today –"

"Everything is fine," he rushed to say. He wasn't sure why, but he'd felt Dr. Zhang's eyes on him closely for the last several weeks. It was making him jittery – or perhaps that was the triple espresso that had become his standard breakfast.

"Okay," she nodded. "Let's stay focused, shall we?" She didn't wait for a response before she ducked away into one of the trauma rooms.

Fatima, the charge nurse of ten years appeared in front of him. Shane both respected and feared her. "There's a full body rash with your name on it in room 11."

"Thanks," Shane said, resisting the impulse to sigh. "Okay." He took a deep breath and set off to the awaiting patient.

Minutes later: "*Fuck*."

Shane skidded through a puddle on the floor – his own doing, probably – and just barely managed to stay upright in his rush back to Dr. Zhang. "I think we have measles."

Some indeterminate time later, the weaselly-looking med student Jason said, "don't be breathing your measles breath on me," at Shane when he collapsed into a chair to begin the painstaking process of charting.

"Don't be stupid," Iris snapped behind him. "The patient is isolated now, and we're all vaccinated, aren't we?" She narrowed her eyes at Jason. "*Aren't we?*"

"Yes, relax," Jason rolled his eyes. "God, I can't wait to get out of here."

Iris sighed loudly, and Shane shot her a sympathetic look that also tried hard to convey, *don't even bother getting into it with him, it's not worth it*.

Apparently the message was not received.

“Neither can the rest of us,” Iris assured him flatly. “Trust fund, frat boy, useless motherfucker...” she said under her breath.

“It’s not my fault I’m here on rotation,” Jason said. “Trust me, I’ll be on the first ride out of here, right into plastics.”

“Of course you’re going into plastic surgery,” Iris said with a brittle laugh.

“Plastic surgery can repair injuries and attacks, and help give people their lives and confidence back,” said Jason snottily.

Iris looked at him for a long moment. “But that’s not why you’re doing it, is it?”

Jason grinned, his mottled brown hair flopping over his eyes. “No, it’s not. Normal hours. Crazy money. The dream.”

“Fucker,” Iris muttered, looking back at the chart in front of her.

“I just hope I can opt out of giving men breasts and fucking building cocks for girls,” Jason laughed.

Shane stared determinedly at his keyboard, trying to focus on entering one one letter at a time.

“Excuse me?” Iris said, outraged.

“Look they can – whatever, they can do whatever the fuck they want,” Jason shrugged. “But I’m allowed to think it’s fucked, right? Though at least I’d get some heads up there, not like getting some fag getting their AIDS blood all over me here –”

Iris was now swelling like a puffer fish, spluttering in disbelief. She whipped her head around, searching.

“Dr. Reynolds,” she said, after a moment. Dr. Reynolds, a middle-aged man with startlingly white teeth, ambled over. “Doctor – Jason here has been speaking very discouragingly about the LGBT community –” she made a nearly-imperceptible glance towards Shane, who felt his cheeks redden and kept his eyes averted.

“Ah, Doctor,” Dr. Reynolds glanced at her name badge, “Dr. Fernandez. Is this really –?”

“She must have misheard me,” Jason chimed in, flashing him a smile, “I would completely understand why she was so upset, of course, but I didn’t say that.”

“This is – beyond inappropriate, it’s *dangerous* to have someone –”

“Right,” Dr. Reynolds said loudly over Iris’s protests. “Let’s just get back to work, please?” He sent a gracious smile back to Jason, who beamed.

Several hours later, standing at his kitchen sink, Shane was scrubbing at his skin so hard it turned red all over.

He remembered in the back of his mind that the Centaurs-Montreal game had been that evening, but it would be long over by now. There would be plenty of press, if he wanted to see Ilya. He often watched his post-game interviews, Ilya standing steady and gleaming with sweat... then he'd see the microphones bunched around his face, journalists edging ever closer.

His hands flexed at his sides. Shane picked up his phone.

"Malik," he said. "Do you want to come over?"

Shane had been in his residency for seven months, and he was now forced to battle the bitter cold of Montreal every morning. The wind was particularly angry at four a.m., he found. This particular morning was not helped by the extra helping of snow they had been served overnight.

As he changed into his scrubs, peeling off his wet socks and grabbing his dry ones from his bag, his mind wandered to the Centaurs game that was meant to happen in Montreal that afternoon and thought idly about if it would still go ahead.

"Hollander —" a rushed voice, a nurse that had recently transferred in from another hospital, "we have another intubation incoming."

Shane leapt to his feet. Recently, he had somehow slipped into becoming the 'intubation guy' — he wasn't sure exactly how he felt about it.

"This is the fourth time in the last 24-hours that someone has had to be intubated right off the truck," Shane said afterwards, staring at the chart.

"Yeah, all over the age of 70," said Jean, a third-year resident, scratching his nose, "it happens."

Shane didn't respond at first. He scrolled through, studying the charts intently.

"The pathway to care is fucked," he said. "Ambulances don't have what they need and then patients end up way worse off with a tube down their —"

"Dr. Hollander," the voice behind him said.

He whipped around. Jean, taking one look at Dr. Zhang, who was looking particularly beady-eyed this morning, fled without another word.

"Sorry, Dr. Zhang," Shane blurted out.

"No sorry necessary," she said, sounding amused. "You're not wrong," she continued, coming to lean on the desk so she could peer at the screen as well. "You have a background as a paramedic, right?"

"That's right."

“Hm,” she said, her eyes flicking over him. “Come by at the end of your shift today.”

That night, Shane lounged shirtless next to Malik, trying with great enthusiasm to convey what Dr. Zhang had told him.

“She was telling me about this new collaborative research unit between McGill, University of Toronto and the University of Ottawa looking into strengthening care pathways between EMS and the ED,” Shane said excitedly. “She said,” – it thrilled him to say – “that she’s *noticed* me, and my work, and that I, like, see things that maybe other people don’t spot, since I was a paramedic – like she wants to put my name forward –”

Malik let out a loud groan, with one hand over his face. “Shane, please.”

“Please, what?” Shane asked, confused.

Malik had pulled on his boxers but was otherwise still naked. “I haven’t even showered yet and you’ve already started on this boring shit –”

“Well, sorry for thinking you might be interested,” said Shane indignantly.

Malik looked at him warily. “Look, we agreed, didn’t we? This is casual. Just sex, right?”

“Yes,” said Shane, rolling his eyes. “Obviously. But I thought as a *doctor* you might care –”

“Shane,” Malik interrupted tiredly, “I was already a doctor today for a 12-hour shift. I don’t really need to be thinking about it now, when my dick was inside you less than ten minutes ago. Like, fuck, you should get some personality other than this.”

Malik got up to shower. He didn’t stay much longer and Shane was glad to see him go. The sex was passably good, but on the rare occasion Malik had lingered for more than an hour, Shane had ‘come down with a headache’ and proceeded to ask him pointedly to turn the lights off when he left.

Shane wandered over to the tv, flipping it on. He wasn’t sure why he went through the pretense of flicking through the channels mindlessly when he knew exactly what he was looking for. The game was over, but he knew he could catch some highlight reels.

Ilya had scored a hat trick. Shane was proud of him. He wondered if Ilya was aware he was playing in Shane’s city, or if he had mostly faded from his memory.

He scrolled twitter half-aware of what he was doing. In the midst of gifs and meme reactions he didn’t recognize, Shane saw several excited tweets, some in French, saying that the rumor was the Centaurs were snowed in. Shane sat up, glancing at the thick sheets of snow falling outside his window.

His fingers twitched.

I hear you’re stuck in Montreal.

He hit send. Shit, should he have done that?

He followed it up with a second text. *Sorry, don't mean to bother you.*

Shane cringed at the back-to-back messages on his phone. He put his phone down, ready to march himself back into the shower to hopefully drown himself before Ilya saw them. Then his phone buzzed.

It would not be so bad if people here were not so angry at me. It is not my fault your team is terrible.

Shane smiled widely, typing out a response immediately. *They're not my team. I'm a proud Ottawan, remember?*

So you are saying you are a fan?

Shane laughed, alone in his apartment. Ilya texted again.

Roads were too bad for the bus but most things are still open. Went to my favorite Russian restaurant, Katya's. Only place with decent pelmeni.

Ilya sent a picture. It was ostensibly of the restaurant, but Shane's eyes zoomed to Ilya's hand stretched casually against the table. It was the most he'd seen of him, outside of interviews, in months.

He seemed to be there alone. Shane wondered, anxiously, if Ilya was trying to say what he thought he was trying to say. But to his blessed relief, Ilya didn't make him guess.

Would you like to come join me?

Shane stared at the message for a very long moment.

I'll be there in 15 minutes.

Shane frantically rifled through his clothes, and he pulled his down, puffy winter jacket over the three layers beneath it. It wasn't sexy, Shane reasoned, but at least it was warm.

When Shane shuffled into the restaurant, trying to kick snow off his shoes, he found it was slightly rundown but smelled warm and rich. Ilya was seated at the table in the back, positioned far away from the drafty door. He looked up at Shane, his smile wide and open.

"Hi," said Shane nervously, rubbing his hands together. As he was still wearing gloves, this made him look and feel incredibly stupid. "How are you?"

"Better now," said Ilya. He looked nervous for a second, then flashed his smile again, "with Russian food, you understand?"

"And it's – it's okay that I'm here? You know..."

Ilya shrugged. "It is two friends eating dinner."

Shane sat down, trying to remember how normal people sit.

“Besides,” Ilya continued, “there is no one else here.”

Shane glanced around at the empty restaurant, trying to relax without making it visibly obvious that this required considerable effort.

“So,” Ilya said, gesturing to Shane, “how is Mr. Genius?”

“That’s Dr. Genius, to you.”

Ilya’s laugh was brighter than he remembered. Which was interesting, considering how much Shane thought about it, playing it in his head whenever he was feeling particularly low.

They traded stilted conversation for a couple minutes, until Ilya asked, “things are good at the hospital, yes? You are liking it?”

“I mean, it’s insane,” Shane said, but he couldn’t hide his grin.

“Ah, so you love it,” Ilya chuckled. “I can see it on your face. You are not subtle.”

Ilya had ordered a platter of pelmeni, which arrived, steaming and beside a saucer of sour cream. The waitress, an elderly-looking Russian woman, pinched his cheek before she walked away.

“These don’t seem very healthy,” Shane said, trying not to look at the red mark on Ilya’s cheek.

“Sometimes we must eat things that make life worth living, yes?” he said, shrugging. “But I cannot judge too much, I did wonder how you got a body like yours.”

Shane shrugged. “Exercise is good stress relief. And I’ve learned a bit too much about cholesterol for my liking.” He bit one corner off to let the steam escape, blowing on it lightly. Ilya’s eyes were fixed on his face, but when they made eye contact, Ilya averted his eyes.

He popped it into his mouth, and immediately regretted it as it exploded into a pocket of scalding steam. Shane had to chew frantically with his mouth open. Ilya snorted with great amusement and stabbed one with a fork.

“So,” Ilya continued, “tell me more.”

Shane swallowed, trying to ignore the blistering feeling in his throat. “Well... I was right about it being insane. Every morning I think maybe things will feel manageable and then they never do. Yesterday, we had three cardiac arrests, a skull fracture, three exposed bones, a few intubations and something that looked like the bubonic plague,” Shane said.

Ilya made a comical grimace but nodded at him to continue.

“But... I love it,” he admitted. “I mean, it’s scary, and stressful and sometimes it’s so sad I wonder if I’ll make it in the next day. But then you see one intubation lead to that person waking up and telling their wife they love them. Or a kid that gets their broken hand set so well, *so* carefully that everyone is confident their dreams of playing piano aren’t over yet.”

Ilya was watching him carefully, a pleased look in his eye. “I am happy for you. It sounds... right. For you.”

“It is,” Shane said.

“And how do you stay sane?” asked Ilya.

Shane snorted. “Who says I do?”

Ilya pushed a dumpling around his plate, flicking his gaze up to Shane every few seconds. “Nothing to let off the stress? Nothing to... distract you?”

“Oh, uh,” said Shane slowly, trying to keep his voice level. “Nothing important...” he glanced at Ilya, hoping that was the right thing to say, but Ilya’s face was unreadable. “I... I don’t know.” He scratched behind his ear. “I like birds?”

“Birds?” Ilya repeated, raising his eyebrows.

“Yeah, when I started last summer, I was going in so early that I could hear the morning calls. It was nice. Peaceful, I guess,” he said, “it’s winter now, so obviously it’s not the same. But I watch videos sometimes, or listen to recordings...”

Ilya tilted his head in curiosity. “The birds are keeping you sane?”

“I guess,” Shane laughed. “And I’ll need it, I think. I might get to do research, as well.”

“What do you mean?”

Shane hesitated for a moment – maybe Malik, who was always calling him a drag, sometimes theatrically snoring over Shane at the staff lunch, was right and this is just a symptom of his one-dimensional personality – but Ilya was looking at him so openly, he shrugged and started to explain.

“So you would be a researcher, then?” Ilya asked, looking confused. “What about being a doctor?”

“I would do both,” Shane explained.

Ilya stared at him for a moment, and then he let out a loud, boisterous laugh, shaking his head. “Dr. Genius – one job is never enough for you, yes?”

Shane huffed, but he was pleased. “It’s not like that – it’s a great opportunity –”

“You stop being a paramedic for ten seconds and you think, hm,” Ilya stroked his chin in mock-pensiveness, “how will everyone know how much better than them I am if I don’t have two life-saving jobs at the same time –”

“Shut up,” Shane said, aiming a well-placed but light kick to Ilya’s shin, “it’s not like that. Plus I still volunteer as a paramedic every so often. I’m part of the paramedics union, it’s good to stay connected, and they need all the help they can get.”

“Really, now you have to stop,” Ilya chuckled, returning to his food, “you can’t be this much of a show-off, it’ll make everyone else feel bad.”

“No one else cares,” Shane laughed.

Ilya looked back at him, sobering slightly. “I care,” he said. Then, a little more lightly, “and you are making me feel inadequate.”

“Okay, now *you* shut up,” said Shane, rolling his eyes. “Back-to-back Stanley Cups and you’re still feeling inadequate?”

“Well, yes,” Ilya said, a playful glint in his eyes, “inadequate is... not usually how I’m described,” he looked at Shane suggestively, “you’re just something special, I think.”

Shane’s cheek flushed red, and he dropped his gaze to his plate.

“And you...?” Shane asked, nervous. “Anything keeping you sane?”

“Mostly just Anya,” said Ilya, shrugging. He paused for a long moment, watching Shane’s face. “My dog. She’s my angel.”

Shane’s mood had soured and then rebounded so abruptly he felt a bit of whiplash. “I wish I could meet her,” said Shane.

“Me too,” said Ilya.

They finished their pelmeni far too quickly, and Shane couldn’t think of a reason to keep him there. They bundled their coats back on and shuffled out the door for their respective Ubers. As Shane pulled the door open, he had the wild thought of inviting Ilya back to his apartment. But before he could let the impulse take over, a young man, probably college-aged, walked by. He stopped in his tracks, nearly falling on a patch of ice in his excitement.

“No fucking way, you’re Ilya Rozanov,” he exclaimed. His arms were still moving like windmills, trying to keep him upright.

On instinct, Shane turned, moving his face from view and taking a step back. Ilya stiffened beside him. After a quick selfie, the man was on his way, but Shane and Ilya still stood awkwardly apart.

Shane’s Uber pulled up. Ilya opened the car door for him and, at the last moment, Ilya leaned in and said gently, “it was nice to see you.”

“Yeah,” Shane said, nodding seriously. “Me too... get home safe.”

Their thumbs brushed together when Shane went to close the door. Shane had to stop himself from jolting at the touch, from pushing the door back open and pulling Ilya in with him.

It had started out small. Ilya texted him the day after they met at the Russian restaurant, just to say:

Roads were shit but made it home alive.

Shane had stared at the message for five full minutes, like it was a miracle on par with the second coming.

I'm glad. He texted back.

Shane promptly took a screenshot and sent it to Iris. He went to put his phone down but it buzzed in his hand before he could.

"That can't be all you say," she said by way of greeting.

"Why not?" asked Shane.

"Shane," she sighed, "don't you want to get laid?"

"I – Iris – the fuck –" Shane sputtered, "I'm getting laid." He picked at his fingernails, trying not to sound too pathetic.

"Don't make me talk about Malik," she said darkly.

"He's not that –"

"Don't even start," she said. He could practically hear her rolling her eyes. "*You* don't even like him. You only like that he's as far into the closet as you."

"Well," said Shane, "it doesn't matter. And I'm not trying to sleep with Ilya –"

"Idiot," she muttered.

"– I just want to be friends."

He heard Iris sigh dramatically. "Fine. Then at least give him something to work with. How is he supposed to respond to that?"

"Fine," Shane huffed. He opened the text thread with Ilya.

Was Anya happy to see you?

Shane read the message out loud. Iris said wearily, "at least it's a question," and hung up.

But Shane was treated to a video of Anya in little snow booties, dragging a dog walker across a salted, slushy parking lot in her relentless pursuit of reuniting with Ilya.

They chatted over text most days. There were often hours – sometimes even days – in between messages, when Ilya was in the middle of a road trip or Shane was stuck on back-to-back shifts. But then, before it could get too quiet, there would be a message, or a photo or – once – a very loud, mostly unintelligible drunk voice note from Ilya.

There were no common themes or threads of their conversations, and yet Shane felt he was discovering something new about Ilya every day. He loved to read, like actual literature (and not, as Shane would have wrongly assumed, thrillers with the odd dirty magazine thrown in). He was the favored babysitter among his teammates, and thought nothing of donning a princess tiara and glitter eyeshadow. He was a terrible cook, but he had great fun pretending to be top-quality chef, sending Shane elaborate descriptions of his dinner that would end up being boxed mac-and-cheese or cereal.

Shane's favorite, though, was a photo Ilya had sent at the start of May, when the Centaurs were still in their playoff run. It was of a tree, backlit by the early morning sun, dotted with warblers.

This reminded me of you.

Shane had developed a habit of pulling up that message most nights before bed.

The Centaurs made it to the final stretch of the playoffs – Ilya had been quieter than usual – but ultimately lost to Colorado. Shane had texted Ilya a sympathetic message, and got in return,

Is okay. My body is being held together with tape and tears at this point.

Shane resisted the urge to call him – he wanted to tell him off, a little, and also convince him to see his physical therapist more frequently in the off season – but they had never called each other before.

In the waning days of June, Shane was subjected once again to the urgent and increasingly desperate pleas of his mother.

“Come to the cottage, Shane,” Yuna said on the phone. “You are allowed to take vacations, aren’t you?”

“Barely,” Shane said tiredly. “You know how intense this year is, mom.”

“Two weeks,” she said. When he huffed, she revised herself, “one week?”

“Okay,” said Shane. He had already gotten the time off, but felt that it was better he made her work for it, so she didn’t get too used to it. “One week in July.”

“Try not to sound too excited.”

Shane *was* excited, really. But he thought, as he pulled into the grocery store a couple weeks later, about the fact that he was nearing thirty years old and still, his most adventurous vacation – and the largest chunk of time he was spending with anyone outside of the hospital – was with his parents. It left him with a strange ache in his chest that he tried to ignore.

He shopped as he always did, with a list in hand and with military-like precision. But Shane was halfway down the cereal aisle – his dad had requested the mega-box of cornflakes – when he stopped in his tracks at the site of curly, golden hair.

“Ilya?” It came out dazed.

He turned. Ilya’s skin was a lovely golden color, tanned since he last saw him in February. He was wearing a black tank top that exposed his broad, muscular shoulders, and accentuated the golden cross lying against his chest.

“Shane,” Ilya exclaimed, a broad smile on his face. He moved towards Shane, holding a basket that currently held a carton of eggs, two pounds of ground beef and a box of cocoa pops.

“Is that all you’re getting?” Shane asked, distracted.

Ilya laughed. “Is more than enough, I think.”

“Don’t you need some produce?”

“Produce?”

“Like,” Shane waved his hands around, “fruit and vegetables.”

“I prefer this.”

“Ilya,” said Shane, frustrated. “You need it.”

“I am still alive.”

“For now,” said Shane, “but you won’t have hockey forever, so you should be teaching yourself to eat right.”

“This is protein,” Ilya’s eyes were glinting with laughter. “All that a growing boy needs.”

“This is ridiculous, you need proper nutrition. Get some fruit at least.”

“I don’t like fruit.”

“What about bananas?”

“What?”

“You had bananas,” Shane said, going horribly red. He didn’t want Ilya to know how much he thought about that day. “In your house. That day I... came over.”

For some reason, a faint blush rose on Ilya’s face as well.

“That was...” he said delicately, “special circumstances.”

They wandered towards the exit together, Shane awkwardly a half-pace ahead of Ilya, who kept stopping to pick up random items and throw them in his basket. It mystified Shane, who hardly ever went off-list.

They checked out in the same lane, and Ilya's hand brushed over his when he was reaching for the divider. Goosebumps raised on Shane's arm.

In the parking lot, Shane asked, "so what are you up to for the summer?"

"Not much," Ilya shrugged.

"Bored without all the Stanley Cup celebrations to keep you busy?" Shane teased lightly.

"Something like that," Ilya laughed. "Most of the guys travel or are busy with their families. I just hang out with Anya."

Ilya helped Shane load his groceries into his trunk. As Ilya heaved the last bag inside, Shane blurted out, "you should come to my family's cottage."

Ilya raised his eyebrows. His mouth opened but he didn't speak.

"Just as friends," Shane hurried to say. "Like... my parents will be there."

"You want me to hang out with your parents?" asked Ilya, sounding baffled.

"I mean," his face burned, "I'll be there too, for the next week... I just thought, I don't know," Shane babbled, "obviously you don't have to. But it's nice there. The house is nothing crazy, we've had it forever. But it's right on the lake and you could bring your dog –"

"Shane," Ilya interrupted. Shane was relieved to see he was smiling. "I would love to."

Four hours later, Shane was unpacking his bags with shaking hands. He had just finished explaining, badly, to his parents that *yes*, actually, he knew Ilya Rozanov. *Yes*, they were friends. *No*, he wasn't imagining things.

When Ilya arrived later that evening, his parents peeked around Shane to get the first glimpse, but Ilya was not an easy man to miss. He bounded up the steps, tan and beautiful and with a wriggling dog in his arms. He presented his parents with a bottle of wine and a box of luxury chocolates, who thanked him profusely and waved him through the door.

"So you've known each other since you pulled your shoulder?" Yuna asked over dinner.

Ilya nodded and flexed his shoulder. "Yes – Shane should have gotten an honorary mention on our last cup win."

Shane snorted and shook his head.

They ended the night with tea and puzzles. Yuna showed off the delicate porcelain tea cups she brought back from Japan, which Ilya steadfastly refused to touch. They talked about their plans for the week – Ilya seemed particularly excited by the jet ski but promised, with some convincing, to let Shane take him out on the kayaks.

When Shane showed him to the guest room, Ilya hovered in the doorway, looking like he wanted to say something. He seemed to hesitate for a moment, then said,

“Why did you invite me?”

Shane looked back at him, startled. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I wanted you to come.”

Ilya nodded thoughtfully. “I got something for you. As a thank you.”

“Oh – you didn’t have to –”

“Shut up,” Ilya said brusquely, pulling a small box from his duffel bag. “Here.”

Shane opened it, curious. He looked blankly at what appeared to be an iPod shuffle which – he had thought – was outdated by a good fifteen years.

“Uh... thanks?”

“You said a few weeks ago,” said Ilya, shrugging, “that you wanted to be able to listen to your birds. But having your phone on you all the time was – you couldn’t relax with the notifications. This,” he pointed to the iPod, “has no distractions,” he said with a twitch of a smile, “only birds.”

“Oh,” Shane said, stunned. “That’s – thank you. Honestly. Thank you, Ilya.”

“It already has your birds downloaded on it,” Ilya continued. He handed him a second box, and this one Shane recognized as new, high-end headphones. “You needed new ones. Yours were shit.”

Shane blinked at the two boxes in his hands. “When did you have time to do this? You – you couldn’t have managed this today?”

Ilya smiled at him, soft and knowing.

“Goodnight, Shane.”

Shane gaped at him for a moment.

“Goodnight, Ilya.”

The week passed, bright and messy and too fast. Ilya made pancakes with Shane’s dad, and saved the special one with the chocolate chip smile for Shane. Shane got a good laugh when Ilya tripped backwards at the sight of the cluster of spiders hiding in his kayak, but then made a habit of checking it every time and cleaning out the webs before Ilya had the chance to. Ilya and his mom made a ruthless duo in charades, to the point that by the end of the week, Shane and his dad were loudly insisting on switching up the teams.

And there was one night – the night before Ilya left – when they laid out on the dock, shoulder to shoulder. Ilya traced the constellations with one hand in the air, naming them as he went.

“How do you know all this?” Shane asked.

“My... my mother. She loved the stars. They looked different from Russia, of course,” Ilya said quietly. “But they make me feel closer to her.”

“How did she die?”

Ilya stared at the sky. “She had depression. She was very sad, for a long time... until she just couldn’t take it anymore. I was twelve.”

Fuck. Shane reached one hand out and grasped Ilya’s hand tightly. “I’m sorry.”

“Me, too.” Ilya said.

“I can’t even imagine,” said Shane, his mind rapidly painting him a dark picture of Ilya’s childhood. And, in the recesses of his mind, of Ilya just a few years ago...

“Well,” Ilya said softly, “you are lucky.”

“I am,” Shane agreed. “Do you... want to talk about it?”

“Hm,” he hummed. “Not tonight, I think. But thank you.”

They laid in silence for a few more minutes, Shane acutely aware that he was still clutching Ilya’s hand. He wanted just another minute.

Ilya turned to him. “Do they know?” he asked, breaking the silence.

Shane looked at him inquisitively. “...know?”

“That,” Ilya waved one hand, “you know, that you... like men?”

Shane’s gaze snapped back upwards. “No.”

“Would they not be good about it?”

“I’m sure they would be,” Shane said. He could hear the vague threat of tears in his voice and was horrified. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me, I just...”

“It’s okay, Shane,” Ilya said soothingly.

“No, it’s not – I mean, I’ve known this about myself for a while, now... I’ve had a few –” Shane blushed, “flings, or whatever. Nothing serious, but like...”

“Serious enough to know you like cock?” Ilya offered reasonably.

“Shut up,” Shane groaned. “It’s been since college... and for a while, I would tell myself, this time, when you get home, you’re going to tell them. And then I would get there, and they would ask about my exams, or the MCAT or med school admissions and they would be excited, or proud, or... whatever. And I just didn’t want to break the moment.”

“You think it would do that? Break the moment with them?”

“I don’t know,” Shane said miserably. “I think... when I was a kid, my dad wanted to teach me to play hockey, actually. He played in college. But then, before he could, his brother got sick. Like, really sick – for years. I think I spent more time in the hospital than home. My dad definitely did. And by the time he died, it was like... I don’t know, the moment passed? I didn’t want to try hockey anymore.”

“So – medicine, then?”

“Yeah,” Shane laughed. “But I always wondered... was he disappointed? Did he want a real man for a son, and he got some kid with his nose in science books who had a meltdown when the ice rink was too loud and cold?”

“Your dad...” Ilya said slowly, “does not seem like that.”

“That’s the thing, he’s not,” said Shane, frustrated. “But I...” he trailed off, looking away from Ilya.

“And no one else knows?”

“One of my friends, mostly because she figured it out herself,” Shane said. “But that’s it... I know, it’s stupid.”

“Is not stupid,” said Ilya firmly. “You should come out when you want to. When you’re ready. Everyone should get that chance.”

Shane glanced over at him. “I’m sorry you didn’t get to.”

Ilya shrugged. “Is okay... Well, it wasn’t, then. It nearly – well, you know –”

“Yes,” Shane said softly, squeezing his hand again. “I know.”

“But now,” said Ilya, “I landed somewhere... safe. The team, my friends in Ottawa – they are special. I am lucky.”

“I’m glad you have that.”

They were quiet for a few minutes.

“And,” Shane asked slowly, as if the conversation hadn’t ended, “you’re – you’re bi, right?”

“Yes.”

“But you don’t usually date men?”

“Ah, well,” Ilya said carefully, “is complicated. I would, but...”

“What?”

Ilya looked at him. “You saw it. It would be messy, right away. Painful. Is hard to ask anyone to put themselves through that.”

Shane didn't respond.

"I can't hide it," Ilya said gently. "If I tried, it would blow up horribly. The world already knows about me. Always, they are looking. So it is easier to not have anything for them to look at."

"I get it," Shane said. The sky looked strangely blurry.

"It would have to be... *something*, yes? To be worth it," Ilya concluded. "For... for everyone."

The first year of residency was closed and in the books, and Shane was grateful for the autumn weather, which, now in October, was blessedly cool.

"Dr. Hollander," said Dr. Zhang, "congratulations on the new publication."

"Thank you."

"Interesting findings – are you hoping it might change the guidelines on field intubation?"

"Maybe," Shane said, "but that's above my pay grade."

"Maybe for now," she gave him a rare, approving smile.

The image of it carried him through the rest of the day on his aching feet. When he got home, Shane rifled through his fridge and landed on a cold, sad broccoli salad. He chewed it unenthusiastically. His phone buzzed.

Doc please help me.

Shane rolled his eyes.

What is it now? He responded.

Staff doctor says I am too handsome to play the next game.

Their week at the cottage was only a few months prior, but it felt somehow like ten minutes and ten years ago.

Fuck off. What's going on?

Is true. I am too distracting to everyone on the ice. Hair too golden, teeth too pearly white.

Shane laughed. *Most of your teeth are fake.*

That's what makes them so white.

Shaking his head, Shane hit the call button. Before Ilya could even say 'hello', Shane said, "what is going on, for real?"

“Ah, it’s nothing,” said Ilya. “I tweaked my knee and Wiebe is having me sit out the next couple games, just to be safe.”

“Oh,” Shane said, trying to tamp down the well of disappointment rising in him.

Ilya was meant to be playing a game in Montreal that Saturday, and they had planned to meet for dinner on Friday night. Shane was going to ask Ilya if he might possibly want to have dinner at Shane’s place instead of Katya’s.

“But,” Ilya said slowly, as if he could sense Shane’s disappointment, “that doesn’t mean I can’t travel up. Support the team, you know?”

“Really?” Shane was embarrassed at how eager he sounded.

“Really.”

“Would you – why don’t –” Shane took a breath. “Come to my place,” he said, trying to sound nonchalant, “I’ll order from Katya’s.”

A long pause. “Yes, okay, sounds nice.”

The beginning of their night had gone perfectly according to plan. Ilya had been delighted at the extra box of cabbage rolls that Shane had sprung for, and had gladly accepted two glasses of red wine with his dinner. Shane had sipped his own glass steadily.

By the time they had settled on the couch to watch a movie, Shane’s cheeks were warm and he felt himself relax against Ilya’s side.

“Why are there giant rats?”

“They’re rodents of unusual size.”

“Yes, I heard that. Where did they come from?”

“It’s not important,” Shane said. “Watch the movie.”

By the last twenty minutes of the movie, Shane and Ilya were side-by-side. Shane shifted one of his legs so it was pressed up against Ilya’s, and was gratified when he didn’t move away.

“Hard to imagine storming a castle still paralyzed,” Ilya mused beside him. “Especially as he’d been dead like twenty minutes earlier.”

“It’s not meant to be realistic,” Shane protested.

“What’s it meant to be, then?”

“It’s – it’s love,” Shane said. “He never stopped loving her – and that’s enough.”

A long pause.

“Right,” Ilya said. One of Ilya’s hands drifted to Shane’s knee unconsciously.

Shane turned his head, buzzing with nerves. He nuzzled against Ilya's shoulder lightly.

"Shane," Ilya murmured.

Shane didn't respond. He gingerly pressed his lips against Ilya's shoulder.

"*Shane*," this time it came out more like a prayer.

Shane pulled his head back to look at him. Ilya's eyes were hesitant, wide and searching. Shane didn't let him speak – he leaned forward and their lips met.

It was everything Shane had remembered – and more. The electric feeling under his skin – never quite extinguished when he was around Ilya – roared back to life. Their lips slid against each other – Ilya's soft and stunned, Shane's urgent and desperate.

Ilya groaned against Shane's lips. Shane took advantage of the movement to slip his tongue into Ilya's mouth, who sighed around him. His lips were still hesitant, but as Shane's tongue stroked into his mouth, Ilya surged forward. Shane panted against his lips, accepting him greedily, moaning at the contact.

Shane grasped both sides of Ilya's face, holding him tight against him, then stroking the back of his head. He clutched Ilya's curls between his fingers and had the unbidden thought, *Fuck, I've missed this. How could I have missed something so much that I barely even had.*

They kissed deeply and frantically, Shane nearly in Ilya's lap. Eventually, Shane maneuvered himself so he was lying back onto the couch, dragging Ilya over him.

One of Ilya's hands stayed planted next to Shane's head, propping him up, but the other wandered. His fingers traced delicately across his ear and down his neck. He wandered across Shane's collarbone and grasped once at his chest. Shane gasped, throwing his head back.

But, in a shock akin to a bucket of cold water, Ilya wrenched himself back.

"Fuck," he gasped, his eyes wild. "Sorry – I'm sorry, Shane, I shouldn't have –"

"What –?" Shane stumbled on his words, disoriented. "You didn't – I started it. I wanted –"

"I know," Ilya said, pulling himself back into the corner of the couch, putting physical distance in between them as his hands flexed. The words came out a bit harsh, and he took a deep breath. He looked at Shane, overwrought. "I want it too. That's why we can't."

"I know what you're going to say," Shane said. He rushed to say the words, the words he had planned, convinced it would put everything right. "But look – I've been thinking."

"Thinking?" Ilya asked, his eyebrows raised. He also, Shane thought, had a tinge of hope on his face. "What were you thinking?"

"You say it's too complicated – but look, you come up to Montreal for games, right?"

"Yes," Ilya said hesitantly.

“And my parents are in Ottawa. I have all the reason in the world to be there.”

“Okay, so...?”

“So no one would find out,” Shane said eagerly. Or he was eager, until he saw Ilya’s face fall. “I know, you said they’re always looking, so it’s impossible – but really...” Shane hesitated when Ilya looked away, “really, I think we’d manage it. We could do it, Ilya.”

Ilya was shaking his head. He dropped his head into his hands.

“Shane,” he said sadly.

“What, Ilya?” Shane pressed, frustrated now. “You don’t –” he took a deep breath, “you don’t even want to *try*?”

Ilya looked at him sharply. “Don’t say it like that.”

“Like what? It’s true, isn’t it?”

“No,” Ilya said firmly. “It’s not. Of course I wish – it’s never been about not wanting you, Shane.”

“Then what *is* it about?”

“Keeping secrets nearly killed me,” Ilya burst out. “Do you get that?”

Shane recoiled, his hands – which had been reaching for Ilya – retracting to his sides.

“I lost nearly everything, five years ago, you know this,” Ilya said miserably. “I had been lying, and hiding and I was afraid all the time. But I thought I knew better, that I could get away with it.

“When I was caught... everyone turned on me. My brother called me the next day to tell me that I was vile, and to never contact them again. My father never spoke to me again, and he is dead now,” there were tears building in his eyes now, “the Raiders were going to cancel my contract, send me back to Russia, and god knows what would have happened to me there...”

“Ilya...” Shane whispered.

“And the worst –” Ilya took a shaky breath, “Mikhail – we barely knew each other, but – we liked each other. Or, understood each other, at least. It was nice to be around someone from home, and we had the same secret... He was talented. Smart. He could have made it. And he –” Ilya heaved, “I don’t even know what happened to him. I tried to find out, but... nothing. He might be dead by now.”

“That wasn’t your fault –”

“It was,” Ilya said harshly. “I should have known better. And knowing that, what I’d done to him... it was too much, Shane...”

Ilya bowed his head and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes.

“Ilya, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” Shane said, inching closer, one hand coming up to rest on the back of Ilya’s head.

“I’m so fucking lucky I didn’t end up the same way. A last minute offer from the Centaurs, even considering the state I was in... a fucking miracle. My last hope to avoid being sent home.”

Shane stroked the back of his head.

“Don’t you see,” Ilya said desperately, looking up at Shane. “I can’t do it again.”

“I – it’s not the same, Ilya, I’m not him.”

“I know that, but still – the risk –”

“I know the risk,” Shane said, trying to keep his voice steady. “I can handle it.”

“Shane,” Ilya said, voice soft now, “you’re not even out to your own parents. Are you honestly trying to tell me you would be okay with your face on a tabloid?”

Shane blanched. Ilya nodded as if to say, *see, I knew it*.

“And it’s not just that,” Ilya said. “I have come such a long way... hours and hours in therapy. Years trying to make a home in Ottawa. And – I’ve succeeded, mostly. I have friends, people I love, that know all of me and love me anyways.”

“And being with me would spoil that?” Shane said. He sounded petulant but he didn’t care.

“Hiding would,” Ilya said, refusing to take the bait. “I can’t go back to hiding and sneaking around. I’ve worked too hard to – to exist. As I am.”

Shane, finally, understood, but the understanding didn’t make him feel any better.

“Aren’t you lonely?” he asked pathetically. He wasn’t sure if he was asking Ilya or himself.

“Yes,” Ilya said simply. “In some ways. But not as much as I once was.”

Shane nodded tightly, his eyes burning. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ilya lift one hand towards him but then, before he touched Shane, retreated backwards.

“I should go,” Ilya said gently.

They both stood, and Shane walked him to the door. Ilya reached one hand to the doorknob.

“Wait –”

Ilya looked back.

“I just – can we – we’re still friends, right?” Shane asked desperately.

A gentle, sad smile. “Yes, Shane. Still friends.”

Shane’s leg jiggled anxiously. The man sitting across from him eyed him thoughtfully.

“Sorry,” Shane said on impulse.

“What are you sorry about?”

“Oh – just – like, I know I’m nervous.”

“That’s okay,” Dr Grant said pleasantly, “most people are the first session.”

“Right,” Shane gave a dry laugh. “Okay.

“Why don’t you tell me why you’re here?”

Three weeks ago, Shane had been gently rejected – he didn’t like thinking of it this way, but didn’t have a better label for it – by Ilya.

He’d ruminated on it for hours. He had been angry at Ilya, briefly, then sad, then confused. Ultimately, he settled on being angry at himself.

Because Ilya was right. Being with him ran the risk of his face and name being plastered across blogs and discussed on hockey podcasts. He might risk his reputation that he was so carefully trying to build in the academic world. He was scared of any black mark against him as he went for jobs that were intensely competitive.

Afraid, always relentlessly, mind-numbingly afraid. Ilya couldn’t be asked to manage Shane’s fears – or take the risk of managing the fall out of them coming true.

Ilya deserved better, Shane was certain of that.

“I... I’ve been struggling to be comfortable with who I am,” Shane decided to say finally.

“That’s a good place to start,” Dr. Grant said encouragingly.

Shane didn’t manage to get much further than that, but later, when his mom asked, “how did it go, honey?” he said, “fine. Good.”

He had told his mom he was going to start therapy. He wasn’t ready to tell her about being gay, but he thought he could at least manage this, at least.

“I think it’s great that you’re going,” she said for the umpteenth time, “I can’t imagine how stressful residency is. You need a place to process everything.”

“Yeah,” Shane said noncommittally, staring at Ilya’s photo of birds in the tree.

Shane and Ilya's text thread had been quieter for the couple weeks or so after what Shane was now calling 'the incident' in his head, but it gradually picked up speed after that. They both carefully steered clear of any topics that could veer into dangerous territory, and Shane tread extra carefully, terrified of scaring Ilya off completely.

Are you working over Christmas? From Ilya.

No, I'm actually making it home this time, Shane responded, *my mom threatened to kill me and/or my boss if I missed another holiday.*

It was snowing on Christmas, something Shane had always loved. It was crisp and quiet, except for the distant sounds of his dad puttering around the kitchen to make Christmas breakfast.

Merry Christmas, Shane texted Ilya, lying in bed, chewing his thumbnail.

Merry Christmas, Shane.

Are you doing anything fun?

Christmas is different in Russia. It's in January, and also New Years is bigger there.

Oh right. Are you doing anything for New Years?

My friend Svetlana is coming to visit, we will go out.

Ilya had mentioned Svetlana before. Shane had looked her up on instagram and walked around with a pit in his stomach for two days. But Ilya never made any mention of them being romantic.

Why don't you join us?

Shane blinked.

I don't want to intrude with you and Svetlana.

There is no intruding, most of the team is coming as well, and many of their friends. Will be a very big group.

Shane tapped his fingernail on the screen nervously.

Sounds great.

On New Year's Eve, Shane took an hour and a half to pick out what to wear.

"I wouldn't stress this much, babe," came Iris's voice over FaceTime. "No – not that one, put that back."

"I thought you said not to stress," Shane said irritably, putting back a purple top his mom had bought for his birthday two years ago.

“Yeah, well,” she said, “that was before I saw that shirt. Where is the black one?”

“Isn’t that boring?” Shane asked, flicking through the hangers.

“It’s classic.”

“That’s another word for boring,” he said grouchily. He pulled it out anyway.

“Why are you talking like this?” Iris asked suspiciously.

“I don’t know,” he exhaled. “Malik always thought –”

“I don’t give two fucks what Malik thought, the bastard.”

“Iris!”

“What? He is.”

“He’s also our co-worker, we have to deal with him.”

“All I know is he sucks at charting and he gave bad dick.”

“It wasn’t *bad*,” Shane said, his face going red, “it just wasn’t –”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. I’m just glad you’re done with him. Let’s focus, shall we?”

Shane walked away from the camera to pull on the black button-down shirt before striding back into view.

“Yes,” she said, nodding in a self-satisfied sort of way. “It’s a favorite for a reason. You look great.”

“Fine.”

“Buck up, champ,” she said bracingly. “It might even be fun!”

Shane had arrived at the club thirty minutes early. Not able to stand the humiliation of shuffling around alone in a corner somewhere, Shane took refuge in a bar a block away where he sat nursing a single beer. Once enough time went by that he was a solid ten minutes late – *that’s cool, right?* – he trudged back to the club.

Ilya was already there, but he was alone.

“Ilya,” Shane said breathlessly, surprised to see him sitting on his own. “Hi.”

“Shane,” Ilya gave him a warm smile. “You’re late.”

“Oh,” Shane said, taken aback. “I – did you –?”

“It’s fine,” Ilya laughed. “I was just surprised. You’re not the type to be late.”

“Oh,” Shane let out a nervous laugh. He didn’t know what he could say without embarrassing himself further. “Where is everyone?”

“They’re not here yet,” Ilya shrugged. “All incompetent children, so they will probably be a while. Svetlana insisted on babysitting them. She’ll get them here.”

“Right... so you...?”

“I thought you would be here ten minutes early,” – Shane’s face burned again – “so I left to make it here on time.”

“Oh, well... thanks.”

“Sit,” Ilya motioned to the seat next to him. “What would you like?”

“Uh – I’ll have...” The truth was that after his beer, Shane wanted to swap in a ginger ale.

“One ginger ale, coming up,” Ilya said, smiling. Shane grinned back and nodded.

When Ilya returned, it was with two very similar looking glasses in hand. Having learned their lesson, they sat opposite each other, a table safely between them. *Just two friends having a New Years drink together*, Shane thought drily, trying not to think too much of the last time they were in a club together.

“Did you get a ginger ale as well?” Shane asked, surprised.

“Ah, well – yes, but this one has whiskey in it,” Ilya said, shaking his glass to hear the ice clink.

Shane asked about Ilya’s holiday break – which didn’t last very long, he knew – and Ilya proudly told him about their ten-game winning streak.

“And the rookies, how have they settled in?”

With a glint of pride, Ilya said, “good, I think. Fischer was struggling a bit –”

“Yeah, you said he was having an issue with his backhand?”

Ilya nodded. “It was getting to him, made him less confident. It can be hard to join a high-performing team. But Bood and I spent a few off-hours with him and he’s really come around.”

“And Mel, the new physical therapist – how are you liking her?”

“Ah, now she is a demon,” Ilya said with an air of mischief, “she lives to cause us pain.”

Shane laughed loudly. “Sounds like she’s doing her job, then!”

“Yes,” Ilya admitted, “but she does not need to get so much pleasure from it. When she stretched out my knee she was fully cackling.”

“And your knee –?”

“All good,” Ilya said. “You, now – how is the progress for the clinician investigator program?”

“Brutal,” Shane said with a shrug. In truth, everything in medicine seemed to be brutal. “But I guess it's good. I've gotten a few papers out this year –”

“Yes, I saw.”

Shane blinked. “What do you mean, you saw?”

“I saw your papers,” Ilya said, as if it was obvious.

“Like, you read them?”

“No, I used them for paper mache,” Ilya said with an eye roll. “Yes, I read them.”

“And... you understood them?”

Ilya emitted a loud peal of laughter. “Yes, okay, you got me there. Not all of it, maybe, but some. You are investigating how to make ambulances more effective. Make it so they can save more lives or whatever.”

“Or whatever,” Shane agreed with a smile.

“But, seriously,” Ilya said, his smile fading a bit, “is amazing, yes?”

Shane couldn't help but feel proud. “I hope so. They're rewriting the guidelines on ambulatory resuscitation next year, we might be able to contribute to that, which – well,” Shane said, sounding a bit struck, “it would matter, I think.”

“Everything you do matters,” said Ilya firmly.

Shane looked down shyly. Taking a breath, Shane said, “I got you something, by the way.”

“What?” Ilya asked, sounding thrown.

“For New Years,” Shane said. “Well, I'd intended it for Christmas but I know now that this is your big gift-giving holiday, right?”

“Yes,” Ilya frowned. “But I don't have anything for you.”

“That's okay,” Shane shrugged. “That's not why I got you something.”

“Right, well... where is it?”

“I don't have it with me, sorry. I didn't want you to have to carry it around,” Shane explained. Maybe it was a bad idea to tell Ilya about a gift he didn't actually have to give him. “I can just send it to you, if you'd rather it be, like, a surprise.”

“No,” Ilya interrupted. “Tell me.”

Shane pulled out his phone to show Ilya photos. He’d actually had a different gift working away in the background, but it wasn’t ready – maybe it never would be. This would have to do for now.

“You told me how much you love gothic literature. Especially Frankenstein.” Shane said, trying not to sound nervous. “How... how your mom loved it too –”

“Yes...” Ilya said. “Though, sometimes I thought...”

“I know,” Shane rushed to say. “You thought that maybe it could have been a little too dark... well... I was thinking, and, like, I don’t know those kinds of books very well. To be honest, if it’s not in a medical textbook I probably haven’t read it,” Shane laughed, “but from what I know... from what you told me, they’re really beautiful, as well.”

“Yes?” Ilya was watching him intently.

“Yeah, like... it’s about finding humanity and love through the pain, right? About searching for the things that make us human?” Shane hoped he didn’t sound like a total idiot. “That’s what I thought, when I read it, at least.”

“You read it?” Ilya’s eyebrows went up.

“Yeah, I did. You made me want to read it, actually.”

Ilya looked touched, but his face smoothed out quickly.

“Ah,” Ilya nodded approvingly. “And you understood it, too. You are one-up on me.”

Shane let out a puff of laughter. “Anyway, I just wanted you to remember that, I guess. So I found,” Shane stuck his phone out towards Ilya, “a woman who will take books that are in the public domain and print, bind and illustrate them herself.”

Ilya took his phone, gaze fixed on the screen, swiping to look at each picture carefully.

“It’s in Russian – obviously, you can see that,” Shane rambled, “and she put in blank pages where she’s gone in and illustrated some of it – I asked her to focus on the – the good stuff,” he cringed inwardly at how stupid that sounded, “and I – yeah. I thought it would be nice.”

“Боже мой,” Ilya murmured. He looked at Shane, and his eyes were gleaming. “You made this for me?”

Shane, for once, knew well enough not to divert to the logical answer of ‘no, I just said, an illustrator made it’. Instead he said, “Yeah. For you.”

Ilya blinked rapidly.

“I’ll get it to you soon,” and Shane hoped this would give him another reason to see Ilya again.

“I love it,” Ilya sniffed. “Thank you.” He handed Shane his phone back and in the movement, they brushed their fingers together, lingering for a moment longer than strictly necessary.

“I’ve probably brought the mood down, a little,” said Shane, feeling a bit guilty. “Let me get us a couple drinks.”

“I can –”

“No,” Shane waved him off.

They relaxed then, Shane joining Ilya in mixing a shot of whiskey into his ginger ale. Ilya’s gaze drifted to the dance floor.

“I wish we could dance,” said Ilya abruptly.

Shane’s stomach tightened. “Yeah,” he said, “me too.”

When the rest of the team showed up, Shane tried not to feel too put out at the intrusion. He greeted each new person in turn and Svetlana, with her halo of curls and a truly perfect face, looked at him with great interest.

“Shane,” she said, kissing him on both cheeks. Ilya cackled behind them at the stunned look on Shane’s face. “I have been wanting to meet you.”

“Me, too,” Shane said, not entirely honestly.

They were, indeed, a very large group. The team, their partners and friends sprawled out in every direction.

Eventually they ended up on the dance floor. Shane, a few drinks in, wasn’t feeling quite as awkward as he normally would, but by no means actually comfortable. But he figured he might as well try. Ilya put one hand on his elbow and guided him so they were at the center of the group. No one around them paid them any attention, although Shane got the sense of them forming something like a shield around Ilya.

He was happy that Ilya had them, truly. He wished he could be part of it.

They couldn’t dance together, exactly, but the music pulsed around them while strobe lights flashed. It seemed each burst of light gifted Shane with a different view of Ilya, each one new and familiar and beautiful.

Their bodies moved in sync but painfully apart. Shane’s eyes traced Ilya’s lips, his hands, the way his hips moved and he knew, he could *feel* Ilya watching him right back. When their eyes met, the breath left Shane’s lungs and his feet tried to pull him closer like a flower searching for the sun.

“I’m going to go to the bathroom,” Shane shouted in Ilya’s direction. He needed to get himself out of here if he didn’t want to sink to his knees on the middle of the dance floor. Ilya

nodded.

Shane was taking deep, steady breaths by the bar a few minutes later when Svetlana found him.

“You care for him?” Svetlana asked abruptly.

Shane sighed, too tired for the pretense. “Yes.”

Svetlana looked back out at the mass of people. They couldn’t see Ilya, still safely ensconced in the team.

“He is not as fragile as he once was,” said Svetlana.

“That’s good,” said Shane cautiously.

“But that is not the same as being strong,” Svetlana turned back to look at Shane. “I think he would crack, for you.”

“Crack?”

“You know,” she said, “he would... sacrifice what he has, this peace – for you. If you pressed hard enough.”

“I’m not – I didn’t try to... I’m not trying to hurt him.”

“I know this,” Svetlana said simply. “And it is his life. And yours, I suppose. But,” she clicked her nails against her glass, “Ilya has gone through too much pain already.”

“I know.”

“I’m just saying, be careful with him,” she warned him, but not unkindly.

Shane nodded tightly. “I’m trying to be.”

The next day, Shane put Ilya’s book in the mail.

“What’s frustrating you, Shane?”

“This,” he said, “you!”

“Why?” Dr. Grant asked, infuriatingly calm.

“Because I’m not making any progress!” said Shane, throwing his hands up. It had been months since his first session, and now – days away from Valentine’s Day, which this year was making him particularly miserable, he said, “and you’re sitting there, nodding and scribbling away like that means anything.”

Dr. Grant peered at him over his glasses.

“Would you like me to be more up front about what I see in you, Shane? I could be more explicit about the changes you can make and the progress I see from my side, if that would be helpful.”

Shane blinked. “You can?”

“Yes,” Dr. Grant nodded. “There is no one right way to do therapy. We start, usually, from a place of listening but we adapt to everyone’s needs.”

“Right, well... right. Why didn’t you just do that, then?”

Dr. Grant smiled. “I was waiting for you to ask, Shane.”

Shane fought the urge to roll his eyes. Dr. Grant seemed to tell what he’d been thinking.

“Sometimes you have to ask to get what you want,” he said. “But I think, honestly, this was a big step forward.”

“What – me shouting at you?” Shane asked, nonplussed.

“I wouldn’t call that shouting,” Dr. Grant chuckled. “That would generally be frowned upon. No, you getting frustrated and *telling* me that you’re frustrated.”

“How is that progress?”

“Shane,” Dr. Grant set down his notebook. “I think that you struggle when it comes to naming and acting on your desires. I think you expend an enormous amount of energy planning for the worst and then even more energy trying to make sure it never happens. I think you expect if you act on some of your desires – anything outside of what is ‘good’ or ‘expected’ of you – you think you are guaranteed the consequences you assume are always waiting around the corner. Does that sound right?”

Dumbfounded, Shane said, “I don’t know – I guess... but, I tried, right? With Ilya? I asked.”

“And what did that asking feel like?”

Shane swallowed. “Terrifying.”

“And what did you plan for, in trying?”

Shane thought for a long moment. “To keep it quiet?”

Dr. Grant nodded. “And, I would say, to keep it small. Even when you are so desperate for something you are able to act on it, you do it in a way that keeps it all contained, so you think you might be able to hold onto it so tightly everything else can stay as it is. Controlled. In its place.”

“And is that so wrong?” said Shane, rattled. “I’m just trying to keep my life together.”

“It is not wrong to try to keep yourself safe,” said Dr. Grant. “But at a certain point, we must all ask if our habits and impulses are doing the job we want them to do.”

Shane looked confused. Dr. Grant explained,

“Our protective instincts – the ones that tell us to hide, or to avoid change, or difficult conversations, or not to take risks – are meant to keep us safe, right? From social consequences or mental or physical pain, for example.”

“Right...”

“So your protective instincts have told you that not coming out or being public is the safe thing to do. That those things come with a cost, and by hiding, you do not have to pay those costs. Does that make sense?”

“Sure.”

“But the avoidance of risk – and the denial of your own desires – has a cost of its own. Don’t you think?”

Slowly, Shane nodded.

“Tell me, Shane. What do you think it has cost you?”

“Well,” Shane blinked back tears, “my parents... they don’t get to, like, fully know me. And obviously, that means I don’t get to be,” Shane sniffed, “fully known by them.”

Dr. Grant nodded. “Go on.”

“I don’t have many friends,” Shane admitted to his hands, “because I usually feel like I’m lying to them, or it’s just too tiring to pretend... I can never, *ever* relax. I’m always just... putting on a show. I’m exhausted.”

“Mhmm.”

“And,” a tear dripped down his nose, “Ilya.” He stopped, watching tears fall onto his hands.

“You have done an extraordinary job in your life, Shane,” Dr. Grant said gently. “You have achieved so much of what you set out to do. And you should be proud of the work and, yes, the mindset that has gotten you this far. But if you are looking around and finding that it is costing you too much, then you will have to trust yourself to try a different way.”

“And what if I can’t?” said Shane, wiping at his eyes.

“I think if you were to look at everything you’ve managed to do so far, you’ll find that you can,” he said. “I’m not saying it won’t come without consequences and even hardship. But there is no choice in life that does not have a price to pay – it is up to you to decide if it is worth the cost.”

When Shane got home that night, after a long, hot shower, he called his mom.

“Hi, honey,” she said. He could tell he was on speakerphone.

“Hi, mom.” His voice was shaking. “Can you go get dad? I have something I want to tell you both.”

Ilya had been less available for the last couple weeks, with the Centaurs gunning for playoffs again.

“Shane,” Ilya’s voice was tired but warm. It was the end of a still-chilly April day. “Sorry I have not called much.”

“That’s okay,” said Shane, fiddling on his laptop. “Did you meet with Galina today?”

“Yes,” said Ilya. “We are thinking of dropping down to once a month.”

“Oh, yeah? Why?”

“Things have been good, actually,” said Ilya. “We think maybe it makes sense to try.”

“That’s great,” said Shane. He wasn’t sure why, but he never told Ilya he was in therapy too. Now he felt vaguely jealous, but he wasn’t sure of what.

“Right, well, I called because...” Shane took a deep breath. “I actually don’t know how to say this.”

“What?” Ilya sounded immediately alarmed, his voice loud and alert. “What is wrong, Shane?”

“Nothing, sorry!” Shane winced. “I realize how that sounds, now. No, it’s nothing – sorry, no, it’s good. It’s good, I hope.”

“Christ, Shane,” Ilya muttered, quieter now, “what is it?”

“I just... this might sound weird. Or like I was being a bit crazy, or whatever. But when we talked, last October, about – about what happened to you...”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Right. Well, you seemed like... I don’t know the right word – haunted, I guess? Sorry, that sounds so dramatic but that’s all I’ve got – by what happened with Mikhail.”

“Yes,” said Ilya stiffly. “Why are you bringing this up?”

“I – I’m sorry if this was – I didn’t mean to overstep, but I tried to – to find him.”

A long pause, so long that Shane asked, “Ilya? Are you still there?”

“*What?*” Ilya asked. Shane wasn’t sure if he was angry.

“I know, it probably seems insane,” said Shane in a rush, “and it’s not like I’ve talked to him or anything. But I went back to the roster class he was in, the records are all online. I did a search for basically everyone I could find – he played in a Canadian tournament, a year before he went to Boston.”

Ilya was silent.

“It’s taken – well, since October, but I went through everyone I could find on Facebook. I got my friend from the hospital, who speaks Russian, to help a bit. It was tricky, actually, he never –”

“Shane,” interrupted Ilya. “Please.”

“Right, of course!” said Shane. “Ilya – he’s okay.”

A loud, shaky exhale sounded on the other end. When Ilya spoke again, Shane could hear tears in his voice.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” said Shane. “He’s in Paris. He’s living with a different last name – his aunt’s married name, actually, she lives in Paris too –”

“How do you know that?”

“Oh, well, I found his Aunt labeled in a photo in an old hockey newsletter that one of the Canadian players forwarded to me,” Shane explained. “And I managed to track her through Facebook and found that her husband is a French doctor. Decent publications, actually.”

“I called him, under the guise of professional interest,” he continued, “we chatted a few times. I asked about his family – I may have lied and said my cousin was thinking of studying in France, and asked what it was like for younger people. He said his nephew, Michell – that’s French for Mikhail – lived with him a few years back. He moved out eventually and became a nurse. He posted his graduation photo on Facebook – it’s him. He still lives nearby. Has a very nice boyfriend, apparently. I think – Ilya?”

Shane was thrown by the sound of heavy sobs on the other end of the line.

“Ilya, are you okay?” Shane asked, alarmed.

“Yes,” Ilya choked out. “Fuck.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

A very wet laugh. “Yes, definitely. *Fuck*. Thank you.”

Shane felt warmth spread to the very tips of his fingers. “You’re welcome.”

“You have no idea what this means,” Ilya said shakily.

“I just wanted to help.”

“*Help*,” Ilya laughed in a disbelieving kind of way. “You – you’ve set me free, Shane.”

“Ilya,” Shane murmured, blinking back tears of his own.

“I thought I killed him,” Ilya said breathlessly. “This is... thank you.”

They sat on the phone for a long time afterwards. It was only after they hung up that a tinge of worry touched Shane’s happiness. *Ilya is free, now*, Shane thought, *free to really be happy*. Free to try, *really* try, with someone.

Shane picked up the phone to Dr. Grant. He answered after two rings.

“Is everything okay, Shane?”

“Yes – can I come in this week?” asked Shane determinedly. “It’s time for me to make some bigger moves. I’m ready.”

April 2021

“Shane,” came Ilya’s voice behind him, sending a thrill down Shane’s spine, “why have you been running laps around the room avoiding me?”

“I’m not avoiding you,” said Shane, and with a deep breath, he turned to face him firmly. “I just wanted you to enjoy your night a bit.”

Ilya raised his eyebrows. “And I would not enjoy my night if you talked to me? Is something wrong?”

“That’s not what I said,” Shane insisted.

“What, then?”

“I was hoping to talk to you,” said Shane. His voice was steady even though his hands shook a little. “In private.”

“We can go out in the hallway –?”

“No,” Shane shook his head. “I’d like – I need to talk to you properly, you know? For real.”

Ilya cocked his head. “I booked a room here tonight,” he said slowly, looking at him carefully. “We could talk there, if you want?”

“Perfect,” said Shane, “yes.”

“Okay,” Ilya looked confused, but he took his wallet out of his pocket and handed Shane a spare room key, “top floor, room 2156.”

“Penthouse,” Shane laughed. Ilya shrugged, looking a bit smug. “See you there when this is over?”

Ilya nodded, still looking at Shane curiously.

“Yes. See you there.”

Chapter End Notes

So.... how are we feeling?

Comments + kudos are very appreciated!

Chapter 5: One night

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took a little longer than I'd expected! I took a vacation last week which definitely slowed me down, but also this chapter just needed a bit of time to come together.

We're earning our 'E' rating here so if that's not your thing you'll have to do some scrolling!

And finally, thank you so much for your kind comments on the last chapter - it means so much!

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

The blinking city lights had an almost hypnotic quality to them. If he unfocused his eyes, they became blurry and slanted, forming a tapestry against the black backdrop of midnight in Montreal. Ilya was strangely glad that the thick pane of glass muted the various beeps and screeches that made up the soundtrack of city life – it meant he could stay here, with a loose hand on his glass of vodka, and let his mind drift.

It had been an hour – or 52 minutes, but who was counting – since the final speech of the night had been delivered by a kindly, rotund man with thirty years of paramedic service under his belt and the stress wrinkles to prove it. The man had tipped his glass exuberantly in Ilya's direction, making heavy weather of the generous donations from the Ottawa Centaurs over the past year, his drink slopping a little over the side of his cup.

Ilya had hoped they might be satisfied with a humble nod, perhaps a quick smile, but he was soon engulfed with handshakes and firm claps on the back, and loud, obvious whispers asking how they might maintain his support.

It had taken him a painful thirty minutes to extricate himself, by which time his teammates were long gone. They had slid from the room somewhere around Ilya's eighth "I'm just happy to help," and shot gleeful, relieved looks at him from behind the glass door while another sweaty hand cuffed him on the back of the neck.

They were travelling back to Ottawa tonight. They hadn't asked him why he was staying; he was sure they knew, anyways.

He and Shane so rarely got to see each other in person. The video calls were Ilya's favorite, because then at least he could witness the little scrunch of Shane's nose when he was annoyed or the way he rolled his eyes when Ilya teased him. But they didn't happen nearly as often as he would like, with Shane half living in the hospital and Ilya on the road more often than not.

The voice notes and text messages and phone calls served to tide him over, just enough that Ilya could nearly ignore the odd ache he felt in the palms of his hands when he went a day without hearing from Shane.

Ilya had often wished himself to be a smarter man, so that he might have come up with a justifiable reason that they would see each other more regularly. Once, after listening to Shane puffing his way through a twelve-minute voice note he sent while biking to work, he had decided to book a sponsor gig in Montreal. He had cursed himself thoroughly during the shoot, which had been scheduled during one of Shane's marathon, four-day shifts and resulted only in Ilya being the face of a discount furniture chain.

Marleau still derived great joy out of ordering one of their tacky orange love seats to Ilya's house every few months. It always arrived in a box plastered with Ilya's face, a pained grin and a stiff thumbs up; Ilya had taken to donating them to local shelters, who were becoming steadily more confused.

So, more than a little humiliated (Ilya would insist to anyone who would listen that the lighting guy had had it out for him – no, his forehead wasn't normally that shiny), Ilya resigned himself to whatever luck and chance deigned good enough for him – when Ilya travelled for games in Montreal, when Shane would visit his parents, when Shane had a dentist appointment, which he once let slip that his mother still made for him at the same family dentist he'd been going to since he was four years old.

There was always another reason. A reason they were in each other's cities, one that could plausibly amount to more than *because I want to see you*.

Ilya had known Shane was a member of this paramedics union. There were photos online, where he had been tagged by his mother, of Shane attending an event of theirs. Ilya had given a quick mental thanks that Yuna had friended him on Facebook and had decided, minutes later, that this was as good a cause as any to direct some of his more charitable impulses.

He had not told Svetlana he was attending the event this evening, having known full well what she would say and having not even the slightest interest in hearing it.

Last summer, Ilya had drifted back to Ottawa from Shane's family cottage in a daze, warm and sunburnt and happy. Svetlana had taken one look at him and rolled her eyes, sighing deeply and muttering something about how very stupid he looked, but he could see the suppressed smile at her lips.

"I would like to meet him," she had said. It had felt like a rush of cold air, and Ilya's smile had drooped. He hadn't responded. Her eyes had narrowed, but she didn't force it.

It was only the following autumn, when Ilya told her how he had been forced to summon every last shred of willpower he had to wrench himself away from Shane's warm and supine body, that it turned into a sharp sigh.

"I'm sorry," she'd said, and the words were clipped. She had taken a deep breath, softening at the downtrodden look on Ilya's face. "But maybe it's good, hm? At least you know. You will have some space, now, and with time and distance you will move on –"

Ilya had looked at her, confused. “What do you mean, distance? We are still friends.”

Thus had kicked off one of their biggest fights to date, Svetlana pacing and huffing and, every so often, pouring herself another glass from Ilya’s expensive vodka collection.

“You aren’t going to keep doing this,” she’d asked, alarmed, “are you?”

“Doing what?”

“The – the *pining*,” she’d said incredulously.

“I’m not pining.”

She’d scoffed and downed her drink in one swallow. With her head thrown back, her curls seemed to vibrate around her tense shoulders.

“That is the good vodka,” he’d protested, gesturing to it, “it is meant to be sipped!”

“You call him after practice –”

“He is my friend.”

“You send him messages all hours of the day, even at my birthday I find you skulking around like a criminal in the back hallway –”

“I apologized for that, and anyways, it was five minutes. He’d been in overnight shifts, I hadn’t gotten to talk to him for days.”

“You take stupid photos of – of trees, and street signs and groceries – and god knows what else, just for the excuse to talk to him.”

“Why,” Ilya had interrupted angrily, “are you so mad that he is my friend? You were the one who was always complaining at how lonely I was, yes? So, I have my friend and I am not so lonely anymore –”

“Exactly,” Svetlana had exclaimed, slamming her glass on his kitchen counter. “Exactly, Ilyusha, don’t you see?”

Ilya did see. And yet, out of pure stubbornness and delusion, he’d said, “see what?”

“You’re in love with him.” The words had come bluntly and with tears in her eyes.

The angry lump in Ilya’s throat had been abrupt but unsurprising. Into his mind unbidden had come the thoughts of Shane’s insistent nagging whenever Ilya got injured. Of Shane’s precise cataloging of the minute details of Ilya’s life, always wanting *more* of Ilya, in this desperate, urgent kind of way, like he was trying to build a sand castle before the tide came in.

Ilya’s mind had drifted to the way Shane’s face lit up when he would tell Ilya about his work, animated and alive in a way that made Ilya’s stomach hurt. And the way his heart always did a pathetic little lurch when he saw Shane’s name in his notifications, and how tension seemed

to drip out of his body when they lay awake at night, talking quietly over the phone. Ilya would always stay awake longer, wanting to listen as Shane's breathing evened out in sleep.

"It doesn't matter."

"How," Svetlana had pressed, incensed, "*how* can it not matter. After everything, Ilya –"

"*Fuck*," he'd snapped, roused to his feet, gesticulating at her in burst of frantic energy, "Fuck this *everything* – has it not taken enough?"

"What does that mean?"

"One stupid fucking mistake and I am still paying for it," Ilya had been trying, and mostly failing, not to shout. "*Still* it is taking from me. Maybe if not for that I would be someone – someone that Shane could –"

"Is that what this is, then?" Svetlana had shouted back. "Are you punishing yourself? You think that this is all that you deserve? To be stuck waiting, forever, trailing after this man who doesn't want you, who would force you headfirst back into the closet, who doesn't stop to think about what he's doing to you –"

"Fuck you," Ilya spat furiously. "Don't fucking talk about him like that."

She'd blinked at him but didn't waver. Svetlana had never been one to back down in a fight. "I will not stand by and watch as you build a fire to throw yourself into."

"Ah," Ilya had said, sarcasm dripping from his voice, "is that what I am doing?"

"I have seen you try to destroy yourself once... please, Ilya. Don't make me see it again." Now her voice was a nauseating mix of rage and fear. Against his will, and despite his present fury, Ilya had remembered the frozen, terrified look on Svetlana's face in the hospital, a memory still jagged and brutal despite the intervening years.

Ilya had collapsed onto the couch, suddenly boneless and exhausted. He hung his head in his hands and stayed like that for some minutes, pulling in long breaths through his nose.

"That's not what I'm doing," he'd said finally. "I am not trying to destroy myself."

"What, then?" she'd asked, perched beside him now. "How does this end, Ilya, hm?" Her voice had gone quiet and hoarse, her hand on his knee. "I think... you love him too much not to be loved back. It's going to hurt. More than you might think."

"I know," Ilya had said, shrugging hopelessly. "I know."

"Then why?"

Shane's face had swam behind Ilya's closed lids again. He thought of long, dark eyelashes set over the warmest brown eyes he'd ever seen. Of the way Shane laughed when Ilya said something deliberately shocking, loudly and with this nervous, delighted expression on his

face, like it was such a treat to be in on the joke for once. Of the way he felt when Shane's knee pressed against his, the intoxicating buzzing under his skin.

"I think... I want to feel it."

"Feel...?"

"The," he had swallowed thickly, "love. For him. I have not felt something like this before, and ever since... *everything*... I thought maybe I never would. Like maybe I had closed off that part of me forever."

"Ilya..."

"I want to love him," Ilya had swiped angrily at his wet eyes. "I don't want that to be taken away from me too. And I know enough to – I know I can't have some hidden relationship with him. That would be too hard. But this... I can still have this."

"And if this is all it is? All it will ever be?"

Ilya's voice had cracked a little, "then okay."

"Ilya," Svetlana had said pleadingly, "are you sure?"

"I would rather have him like this than not at all." That had been the last thing he'd had to say on the matter. Svetlana had gone quiet, but he'd felt her concern in the months since – asking about his therapy sessions, checking to see if he was taking his antidepressants. It had frustrated him as much as he found it touching.

So, yes, he had decided Svetlana did not need to know about this particular evening.

He regretted that, a little, now. Ilya had already whipped his phone out to call her, or perhaps send her an urgent text, his panic poorly concealed – *Shane needs to talk to me about something important!!!* – but he had put his phone back in his pocket just as quickly.

At the start of the night, his best hope was that he and Shane could spend some time together and, if he was lucky or especially charming, he might convince Shane to go for late-night pancakes afterwards at a 24-hour diner he'd found. He had booked this ridiculous hotel room in the hopes that after their midnight pancakes, Ilya would be able to shrug and say he would just crash in the hotel for the night. Maybe they could meet up for lunch the next day before he headed home...

Ilya sighed heavily – dramatically, some might say – and sat on the bed. He was perennially hunting for scraps of time with Shane, greedily scrabbling for thin, sparse moments. He collected them like tokens, stacking them carefully in his imaginary register, like he was saving up for the big prize that was always on a shelf too high to reach. *Maybe Svetlana has a point*, he thought grimly.

But instead, Shane, his face pale and set, told Ilya very seriously that they needed to *talk*, and then proceeded to avoid him all evening – and he didn't care what Shane had said, he was

convinced at one point, when Ilya lingered a little too close to Shane's chosen corner, that he might break out into a jog in his haste to put distance between them.

Though Ilya might be foolish and desperate and a little pathetic, he had, at the very least, the cold comfort of knowing he was not alone in his stupidity. Shane, he was certain, felt the pull between them.

But – his chest clenched – perhaps it was finally too much. Maybe Shane would rather excise Ilya from his life entirely than have him like this – half-there, hoping, wanting and always out of reach.

When the knock finally came, he wasn't sure if he'd been waiting minutes or hours. His heart was pounding but, with a grim resignation, he decided there was nothing to be done about that now. Wiping his hands on his pants, he stood. Ilya had rid himself of his suit jacket and shoes, but his white dress shirt was still tucked neatly into his pressed pants.

He steadied himself and pulled the door open.

"Sorry," said Shane immediately, looking taken aback, as if he'd expected someone else to open the door to Ilya's room. Ilya wondered distantly whether an apology was just the standard Canadian greeting. "I know you gave me a key, but it felt a bit – rude, I guess – to just barge in."

Ilya smiled despite himself. At least Shane was still Shane. He stood a step back and waved his arm inwards. "Come in."

Shane gave him a brief, strained smile. He crossed into the room, his hands shoved into his pockets, and then paused just over the threshold.

"Your hotel room has a living room?" he asked, sounding bewildered.

"Yes."

"Huh," said Shane, glancing around. "Good for you."

"Do you want to sit?" Ilya asked, now feeling so jittery he wasn't overly confident in the ability of his legs to keep him upright.

"Uh, yes," Shane nodded nervously. "Yeah, sure, let's sit."

They sat down on opposite ends of the couch, though they angled towards each other. Shane was staring at his knees in a determined kind of way.

"Did they do something to you?" asked Ilya.

"What?" said Shane.

"Your knees," Ilya joked, trying to break the tension. "You're looking at them very angrily."

Shane let out a breathy laugh. "No. And I'm not angry, I'm just..."

“Just?”

“Nervous,” said Shane, “I guess.”

“Tell me why,” said Ilya, his own heart pounding. *Please don't go*, came a frantic, pleading thought.

Shane's gaze flickered over to Ilya.

“Fuck. Sorry. I'm off to a terrible start,” he said, shaking his head, “I just – I wanted – I think – sorry, fuck, what is wrong with me –”

“Shane,” Ilya cut in gently, shifting over closer to him. He was pleased when Shane didn't move away. With that encouragement, he slowly rested one hand on his knee. “Shane, relax. Is just me, yes?”

Shane shot him a grateful smile and sighed.

“You can take all the time you need,” said Ilya, rubbing his hand on Shane's knee. He wanted Shane to be okay – even if this was the end.

Shane tried again. “I wanted to say...” he said carefully, “I – I want to try... with you.” He looked up at Ilya now. He had furrowed his eyebrows in that scrunched, determined kind of way. Ilya didn't know why he found that so cute.

“Try?” repeated Ilya. “Try... what?”

“To be with you.” This came out a little more steady as Shane seemed to gather his confidence. “To be together.”

Ilya wasn't sure he heard him properly over the blood rushing in his ears. He was still for several long moments.

“Shane,” he said slowly. He could feel the tenuous hold on his conviction weakening, and he had to force himself to say, “we've talked about this. I'm sorry, I can't –” And in the back of his head, he howled with rage, a voice shouting at him, *who cares, who fucking cares, just do it, just take what he's giving you*. He had to grit his teeth together to keep the words from escaping.

“I know,” said Shane in a rush, interrupting his reckless train of thought. Ilya snapped to attention. “I'm not saying – I'm saying I want us to be together, for real.”

Ilya stared at him.

“What do you mean?” His voice sounded faint to his own ears.

“I'm ready,” Shane said, eyes wide and scared but trained on Ilya's face. “I'm – I'm sorry I wasn't ready before. But I am now. I want to be with you, and I want it to be real. Real, like – public. Whatever it needs to be.”

“Shane.” Ilya felt dazed. “I – where did this come from? Do you realize –?”

“I do,” said Shane, squeezing his hand.

Where Ilya had imagined many, *many* times a feeling of jubilation or euphoria, he now felt only a sinister, rising panic. He looked at Shane’s face – sweet and hopeful, smiling tremulously at Ilya – and he was hit with a dizzying wave of fear.

“Shane, I need you to understand,” Ilya said fiercely, “It would be insane. It would change your entire life. Do you get that?”

“I just said –”

“No,” Ilya interrupted, feeling insane. Maybe he *was* insane – this was everything he had wanted, but now... “I need you to understand. It – it could be brutal. Tabloids, and – and crazy people tracking you down. They might call the hospital trying to dig up dirt on you or just to scare you,” Ilya had gotten his share of death threats over the years, and the thought of that vitriol being pointed in Shane’s direction made him feel ill. “Maybe it could impact your career, what about the research group? They might not want the press – Shane, it could be –”

“Fuck, I know,” Shane interrupted, his eyebrows going up in surprise.

“If you know, then how can you say –”

“Because I want to, that’s why!” said Shane, his voice rising slightly.

“Well,” Ilya exclaimed, throwing his hands up in a hopeless gesture, “I can’t let you –”

“Let me?” Shane repeated incredulously. His cheeks went pink, which Ilya normally loved. Shane stood up, agitated, and rounded on Ilya where he sat. “You’re not the fucking boss of me, Ilya.”

“I’m just saying –”

“You were perfectly happy –” Shane huffed, looking flustered and waving his hands around, “when we first met, you would have wanted this, right? So why the fuck are you being like this now?”

“Because I know you now!”

“And what?” said Shane furiously, raising his eyebrows, “you know me, and now you don’t actually want to be with me?”

“Jesus, no –”

“So then you think I’m too weak to handle it, is that why –?”

“No, *fuck*,” Ilya burst out, and without thinking, without planning it, he said, “it’s because I fucking love you!”

Shane froze where he stood, hovering above Ilya, who was still sitting on the edge of the couch. He paused for a moment, his mouth hanging slightly open.

“Fuck,” Ilya said again, slumping back onto the couch. He rubbed the heels of his hands into his eyes, which had gone suspiciously damp. “Shane,” he lifted his head to look at him, still frozen. “I’m so in love with you.”

Shane slowly sank onto the couch next to Ilya. They sat side-by-side for a minute, not speaking, not looking at each other; then, with a cautious hand, Shane reached for Ilya’s cheek, gently pulling his face towards him.

Ilya fought the impulse to squeeze his eyes shut, afraid of what he would find waiting for him. But even though Shane’s eyes were red and wet, and his little eyebrow scrunch was back, there was also a shaky, wide smile.

“I fucking love you, too,” Shane said with a weak, breathless laugh.

And there, even with his face still damp, his voice slightly hoarse, and the thrum of panic still in his veins, Ilya had the presence of mind to stop, to just look at Shane, to hold them there for a few extra seconds. He wanted to remember every last thing about this moment.

Shane seemed to be thinking the same thing, his eyes searching Ilya’s face rapidly. After a few moments, something softened between them, and they both let out matching, giddy laughs.

“I’m sorry,” said Ilya, sobering slightly, “I just... I’m scared. I don’t want to be the reason your life gets hard.”

“Ilya,” Shane said gently, “I know. Everything you said, it’s what has kept me from this for the last two years. But –” Shane ducked his head down, “Ilya, *look at me.*” Ilya dragged his face to meet Shane’s resolved gaze. “I want you more.”

Ilya studied Shane’s face carefully, trying to find any hint of hesitation or regret.

“I mean it,” said Shane, his hand coming to rest in Ilya’s curls. “You’re all I’ve thought about for years.”

At this, Ilya let out a snort. “Liar.”

Shane laughed. “Okay, fine. Maybe not the only thing but – you’re the thing that has made me the happiest. I – I pick up my phone in the morning because I want to see if you’ve messaged me. When something good happens – or I’ve had a shit day – I just want to talk to you. When we say goodbye on the phone I feel like I would trade anything for another minute.”

Ilya wiped rapidly at his leaking eyes.

“But Shane,” Ilya whispered, stark memories flashing through his mind, “I can’t protect you.”

Shane shook his head. “Ilya, I don’t need you to,” he said, “all that other shit – maybe it’ll happen, maybe it won’t. But I’m not some wilting flower,” he continued, setting his shoulders, “it’s not like I’m going to let some freaks steamroll over my career. Whatever it ends up being, I can handle it.”

“Are you sure...?” Ilya pressed one last time. “What if it’s too much?”

“Nothing is too much,” Shane said softly, “for you.”

Ilya let out a breath and leaned forward, his forehead resting on Shane’s shoulder. One of Shane’s hands was still resting on the back of Ilya’s head.

Shane said, “So... does that mean...?”

Ilya pulled back to look at him.

“That... like, you – you want me, too?” asked Shane, cringing a little. “Like – are we together, now?”

At that, Ilya rolled his eyes hard. “I just told you I love you.”

“Well,” said Shane, half-defensively, half-amused, “technically that’s not the same as –”

Ilya cut him off, surging forward to press his lips against Shane’s. Shane gasped lightly and, after a moment’s pause, pressed eagerly against him, grabbing both sides of Ilya’s face. Ilya breathed into it, feeling his shoulders drop and his chest lean towards Shane. Only when he felt the urgent need for oxygen did he pull back, but he didn’t go far, dropping to rest their foreheads together.

“Shane,” he murmured, shaking his head a little, “I’ve never wanted anything the way I want you.”

Shane let out a weak laugh and said, “thank god.”

Ilya leaned back to look at him, a wondrous, curious look in his eyes.

“So... where do we start?”

“Well...” Shane whispered, leaning in closer, “I would really like for you to kiss me again.”

And Ilya knew it would take a man far stronger than him to refuse. When he moved forward, it was slow. Ilya saw each of his eyelashes as their noses brushed together and he watched as Shane’s eyes slid shut. When their lips touched, it was just a gentle graze at first. Shane sighed in a dreamy kind of way, which for some reason sent rolling shockwaves down Ilya’s body.

It turned almost instantly, becoming firm and frantic and just the right side of desperate. Shane licked into Ilya’s open mouth eagerly, clutching onto Ilya’s collar. They became lost in each other, just roaming hands and little sighs, while Ilya floated away into some new version of reality that was far better than anything he’d experienced before.

“Fuck, Shane,” Ilya said against his lips.

Shane just laughed and kissed him again. This time, his hands started to wander down Ilya’s chest, over his nipples and trailing down to his hips.

Ilya moaned when Shane’s hand ghosted over his crotch, which he seemed to take as a sign of encouragement, as he promptly pressed down with great enthusiasm. Ilya threw his head back and Shane went for his neck, still stroking him through his pants. He wrenched his head back up, wanting to see it, but his view was blocked as Shane’s lips came back to his.

Ilya forced himself to say in between kisses, “Shane – ah, fuck – Shane.”

“What?” Shane murmured absently, his hand still moving.

Ilya closed his eyes, trying to get a grip on himself. “I don’t – fuck, I don’t have –”

Shane pulled back. “Lube? Condoms?”

Taken aback but pleased at his bluntness, Ilya snorted. Shane blushed but shrugged in a ‘*can you blame me*’ kind of way.

“Presumptuous,” Ilya teased.

“I’ve waited a long time for this,” Shane said, “if you also want...?”

“I want,” Ilya said firmly. “And I have lube, but considering I was, ah, just going to use it by myself, I don’t have any condoms. Do you?”

Shane shook his head.

“Really?” Ilya asked, surprised. “I thought boy scout Shane would be better prepared.”

“Now who’s being presumptuous?”

“Like you didn’t want this to happen.”

Shane pressed little kisses along his cheek, still stroking him through layers of clothes, murmuring, “I did. My condoms are sitting on my kitchen counter. I was so nervous I forgot.”

“Ah, fuck,” Ilya groaned, “okay,” he said, removing Shane’s hand with what he thought was an impressive amount of self-control. “I will go – there has to be something open nearby, I’ll be five minutes –”

“Wait –” Shane said, grabbing onto his arm.

Ilya looked back at him, eyebrows raised. “I mean, we could do other things, if you prefer not to...?”

“No, I definitely want to” said Shane, his tone leaving no doubt of his intentions. “No, I mean – I don’t know if you know? Not that I’d judge – it’s fine if –”

“Shane, what are you asking?”

He took a breath. “I – I’m clean. I haven’t been with anyone in a long time, and I’ve been tested since then.”

Ilya thought he might pass out.

“Are you – are you suggesting –?”

“Only if you’d want to, too,” Shane said nervously, “and if you’ve, um, checked.”

Ilya said in a faint voice, “yes, I – I’ve checked. Routine physical at the start of the year. All clean.”

“And no one else since...?”

“No,” Ilya shook his head. “No one since, and no one before that in... a while. Since before the cottage.”

“Really?” Shane sounded delighted at this, and Ilya felt an urge to pinch Shane’s cheeks.

“Really,” he said with a smile.

“Right – well, if you’d be interested in...”

“Fucking you bare?” Ilya said, for the pleasure of embarrassing Shane, who promptly went pink. “Yes, Shane, I’d be very interested in that.”

“Cool,” Shane said earnestly, and Ilya had to physically restrain himself because of how badly he wanted to squish Shane’s face in his hands. “But we should show each other,” Shane said, looking serious again, “it’s good practice.”

Ilya laughed but pulled out his phone as Shane did the same. They swapped over, showing off their clean STI tests.

Before Shane could launch himself back at Ilya – which he could tell Shane was very close to doing – Ilya stood up abruptly. Shane looked up at him, disoriented for a moment, until Ilya held his hand out.

With Shane’s warm, calloused hand enclosed in his, Ilya led him to the bedroom, which was wide and dimly lit only with the city lights trickling through the floor-to-ceiling windows. They stood in the open space at the foot of the bed, and Shane reached for him. Ilya grasped his hands and brought them back down to his sides, and when Shane looked at him questioningly, Ilya smiled and said,

“Like you said, we’ve waited a long time for this,” he said, and then he leaned in to whisper in Shane’s ear, “we’re going to enjoy it.”

Shane shivered.

Ilya took a step back. “Take your clothes off.”

Shane didn’t question him, his eyes darkening. He brought his hands to his own shirt and unbuttoned slowly. He left the shirt hanging open, letting Ilya take his first long, proper look at him. Ilya’s eyes tracked downwards, drinking him in. He felt his cock start to thicken and Shane glanced down, smirking a little.

Shane’s hands moved, pulling the shirt off, smooth ribbons of muscle rippling across his shoulders. Ilya circled him, like he was circling prey. One of Ilya’s hands traced along his shoulder and around his back, pausing to dip his fingertips in his hair.

Shane exhaled, tipping his head back, encouraging him. Ilya scratched into his scalp for a second but then his hand trailed back downwards. He stayed at Shane’s back, moving his hand to palm against its muscular surface.

“You’re okay?” asked Ilya quietly.

Shane nodded in response, too gone for words.

Ilya continued his explorations. He dropped his lips to the back of Shane’s shoulders. He kissed gently down his spine, bending a little to reach. He let his hands glide around to Shane’s chest and then down to his stomach. He could feel the pace of Shane’s breathing increase and the quickening pulse under his skin.

Ilya came back up to kiss the back of Shane’s neck and brought himself closer, pressing the length of his body against Shane. He was sure Shane could feel his erection pressing against him, and Shane let out a loud moan, his head dropping back against Ilya’s shoulder.

Ilya chuckled into Shane’s neck, nipping at him lightly.

“Fuck,” Shane breathed.

Ilya kept making little love bites down Shane’s neck – a little nip of his teeth, and then a swipe of his tongue to soothe the burn. Shane squirmed under his careful movements, rocking back into Ilya’s arms, which were securely wrapped around him.

With a sigh, Ilya stepped away. Shane, looking lightheaded, turned to face him.

“Okay,” Ilya said, hoping he sounded calmer than he felt, “pants too, now.”

Shane just looked at him for a second, one hand coming up to trace at the marks Ilya left on his neck. Then his hands dropped and he unbuttoned his slacks, pulling the zipper down. He looked Ilya directly in the eye and rolled them off his hips.

Ilya felt a lurch in his stomach when he saw that he was taking his boxers down with them.

Shane’s cock, which had featured prominently in most – okay, all – of Ilya’s fantasies over the past year, stood proudly at attention. Ilya’s mouth went dry.

Then, Shane lowered his hand, gripping his cock firmly and taking a single stroke. This broke Ilya from his reverie.

“Ah,” he said, “no.”

“No?” Shane teased, his lips parted and his eyes locked on Ilya. He gave himself another stroke.

“*Shane*,” said Ilya. It was meant to come out like a warning, but instead it sounded more like a plea. He took another step towards Shane. “Very rude to start without me.”

Shane smiled at him, eyelids half-closed and lust drunk. “Come join me then.”

Ilya gently closed his hand around Shane’s wrist, pulling it away. “If you insist.”

Fully clothed, Ilya dropped to his knees, eliciting a groan out of Shane, who instantly grabbed onto Ilya’s curls.

It would be incredibly embarrassing for Ilya to come in his pants before he even touched Shane’s cock, so before he started he took two deep, centering breaths. He leaned forward, one hand coming to wrap around the base of Shane’s dick, his mouth closing over its tip.

“*Oh, fuck*,” Shane moaned above him, his hips jerking uncontrollably. Maybe, Ilya reasoned, using his free hand to steady Shane, he wasn’t the only one at risk for a quick finish.

He gripped him tighter at the base, trying to stave off an early end to their night, and bobbed his head, sucking his cock in tightly. He could feel Shane’s fingers clutching at his hair, to the point it would have been painful if not for the fact it was sending bolts of arousal straight through him.

Ilya gathered speed, moving his mouth over Shane, his tongue roaming. After a couple minutes, during which Shane’s knees seemed to get noticeably weaker, Ilya relaxed his throat, diving deeper and feeling him slide into his throat. Shane cried out, “*holy shit*.”

Releasing his firm hold on his cock, Ilya grasped both sides of Shane’s hips. He stilled his own head, and tugged on Shane in encouragement. Their eyes met briefly – a look from Ilya that said *go ahead* – and Shane started to thrust carefully into Ilya’s mouth.

Ilya focused on keeping his throat relaxed for him, urging Shane on with his hands before moving them to roam the back of his thighs. After a couple minutes, Ilya gripped Shane’s hips and pulled off. He looked up at Shane, his mouth wet and lips swollen.

“Fuck,” Shane heaved above him, “*holy shit... oh, fuck*.”

“Hm, so you’re saying you liked fucking my mouth?” Ilya asked, still on his knees. He thought he would be happy to stay on his knees forever, actually, for this.

Shane flushed, as Ilya knew he would. But Shane was being brave tonight, because he said, “Yeah – yes,” still breathing heavily, “but I – I want you to fuck me.”

He grinned at Shane, who smiled back and added, “please.”

His awkward, wonderful, perfect Shane. Ilya laughed lightly as he stood, moving in to kiss Shane hard. “Okay, because you said please.”

Shane pushed at Ilya’s clothes, his hands scrabbling for the buttons, taking brief breaks to attack Ilya’s lips with his mouth. For a moment, Shane moved as if he was going to go to his knees as well, but Ilya stopped him. Shane looked at him questioningly.

“Another night,” Ilya said between kisses, moving his own hands to help shed his clothes. “I know what I want to do to you tonight. Let me.” Shane responded with a bruising kiss.

It didn’t take long before Ilya was naked, Shane’s eyes searching him frantically.

“Like what you see?” Ilya teased. It was light, purposefully so, as he was trying desperately to keep a clear head. Because Ilya could feel a gathering pressure, like the minutes before a lightning storm, where things became heady and hot and like he might lose all sense of himself completely.

Shane nodded, but it was serious, like he could feel the gathering storm too but was giving it free reign to crash down upon them. He lifted one hand up to rest on Ilya’s chest, then, looking into Ilya’s eyes, traced his fingernails over his nipple, scratching lightly. Ilya let out a breath, rocking forward onto the balls of his feet.

“I’ve –” said Shane hesitantly. “I’ve thought about you so much. About... everything. This. Being with you.”

The burst of electricity fizzled through Ilya’s body, thrill and nerves and wild desire. “I hope it can be as good as you imagined.”

Shane looked at him, eyes traveling across his face. “It’s better. Already.”

And then they were kissing, and Ilya couldn’t say who leaned in first. All he knew was he needed to be closer, to press himself against every inch of Shane’s body, that if he could, he would bring them so close that they would meld together, somehow.

Shane’s hand dropped down and gave a few experimental strokes to Ilya’s cock. He moaned into Shane’s mouth, who swallowed it down greedily.

Ilya stepped them back carefully to the bed, their mouths still welded together. When the backs of Shane’s knees hit up against the mattress, Ilya carefully – reverently – lowered him onto it. Shane broke the kiss so he could crawl backwards on the bed, somewhat ungracefully, until he was lying back against the pillows.

Ilya moved over him slowly. He started with his head at Shane’s ankles, dropping a kiss on each one. He traced his mouth upwards slowly, over his shins, his knees and then, very carefully, kissed gently at his thighs, pressing his legs apart.

Shane whimpered. “Fuck, yes. More.”

Ilya didn't respond, focused on the soft skin of Shane's inner thighs while his hands traveled to each knee. He grasped under them and pulled them apart, then pressed upwards so Shane's knees were folded on top of his chest.

His pink, tight hole was brought mercifully into view. He failed to stop a low groan escaping him, but before moving further, Ilya's eyes flicked upwards to check. Shane was trembling, but he looked at him and nodded.

Swallowing once, Ilya started with his lips brushing the sensitive skin under Shane's balls, taking pleasure in the way Shane tensed and moaned and writhed under him. Then, finally, he reached Shane's hole. With one last glance at Shane's face, which was blown open with ecstasy, he licked it gently.

"Ah, fuck," Shane moaned. "Yes. Yes, fuck."

Trying not to feel too smug, Ilya released his pent up desire onto Shane's hole. Encouraged by Shane's moans and the way his legs trembled, bracketed on either side of his head, he licked eagerly and with abandon. He lapped at Shane's hole, feeling drunk on it, swirling his tongue and letting the spit run its way into Shane's loosening entrance.

When Shane's whole body was shaking – which didn't take long – Ilya pulled back to grab blindly for the lube. In the process, he caught a glimpse of the look on Shane's face, contorted with pleasure, and he nearly came on the spot.

"Ilya, please."

"Fuck," Ilya muttered to himself. He squeezed a generous amount of lube on two fingers. He said then, "just a second, baby. Fuck."

Shane moaned again, his face tense with anticipation.

Ilya dipped the tip of his index finger inside his hole, and Shane groaned and tried to grind his hips down onto it. Ilya chuckled to himself and went deeper. He stroked, gently for a second, but quickened when he saw that Shane wouldn't be kept waiting any longer. He slipped a second finger in and he moved – searching, looking for –

"Ah," Shane shouted out, "there, fuck, right there."

Ilya curled his fingers into the spot, again and again, taking the opportunity with every movement to scissor his fingers, gently stretching him. Ilya was now so hard it was almost painful, but he wanted to be absolutely sure Shane was ready for him.

"Ilya," Shane gasped. Ilya looked up at him. Shane looked wrecked: his mouth hanging open, his cheeks red and sweaty, and his eyes – fuck, his eyes were blown dark and there were tears gathering at the corners. "I need you inside me. Now."

Ilya just managed a tight nod. He withdrew his fingers, and grabbed the bottle of lube again. He slicked himself, giving just a couple strokes in the process.

He climbed over Shane, hovering above him. He hesitated for a moment, kissing him softly. Shane kissed him back, just as gentle, and Ilya could feel the stray tears that had escaped onto his cheeks.

“Please,” Shane whispered.

Ilya settled himself between Shane’s legs, lifting them so they were hooked over his shoulders. He reached one hand down to stroke at Shane’s cheek. “I love seeing you like this,” Ilya said, not even intending the words to come out. “Open for me.”

Shane nodded frantically. “It’s all for you.”

Ilya took a deep breath and lined himself up. With one hand on his cock, he leaned forward slowly. The blunt head of his cock pushed into Shane’s hole and they both gasped.

Ilya had never done this without a condom before. It was tight, unbelievably so, and he could feel every inch of Shane’s heat wrapped around him, dragging him into Shane’s body. Just knowing that he was burying himself in Shane was enough to make his eyes roll back a little in his head. And then there were the little gasps out of Shane, filling his ears and making him feel half-insane.

The electric pulse under his skin thrummed wildly.

Ilya pushed forward, driving in tantalizingly slowly, Shane whining beneath him. When he bottomed out, his balls up against Shane’s ass, his legs came off Ilya’s shoulders and Ilya dropped himself closer to Shane, burying his head into Shane’s neck.

He held himself there, not quite sure if it was Shane that was shaking or himself. Perhaps both.

He gathered himself for a second, then pulled back to look at Shane. Shane had his head thrown back, panting and moaning and rolling his hips, trying to urge Ilya to move.

Ilya was struck by the thought that he wasn’t sure he would be able to deny Shane anything ever again, and he started to move.

His thrusts started deliberately slow, but hard, Ilya drawing back carefully but then thrusting back in with force. Shane cried out with every thrust.

“Yes – Ilya – fuck,” the words were punched out of him, “more – please, *more*.”

“You like my cock?” Ilya whispered into his ear.

“Yes,” Shane moaned. Fresh tears gathered in the corner of his eyes. “Harder. I want to feel you everywhere.”

Ilya groaned and dropped his head again, and for a few minutes they were panting into each other’s mouths as he fucked into him. Then he pulled out of Shane and rolled him onto his stomach so he lay flat. Shane turned his head, one beautifully pink cheek on display, both arms coming up and resting under his head.

Ilya draped his body over Shane's, his face coming to rest on top of his cheek, close enough that their breaths mingled together. Their bodies were perfectly lined up, Ilya crowding in on every inch of Shane's bare back and pressing him bodily into the mattress. Ilya spread his ass with strong hands and thrust back inside.

Shane shouted out, his eyes squeezing shut. "Yes, *fuck*."

Ilya's arms came up to wrap around Shane's shoulders, and he started to drive in relentlessly. His hips rutted against him, punching little noises of "*ah, ah, ah*," out of Shane with each thrust. Shane was flat against the bed, and Ilya knew he could feel his full weight pressing into him, as close as he could get without fully crawling into Shane's ribcage. He felt the sticky sheen of sweat shared between them and he groaned at the wet, obscene sound of his balls slapping against Shane's ass.

"I love you," Shane panted mindlessly, throwing his hips back as much as he could to meet Ilya's thrusts. "I love you. I love you."

Nuzzling into Shane's neck, Ilya gasped against his skin, "Ya tebya lyublyu. I love you, Shane."

Ilya could feel the hot coil of pleasure deep in his groin, and he started to lose his rhythm. He gritted his teeth, determined to hold on until Shane came. He was just considering hauling Shane's hips back into the air, to give him access to his cock, when Shane said,

"I'm close – fuck – Ilya, don't stop –"

"Yes, Shane" Ilya groaned, "come for me."

Another moan from Shane, who was grinding back onto Ilya's cock.

"Come for me," Ilya demanded, drops of his sweat falling onto Shane's face.

With that, Shane started to tremble and shout, his hips jerking wildly. It seemed to come in waves, rolling through Shane relentlessly as he cried out, clenching down onto Ilya's cock. As the final wave appeared to crest, Ilya finally let go, the last thread of control breaking as he thrust once, twice more into Shane before he pushed himself in as far as he could go, holding tightly to Shane, and pulsed into his body. Ilya panted heavily into Shane's ear, shaking as he felt himself release ropes of come.

Boneless and fucked stupider than he thought possible, Ilya collapsed. He had just enough presence of mind to slide himself part-way off of Shane, so he was resting at least some of his body weight on the mattress instead of suffocating him like the world's sweatiest weighted blanket.

They lay there, face-to-face, their hot breaths fanning over each other's faces.

After a minute or so, Shane gave a weak, delirious laugh. "Jesus Christ."

Ilya had to agree, nodding mindlessly. He was still mostly inside Shane, so he carefully pulled out, checking Shane for any sign of discomfort but finding none.

“Are you...” Ilya was still catching his breath, “okay?”

Shane laughed again, this time a little stronger but no less delirious. “I’m better than I think I’ve ever been.”

Ilya smiled. He ran one hand down Shane’s sweaty back, pausing at the swell of his ass. Unable to help himself, he dipped his fingers into the crease. He was watching Shane carefully, but he only looked at Ilya with half-lidded eyes.

Ilya very gently opened Shane’s cheeks again, propping himself up on one elbow to look. Shane’s hole was a ruddy pink, looking used and swollen. The puffy rim clenched a little at a probe of Ilya’s careful finger, Shane letting out a quiet moan, and there was a trickle of white come spilling from it.

“Fuck,” Ilya whispered. He used one finger to trace his release that was dripping out of his body and pushed it gently back into Shane’s hole.

Shane, who was watching with great interest, shivered. Ilya looked back at him and kissed him, and Shane propped his head up enough to kiss him back.

Then Shane let out a low groan. “I need to shower,” he said, sounding reluctant.

“Hm,” Ilya said, kissing his neck. His finger was still playing with Shane’s hole. “But I want to keep you like this.”

“I – *ah* – I wish we could,” Shane said, hissing a little as Ilya brushed his sensitive skin.

“I love having you here,” Ilya said, mouthing at him and tasting the salt off his skin, “naked. In my bed. Full of my come.”

Shane trembled again. “Fuck.”

Ilya hummed against Shane’s neck.

“Seriously,” Shane said breathlessly. “We both need a shower.”

Ilya groaned but withdrew his hand.

“But,” Shane said, smiling, “you can come in with me, yeah?”

Ilya grinned.

When they were cleaned and showered – an endeavour that took longer than was strictly necessary – Ilya dried Shane off with a fluffy towel, working out some of his cuteness aggression by ruffling it quite vigorously through Shane’s hair, and led him back to the bed. Shane insisted that the filthy top sheet be removed, and they shoved it in the corner of the room.

They laid down on their sides, facing each other. Moments later, Shane’s eyes were shutting.

“Shane,” Ilya whispered, tracing one finger over his freckles.

Shane groaned a little. Ilya smiled. “*Shane.*”

“What?”

“I love you.”

A satisfied, sleepy smile. “I love you, too.”

Ilya woke up needlessly early the next morning, before the sun had fully emerged over the horizon. Shane had an arm draped over him, and for a while he just relished the weight of him. A tiny, sleepy sigh from Shane sent a wave of happiness through him.

Eventually, irritated but too uncomfortable to ignore it, a full bladder prompted his exit from the bed.

Instead of returning, Ilya was drawn to the little balcony attached to the room. It was nearly May, but it was Montreal, where spring came slowly and in stops and starts. The early morning air was still chilly against his skin.

Despite being downtown, there were still birds swooping through the trees of the park below. Ilya watched them, his eyes tracking their movements. He already had one hand reaching for his phone on instinct, before he remembered that there was no need to take a video for Shane – if he wanted him to see it, he could just go inside and wake Shane up.

At the thought of Shane, wrapped tightly in the spare, clean blanket they’d found in the wardrobe last night, a smile stretched across his face. He looked down at his hands, feeling that familiar ache – but now, when he longed for him, Shane would be there.

Well. *Sometimes*, he supposed. Shane lived in Montreal, and he still lived in Ottawa. He knew they would have to talk about it, figure out how to carve out some semblance of a life two hours apart. He shivered and pulled his sweater tighter around himself.

His thoughts, as they often did, drifted to his mother.

When he was a boy, maybe six years old, he had a favorite spot in the house. It was a little nook, a tiny room with a strange door only a few feet high, like the builders had started to make a closet and got bored halfway through.

“It’s dead space,” his mother had explained, “the ceiling is slanted so it’s all that would fit.”

But he didn’t care for that explanation. He preferred to imagine it had been made especially for him, and he packed it with pillows and blankets and even stole one of his mother’s silk scarves so he could hang it and make the room look like the inside of a genie’s lamp. She had found it secured to the ceiling with a thumbtack he’d taken from the laundry room. She raised an eyebrow at him, but at his guilty expression she gave him a little wink and put a finger over her closed lips.

He loved it for many reasons, but mostly because his father never thought to look for him there. Ilya would hear him slamming doors or shouting and he would run with soft feet and shut the door silently behind him. A few times, he heard his father's voice getting louder and his footsteps tracking in his direction, but he was able to breathe a sigh of relief when his mother's voice appeared as well, dragging his father away to finish their argument.

It only occurred to him years later that she had interrupted on purpose, inviting more conflict into her life in exchange for his secret being safe another day. But by then it was too late to thank her.

His mother had wedged herself into his nook only once. He had been annoyed, a little, because she couldn't really fit and they'd had to leave the door open so she could stick her feet out. But he'd allowed it, because she had seemed so sad. And besides, he had heard a loud slam of the front door and he was sure his father was gone for the day.

"Mama," he'd asked, patting her clumsily on the face, "what's wrong?"

She had seemed frightened for a second. "My Ilyushenka. My sweet boy," she'd tweaked his cheek a little, "you will be better than him, yes? When you are older?"

Ilya had nodded fervently. He didn't know what he was agreeing to, but it was her that was asking, so the right answer had to be 'yes'.

"Good," she'd said. "It is a privilege, Ilya. To be given someone's heart. A gift. Do not waste it."

He hadn't understood, really, what she meant, but there were tears in her eyes and he wanted to make her happy.

"You can have mine?" Ilya had offered hopefully. "And I will take yours?"

He couldn't remember if she'd said anything in response, but he did remember the way her mouth had tightened and, later, he heard a bawling cry from her bathroom. He'd been disappointed in himself, and resolved to say something better the next time.

He thought about that often, since. The nook. The way her eyes had gleamed with unshed tears. How she'd crawled out on her hands and knees, which made him giggle. How she'd hoped for him to be better than his father was.

He stared down at a cigarette he was rolling between his hands.

"Are you going to smoke that?" came Shane's voice behind him.

Ilya startled, not having heard the door open. Shane was carrying two mugs of coffee, the shitty instant kind that came with the machine. He handed one to Ilya, and it was sweet and milky, the way Ilya liked. Shane sat down next to him.

"I don't know," Ilya shrugged. "Maybe."

Shane pressed his lips very tightly together.

Ilya gave a little laugh. “It’s okay, Shane, you can say it.”

“Say what?” he asked stiffly.

“The same thing you have been saying for the last year.”

Last summer at the cottage, Ilya had been caught sneaking a cigarette, and Shane had delivered one of his all-time best lectures, beady-eyed and waving his hands around and even tapping his foot impatiently. When he threatened to pull out his medical textbooks, Ilya had thrown his hands up in defeat, promising to abstain at least for the week.

Shane made a non-committal noise, not looking at Ilya.

Ilya laughed. “Fine, I will say it for you – I really need to quit, it’s going to ravage my health, I won’t be able to play –”

“That’s true,” Shane interrupted irritably. “But that’s not what I was going to say.”

Ilya’s smile faded a little. “What then?”

“I was going to say...” said Shane. He looked at Ilya, then his gaze flickered away. He was staring at the skyline when he said, “I would really like you to try to stick around. For me.”

Ilya stared at the cigarette and let out a dry laugh. “That’s not fair.”

Shane shrugged. “I don’t care much about playing fair. I want to have you around for the long term.”

Ilya paused, and then said, “I have tried – to quit, I mean. Since last summer.”

Now it was Shane’s turn to be startled, his head swiveling in Ilya’s direction. “You have? Really?”

“Yes,” said Ilya. “I haven’t been completely successful, obviously... but I’ve tried.”

“I’m glad,” said Shane, “that’s all I can ask. That you try.”

“I would text you,” Ilya admitted, still looking at his hands. “When I wanted to smoke. It helped.”

Shane raised his eyebrows. “If you had told me that, I would have never let you get off the phone.”

Ilya laughed.

“I’m serious,” Shane insisted, grinning, “I would have wired an earpiece directly into your brain.”

“I will try,” said Ilya. An image flashed in his head, this strange idea of Shane handing him his heart in a box. Then, he said more firmly, “no, I will. I’ll do it for you.”

“Thank you,” said Shane softly. He reached out and grasped one of Ilya’s hands in his. “My parents will be so happy to hear it. I think it was the only knock against you in their eyes.”

Ilya frowned. “I don’t like having any – what was it you said?”

“Knocks against you?”

“Yes, that – I don’t want them to have any.”

Shane rubbed his thumb against the back of Ilya’s hand. “I’m kidding, Ilya, it’s okay.”

“No, is important,” Ilya said firmly. “Whenever you tell them –”

“Oh,” Shane said, looking at him with wide eyes. “They already know.”

“Know?” Ilya repeated, his eyebrows going up. “You... told them you are gay?”

“Yeah,” Shane said, “and – and that I had – had feelings for you.”

“What?” Ilya asked stupidly.

“I thought it would be okay,” said Shane, “I mean – I didn’t say anything had happened, but, like, you’re not closeted so –”

“Shane,” Ilya interrupted, “I’m not mad. I – it’s good. I’m just surprised. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Ilya watched a little muscle work in Shane’s jaw.

“I wanted to know for sure that I was ready. I didn’t want to mess you around... but I’ve been working on this –” Shane waved his hand between them, “– for a while.”

Ilya cleared his throat. “And what did they say?”

“They weren’t too surprised, actually,” Shane admitted with a laugh. “Made me feel silly that I’d hid it, a little... but they were great.” He glanced at Ilya. “Now, about you...”

“What?” Ilya asked, trying not to panic.

“I’m kidding,” Shane playfully bumped him on the shoulder. “They love you already. My mom threatened to show up last night for ‘moral support’. And even if they didn’t, I think Anya would be enough of a draw.”

But even though Shane was teasing him, Ilya squared his shoulders.

“Okay,” he said seriously. He put the cigarette on the table. “No more, then.”

“I – Ilya –”

“No more,” he repeated firmly. He looked at Shane. “Anything, for you.”

Shane smiled shyly, but he looked pleased. “Okay, well, I’m not going to argue with that,” he said, “I’ll look into the best anti-smoking measures,” he continued on, tilting his head in thought, “I was reading about a nicotine-free med, actually..”

He pattered on for a couple minutes, and Ilya – though listening intently – didn’t quite catch it all. But it didn’t matter.

“Shane, moya lyubov,” Ilya said, patting him on the arm. “I’ll do whatever you tell me to.”

They held hands for a while, sipping their coffee.

“I’m out at work, as well,” Shane dropped casually.

His heart had been in his throat that day, having gone into work for three days straight thinking, *I’m going to say it today*, and then coming home disappointed. But that Thursday morning he was determined, and if he didn’t find an opportunity he thought he might just stand up and say it before leaving for the day.

But then someone asked him who he thought the hottest woman in Game of Thrones was and – despite the distastefulness of the question – Shane grabbed onto the thin chance and said, with all the nonchalance he could muster, “well, I’m gay so probably not the best judge.”

Ilya gaped at him. “Who are you and what have you done to my Shane?”

Shane laughed, and it came out light and clear. Ilya wished he could bottle the sound. “I wish I had known how overblown the crazy scenarios I’d been playing in my head were.”

“So it has been okay?”

“Yeah, I mean – not perfect, but good. Mostly people just accepted it and moved on.”

“That easy?”

“Well,” said Shane reasonably, “someone came in with a crowbar halfway through their neck five minutes later, so they got distracted.”

Ilya whistled lightly. “I’m proud of you.”

Shane ducked his head before tucking himself into Ilya’s shoulder.

“So,” Ilya threw his arm around Shane, bringing him closer, “what will we do? Splashy instagram post? Fuck on center ice? Oh – I have an ad campaign coming up, what do you think of making out on –”

“No ad campaigns,” Shane said firmly. “I don’t think I want everyone to see me with a big shiny forehead looking constipated –”

Ilya gasped in mock-offense. “You said it was not that bad!”

“Oh, well,” Shane shrugged, “I lied.”

Ilya nipped hard at Shane's ear, who slapped his head away like a gnat.

"Anyways, I was thinking we start with our friends and family, yeah? Then," Shane shrugged, "we can do whatever we want."

Chapter End Notes

How are we feeling?? Worth the wait?

Every comment is read and appreciated - I just feel super weird responding, I never know what to say! Kudos are loved as well.

Also, how did a chapter covering one night somehow feel harder to write than the chapter covering two years? Who knows.

Chapter 6: A beginning, and an end

Chapter Notes

Here we are, at the end! For anyone reading along (which might be, like, five people, I'm not sure), I'm really hoping you enjoy it. If you want to drop a comment or kudo, it would be very welcome :)

Did I intend for this chapter to be as long as it is? No, but nothing to do about that now... except enjoy it, maybe?

I have definitely taken some liberties, considering how little I know of hockey and being a doctor. Forgive me. Also, editing was going to kill me so there must be some mistakes I might fix at some point.

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

May 2021

The sensation of wet presses of lips and tongue was not, typically, what Shane would expect as a wake up call. The tacky feeling of saliva on his cheeks, Shane cracked his eyes open as Ilya dropped kisses on his forehead, nose and, strangely, the tops of both of his ears.

Ilya smiled broadly at him, hovering inches above his face. He returned his mouth to Shane's neck, this time nipping his teeth against his skin lightly in his excitement.

"Good morning," Shane said, his voice raspy.

"Good morning," Ilya murmured, returning his lips to the important job of slobbering all over Shane's face.

Shane grasped his curls with one hand, tugging a little to pull Ilya's head back. He blinked a few times, trying to clear the sleep from his eyes. Ilya was gazing down at him, smile wide and eyes soft.

"Happy birthday, moya lyubov," said Ilya.

The season for the Centaurs had ended in a spectacular, brutal fashion in a playoff game against Colorado two nights previously, involving a broken nose, multiple cases of bruised ribs and four on-ice fights. Shane had watched, enraptured, then huffed at the sixth time Ilya was sent to the penalty box. On the seventh, though, he stood and shouted at the tv, firm in his belief that that one, at least, was unfair.

Ilya had called in the wake of the 3–2 defeat. "At least I will be back for your birthday."

Shane had protested – he would be exhausted, he needed to rest, it's *fine*, really – which Ilya had barely deemed worth responding to. He had arrived past midnight the night before, and they'd had time only for a hello-kiss before Ilya collapsed into bed, pulling Shane onto him until he was draped over his chest like a blanket.

Now, sunlight trickling through the broad windows, Shane waking up with Ilya's lips warm against his skin, he was selfishly a little – just a *tiny* bit – glad that they had lost that game.

Ilya nuzzled against his neck, saying, "I am mad at you."

"What?" Shane asked, distracted at the way Ilya was mouthing at him. "*Ah* – why?"

"Well," Ilya pulled back, "you chose, for some reason, to try to seduce me –"

"*Seduce you?*" Shane spluttered indignantly.

"Yes, you came on very strong," Ilya said, pressing another kiss to his cheek, this time over his freckles. "Desperate for me."

Shane made a disgruntled noise that made Ilya chuckle.

"And you just had to make your move less than two weeks," Ilya kissed him on the lips now, and it was slower this time, and Shane couldn't help the way he breathed into it, "before your birthday."

"Oh," Shane blinked, breathless. "The two weren't connected."

"Hm, well, is still very inconvenient for me," Ilya said, idly tracing one hand down his chest. "So much planning to do in such little time."

Shane shifted a little under Ilya's roaming hand. "I don't need anything. I don't even care about my birthday."

"I care," Ilya said firmly. "It's your thirtieth too, is a big deal."

"Well," Shane said, his eyes flicking up to meet Ilya's, a mischievous look in his eye, "I can think of ways we could celebrate."

Ilya grinned wickedly at him, and with his broad, strong hands, reached for Shane's briefs.

"Wait," Shane protested, trying to squirm away, "I haven't brushed my teeth."

Ilya was already nosing at his groin. "I don't care."

"But – I –" Shane's eyes fluttered closed as Ilya started to mouth over his boxers. His hands traveled unconsciously to the top of Ilya's head. "Fuck."

He could feel Ilya smile as he tugged his boxers off. "Don't worry," Ilya said, "your mouth isn't really necessary for this."

And if Shane came down Ilya's throat in record time, well, it was his birthday and there was no need to mention it again, even if Ilya leapt out of bed with a smug gleam in his eye. Ilya dragged him into the shower, but when Shane reached for him, he batted his hand away.

"Later," Ilya said. He spun Shane around and got to work massaging shampoo into his hair, hands working slowly. Shane closed his eyes and let his head tip back onto Ilya's shoulder. Ilya moved from his hair to gently run soap down his body.

"You know, I can clean myself," said Shane, amused.

"I know," Ilya said, and he guided Shane under the shower head to rinse him off.

Once satisfied, Ilya dried him carefully, and moved back into the bedroom to rifle through his suitcase, which was open on the ground.

Shane pulled on a pair of boxers, and then turned to find Ilya holding out a set of clothes to him.

"What's this?"

"Clothes."

"Yes, obviously," Shane rolled his eyes, "I mean, they're not mine. Are they new?"

"Ah, new to you," Ilya shrugged, pressing them into his hands. He grabbed his own white t-shirt and pulled it over his head. "Look at them again."

Shane held up the t-shirt he was holding. It was worn, but not so much that it had taken on that threadbare quality that he hated, like he was wearing tissue paper that would slough off at the slightest provocation. No, it was worn in a soft, loved kind of way.

Shane stared at it – an Adidas shirt, one of the classic ones, grey with those recognizable stripes down the shoulder – then, his eyes widening, said, "is this... it can't be?"

"It is."

"But," his hands went slack, "how?"

The previous summer, on the third day of Ilya's stay at his family's cottage, Shane had been made to suffer through a level of embarrassment that, he was sure, only a parent could deliver. His mom had come bustling out of the laundry room, looking defeated.

"I'm sorry, Shane," she'd said, a limp piece of cloth in her hands. "I think it's finally time."

"Time for what?" Ilya had chimed in with interest.

Shane, who had been making frantic hand signals and gestures to his mom behind Ilya's back, had to straighten out abruptly when Ilya glanced at him.

"Nothing," he'd said unconvincingly.

Ilya raised an eyebrow. “Tell me.”

“Um,” Shane said, his cheeks burning, “no.”

Ilya had narrowed his eyes. “Tell me or I throw you off the dock.”

“You can’t threaten me,” Shane had said, sounding a little hysterical. “This is my house.”

“It’s actually our house,” his dad had chimed in unhelpfully from the kitchen.

So Shane had been forced to explain, with one more furious look at his mother, that he had had that Adidas t-shirt for years, and it was soft and comfortable and *perfect*, and yes, a little hole had shown up a few months ago, and yes, it had started to go a bit thin and papery and okay, *fine*, maybe he’d asked his mom to have a look to see if she might be able to patch it up.

“Sorry, honey,” his mom said, patting him on the head. Shane was sure she was doing it on purpose now, throwing her another dirty look. “But it’s gone. The washer may have, uh, shredded it a bit.”

Ilya, who was chuckling to himself, had said, “aw, it was like safety blanket, yes?”

“Shut up.”

Still grinning broadly, Ilya shrugged and said, “but you can just get a new one?”

“Well,” Shane hesitated, “it’s not – I don’t,” he sighed, “it wouldn’t be the same.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve had that one a long time,” Shane had explained, picking at his fingernails, “it took, like, a year to get it comfortable like that. I just can’t – I’m in scrubs most of the time, anyways, so it would take ages to break another one in.”

Shane had waited for Ilya to laugh again, but he had quieted, looking at him curiously.

And now, months later, he was holding it again.

“What, did you, like –” he glanced at Ilya, “are you like a t-shirt necromancer or something?”

Ilya barked out a laugh. “I actually know that word,” he said with delight. “But no, I’m not.”

“Then where...?”

“I bought it after I got home last summer,” Ilya explained, taking a step towards him. “I thought – if you did not have time to break a new one in,” he shrugged, “I would do it for you.”

Shane felt a wave of tenderness come over him, and he twisted his lips as his throat went suspiciously tight.

“I’m sorry it wasn’t a whole year,” Ilya said, thumbing at his cheek. “But I am in athletic gear a lot, so I think maybe I didn’t need as much time.”

Shane gave a disbelieving, shaky laugh. “Ilya –” he looked at the shirt in his hands again, “this is so fucking sweet.”

Ilya was suppressing a smile, shrugging in a would-be casual kind of way and saying, “I just – I wanted you to be comfortable,” his eyes flicked over Shane’s face, “it seemed like something that would make you happy.”

“This might be the most thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me,” said Shane earnestly, reaching out to draw Ilya into a hug. “I love you so much.”

Ilya leaned back to kiss Shane again. It was light and sweet, and laced with unbound affection. “I love you, too.”

After another moment, Shane’s smile went mischievous, and he teased him, “so, you got this *last summer*? God, you were *so* fucking into me –”

“Okay,” Ilya said, breaking away and rolling his eyes. “This is not news, yes? Now get dressed, I have a birthday breakfast to make you. I have a whole day planned before your parents get here tonight.”

Shane tugged it on with excitement, then turned to the simple black sweatpants Ilya had handed him as well. “So,” he said, pulling them on, “what about the sweats? Did you, like, sew them by hand after seeing a photo of me wearing a pair just like them to my high school track meet –”

“No,” Ilya said, smirking a little. “Those I wore without underwear for a few days. Including a few nights ago.” He wagged his eyebrows, conjuring in Shane’s mind a very vivid image of the last video call they’d had.

Shane froze with them halfway up his thighs. “Ilya – what? That’s,” his cheeks heated, “that’s gross.”

“Is it?” Ilya said softly, leaning in and ghosting his lips across his cheek. “Take them off then.”

Shane’s hands were still hovering over the waistband of the pants, and after another moment’s hesitation he pulled them all the way on. He wouldn’t meet Ilya’s eye, and he shifted himself a bit so Ilya might – possibly – miss the burgeoning erection that he promptly tucked into the waistband.

“Whatever,” he said, brushing past him determinedly, “they were already on, no point in changing.”

It ended up being another hour before Ilya finally got started on breakfast, as they were delayed by Shane’s sudden, desperate need to be bent over the kitchen counter.

July 2021

“I am not nervous,” Ilya said, sliding out of the car, “I don’t get nervous.”

“What are you talking about?” Shane snorted. “I’ve seen you nervous plenty of times –”

“Ah, no, must have been your other boyfriend.”

He knew Shane hated that joke, which is why he’d made it. He relished the deep, long-suffering sigh it earned him.

They were in the driveway of the family cottage, and Shane went around to release Anya into the yard, who wasted no time launching herself into the grass.

“She is happy here.”

“She’s just happy to have a yard again,” said Shane.

When Ilya had first arrived at Shane's apartment two months previously, they had expected him to split his time, the two of them making constant journeys between their cities. Instead, on the third day, Ilya had broached the idea – nervously, Shane would insist – that he simply pick Anya up and return with her to Montreal. Shane had enthusiastically agreed, and Ilya had returned with Anya, a mountain of dog toys, and a very heavy suitcase in tow.

“She could have a yard,” Ilya said, grumbling a little as he hauled their bags out of the trunk, “if you would just –”

“Don’t start,” Shane huffed. “I told you already, you’re not buying me a house.”

Ilya muttered something under his breath, quiet enough that Shane could plausibly pretend not to have heard him.

“Anyways, my parents know you,” Shane said, looking at him with concern. “They already like you.”

“I know,” Ilya said, swinging Shane’s duffel bag across his shoulder. “But it’s the first time – since –”

“Since we went public.”

Ilya sighed and dropped the bags at his feet. He stepped into Shane’s space, and his hand came up to the back of his head, stroking gently.

“Let’s go in, baby,” Shane murmured. “It’s okay, you’ll see.”

Ilya picked the bags back up, and nodded for Shane to lead the way.

“Mom,” Shane called out, “Dad?”

They heard a distant rustle, and a few seconds later David came bounding down the stairs. “Shane, kiddo,” he said in excitement, hugging Shane tightly. He turned to Ilya, who straightened. Ilya went to stick out his hand, but David shook him off with a grin and pulled him in for a hug. “Ilya, thanks for coming.”

“I’m very happy to be here,” Ilya said, a little stiffly.

“Really?” came Yuna’s voice as she emerged from the kitchen, placing a jug of lemonade on the table. She gave them both a hug as they went to sit down, “I know Shane doesn’t get a whole lot of time off. We appreciate you sharing him with us this week.”

“No place we’d rather be.”

“I’m glad,” Yuna said lightly. She paused for a few moments, and Ilya could see something working on her face. “I guess you *do* get to see him every day –”

“Mom,” Shane said in warning.

“What?” Yuna said, holding her hands up. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Okay, well,” Shane said testily, “let’s just –”

“It’s just,” Yuna said, yanking on the lemonade jug. She stared at it while she poured lemonade into waiting glasses, saying, “you’re already living together – I mean,” she laughed dryly, “starting only two weeks into a relationship –”

“*Mom*,” Shane cut in sharply. “You said you wouldn’t do this.”

“I’m not doing anything,” she said defensively.

“He’s barely through the door,” Shane said, exasperated. “Cut us a break, will you?”

“Is okay,” Ilya said, who’d gotten a sinking feeling watching their exchange. He looked at Yuna steadily. “You’re right.”

Yuna’s sharp, careful eyes raked over Ilya’s face.

“It was fast,” he shrugged. “But I think, maybe, also not so fast. We’ve –” he hesitated, glancing at Shane, “uh, we’ve wanted to be together for a long time.”

The hard line of Yuna’s mouth softened a little, and David – who’d be conspicuously quiet so far – nodded at him encouragingly.

“I have to go back to Ottawa at the end of the summer,” Ilya explained, “so we,” he glanced at Shane, “just want to spend all this time together while we still can. And I will be careful with him, I promise.”

Yuna peered at him for another moment, and then her gaze shifted to Shane – but he wasn’t looking at her, his soft eyes on Ilya’s face. She turned back to Ilya, looking mollified. “I – I’m

sorry,” she said finally. “I’ve been rude, Shane is right – you barely got through the door before I started.”

“Don’t apologize,” Ilya said simply. “You are watching out for your son.”

It was enough that they could take a breath, at least, and they spent the rest of the afternoon unpacking – Shane was militant that all bags be unpacked, even if Ilya preferred to live out of an open suitcase – and lounging by the dock.

When it came time for dinner, Shane hung back on the patio with a ginger ale, as Ilya hovered around the grill with his dad.

“Does he know what he’s doing?” Yuna asked.

“Yeah,” said Shane, watching Ilya and his dad laughing and allowing himself to revel in the rising tide of warmth in his chest. “He does pretty much all the cooking at home.”

Shane could sense, rather than see, the way his mom tensed at the casual mention of a shared home between him and Ilya. He held his breath.

“Does he?” Her voice was a bit tight, but she sounded curious. Shane shifted in his seat so he was facing her.

“Yeah, he was pretty bad at first,” Shane laughed. “He had, like, one thing he knew how to make. And there were a few, uh, *interesting* meals at the start. But he’s been picking it up really fast.”

“Huh.”

“He said he was tired of watching me eat half a protein bar for dinner –”

“Shane!”

“I know,” he said, holding up his hands in defeat, “but I’d just be so tired after my shifts –”

“I told you,” his mom said severely, “you need to eat proper meals, you need to take care of yourself –” she stuttered to a stop as Shane let out a peal of laughter, “I – what?” she asked suspiciously.

“Nothing,” he said, shaking his head, “you just – you sound like him,” Shane explained, nodding in Ilya’s direction.

Yuna’s eyebrows went up, glancing between Ilya and Shane.

“He’s always going on about it,” Shane shrugged. “That’s why he wanted to learn how to cook. Said he’d feed me well if it killed him. And,” he laughed, “it nearly did, but we got the fire out before it got too big.”

He watched Yuna’s face contort as she decided whether or not to skate past this.

“Wow – well,” she said begrudgingly, “I’m impressed.”

Shane took a long sip of his ginger ale and let his eyes wander back to Ilya. He was watching his dad offer Ilya the spatula in an ostentatious, over-the-top kind of way, and Ilya accepting with equal ceremony, when he said, “you’re being hard on him.”

He didn’t turn to look, so he couldn’t be sure how she was reacting as he waited several moments for her to respond.

“Yes,” said Yuna, reaching for the glass of wine David had poured for her, “I guess so.”

“Why? I mean, I know it’s fast, but you liked him before – so what –?”

“You’re my baby, Shane.”

Shane went quiet, but he extended one hand to sit on top of hers.

It wasn’t long before the burgers were ready, and Ilya placed one neat plate in front of Shane, and put another, more burnt-looking one in front of himself. As Shane’s parents settled in across them, Yuna looked at David expectantly, giving a little cough.

“Oh, uh,” David said, sounding ruffled, “so, boys.”

Ilya glanced up, eyebrows raised, and looked at Shane, who looked back at him similarly mystified.

“How’s – how’s it been,” he sounded pained, “lately? After the Instagram post and everything?”

Shane snorted. “You’re not subtle, mom.”

“Your dad is the one asking!”

“Right,” said Shane, turning back to his dad, “well, *dad*, everything is going fine.”

Ilya rested a hand on Shane’s knee. “My team has been great.”

“They have been,” Shane agreed. “I met them at a team barbeque a week ago, the day before we posted. They were so welcoming. We’re going,” he smiled at Ilya, “to Troy and Harris’s wedding next month. The whole team will be there.”

“Yes, which is a problem,” Ilya said in mock-seriousness, “I think they prefer Shane to me, now.”

“They do not,” Shane said, bumping up against his shoulder.

“And your work, Shane?” Yuna asked.

Shane shrugged. “Fine. Normal, mostly. A couple people asked me to get them an autograph. A few more asked if I could bring home the flu before his next game against Montreal.”

David laughed, and even Yuna managed a brief smile.

Ilya's stomach tightened; it was the truth, mostly, but he noticed how Shane had skipped over the two days he'd been pulled out of triage so he could avoid the photographers in the waiting room, or how the attending had made an announcement, to Shane's great embarrassment, that everyone needed to flag any patient who requested him specifically.

"And the program," Yuna asked, "are you doing okay?"

Shane picked at his grilled vegetables, glancing at her. "Yeah, I told you."

She raised her eyebrows.

"I mean," he deflated a bit, "it was disappointing, obviously."

When Shane had gotten the email, he was mercifully alone. Ilya had been taking Anya on a run, so upon finding out that he had not secured a place in the research program he had applied for, he at least had the chance to compose himself before Ilya returned.

"And... do you know if...?"

"These are competitive places," Shane said firmly, but Ilya grew wooden beside him, "like, insanely competitive. Coming out or – going public – whatever, it had nothing to do with it."

"You're sure about that? Because it wouldn't be right, if they had –"

Ilya was not sure, and he knew Shane wasn't either.

"I'm sure," said Shane, not sounding very convincing. "Anyways, it's fine. She encouraged me to apply again next year."

They all returned to their burgers, eating quietly for the next couple minutes. Then David, with the air of wanting to inject some brevity in the conversation said, "Well, one good thing is that Shane is now 'Hot Doctor' online –"

Shane startled in his chair, pulled tight in one smooth movement. "Stop it! You saw that?" He sounded horrified.

David laughed heartily, and Ilya snorted into his food. After a moment, and a passing attempt at resistance, Yuna joined in.

"It wasn't hard to find," David said. "Though I did have to scroll pretty fast past some of those comments..."

Ilya was now shaking with laughter beside him while Shane's cheeks burned a bright pink. "It's so embarrassing," he groaned.

After their laughter subsided, Yuna turned back to Ilya. "You do seem to have gathered quite some attention."

Ilya couldn't tell if she thought this was a good thing or not. "Yes, well... after I... moved to Ottawa, I was a bit," he swayed back and forth as he looked for the right word, "spirited," he said finally. "And maybe not in a very good place. I got into some online fights. Homophobes. Republicans. Once, after I got my citizenship, the official state page for Russia. It was very stupid, probably, but it also made people laugh. So they followed me."

"Hm," Yuna said carefully. "You could probably do more, you know."

"What?"

"With your follower count, and your profile," she said, "I mean, three Cups later, and all the attention you've gotten. You don't need to be advertising for furniture chains."

It was Ilya's turn to burn, a flush rising on his cheeks. Shane looked at him, smug.

"I can help, if you want," she shrugged.

"Ah – maybe," he said carefully, "but thank you. Really."

Late that evening, Yuna and David having retired for the night, Ilya and Shane rested by the campfire. Ilya was very slowly roasting a single marshmallow to a golden color. When he deemed it perfect, he folded it in between two graham crackers – Shane didn't like the Hershey's chocolate – and handed it to Shane.

"Sorry my mom was so tough today," Shane said.

"Is okay."

"If you actually let her run your promotional deals, then you'd really find out," Shane laughed.

Ilya made a non-committal noise, poking another marshmallow onto his stick.

"What?" Shane asked, "not interested?"

"It's not that," Ilya said, "if anyone could do it, it's her."

"But?"

"But... I think now is not the best time."

"What do you mean?"

The flames reflected off Ilya's eyes, which gleamed as they flashed in his direction. "We have enough attention right now, yes? A lot of eyes on you, and I know it's not been so easy –"

Shane had picked an unfortunate moment to have his mouth full of hot marshmallow. He swished his tongue around, trying to ease the stickiness enough to talk. "Ilya – I don't want you passing on something –"

Ilya waved his hand. “I don’t need it. What, more money for another sports car? A boat? What am I going to do with a boat?”

“But you could –” Shane said, “I don’t know! Is that why you haven’t wanted to post lately or – or go to that premiere you were invited to? I don’t want you feeling like you have to hide, for me.”

“I don’t,” said Ilya, “is not hiding. It is just... being a little more quiet.” Ilya pinched his cheek. “I think that could be good for me, yes?”

Shane couldn’t help but smile a little.

“I want to help keep things calm for you,” Ilya shrugged.

Ilya’s stick went back into the fire, but this time he plunged it straight into the flames, explaining, “I like mine burnt.”

His hands made steady work of his smore, piling on a thick layer of chocolate.

“I am glad that you have Yuna... that you have someone that tough in your corner,” Ilya said, licking a ribbon of chocolate off his hand.

“You’re in my corner.”

“Yes,” Ilya said, his eyes glinting, “but I am not sure I am as tough as her.”

A sudden vision of his mom and Ilya in a boxing ring flashed through his mind, and Shane laughed.

“I’m serious,” Ilya said, “if a bear comes out of those words, I am calling Yuna to save us.”

“She is something,” Shane conceded. “I just...” he glanced at him, “don’t want her to scare you away.”

“Shane,” said Ilya. He leaned forward to kiss him, running his tongue across the seam of his lips, and dipping inside. He savored the taste of toasted sugar on his tongue and shivered.

“Nothing could scare me away.”

November 2021

“We met three years ago today.”

Ilya was staring up at his ceiling, splayed out in his bed, the satiny sheets cool underneath his bare legs. The patter of rain outside had been looping in a dependable cycle, slapping against the windows for a few minutes, easing off, then starting up again. Ilya’s eyes drifted to trace the windblown, yellow leaves stuck helplessly against the glass.

Shane's voice, sleepy and low, was muted to his ears, like it was being filtered through the early dawn light.

"Yes," Ilya said softly, "I know."

Sun-soaked bliss had given way to cooling winds and the pressing, non-negotiable need for Ilya to return to Ottawa. Never before had Ilya so dreaded the return of the season. Usually it was a welcome relief, in the years that it prompted his return from Russia. Later, it was an easy distraction, something to fill his hours and days.

Now, Ilya realized with some bitterness, it was rapidly becoming the thing that kept him from Shane's bed.

He closed his eyes, trying to imagine Shane at that moment. He knew he was freshly showered, coming off a grueling overnight shift and wrapped up in his favorite t-shirt. He wondered if his eyes were slipping shut, fighting to stay awake for just a few minutes together on the phone.

"So is this, like, our anniversary?"

There was a tugging feeling in his chest, and he squeezed his eyes shut a bit tighter.

"Maybe," he said, trying to keep his voice light. "What about April, though?"

"I guess that's more our anniversary," Shane conceded. "But still, it feels... important, you know? The first time we spoke to each other."

"What do you remember?"

"Um, well," Shane mused. "I remember you trying to embarrass me."

Ilya smiled at the memory. "Was not hard, and was not my fault. You have very cute pink cheeks."

"Shut up," Shane shot back, but he was giggling a little.

Ilya heard a yawning sound at the other end of the call, and, sighing, readied himself to insist that Shane actually go to sleep, but then –

"I was supposed to go with my team," said Shane abruptly.

"Uh – what?"

"That night," Shane said. "I – I didn't have to stay back with you. You were fine, we could have just called the Centaurs medical staff down to sit with you while you were waiting for the second ambulance. I should have left with my team that night."

Ilya's mouth dropped open, words temporarily escaping him. He shifted, turning on his side and cradling the phone by his ear, like he was wrapping them in their own private cocoon.

"Why did you stay?"

His fingers tapped against his phone as the seconds ticked by.

“I think you know.”

“Tell me anyway,” Ilya said, and he hoped it came off playful instead of desperate.

“Because,” Shane hesitated for a moment, “I just – I think I may have been a little bit in love with you already.” He let out a small laugh, nervous and low. “Is that crazy to say?”

“No,” Ilya said. He felt his eyes burn. “It’s not crazy at all.”

Ilya let himself think about, for a moment, what might have happened if Shane had walked away that night, the way that he was supposed to, never giving them the chance to exchange more than a few words.

“I was a little in love with you, too.”

There was a little puff of air on the other side, maybe a laugh or a sigh, and Ilya didn’t care which it was. He just closed his eyes again and tried to conjure up the feeling of Shane’s breath against his skin.

After another yawn, which Shane was very obviously trying to stifle, Ilya said, “get some sleep, sweetheart. We’ll talk when you wake up.”

He let himself wallow in bed for another five minutes, checked his phone and then, decision made, Ilya hauled himself out of bed.

Four hours later, Ilya had his head buried in the fridge, shuffling things out of his way with a furrowed, concentrated look on his face. Then, a loud yell rang out behind him, startling him enough that he jumped, smacking his head on one of the shelves.

He turned to find Shane standing behind the kitchen counter, clutching onto it with strained hands.

“What the *fuck*, Ilya,” Shane said weakly, “you scared me half to death. What are you doing here?”

Ilya rubbed at the sore spot on his head, frowning at Shane. “Why are you awake? This isn’t right, go back to sleep.”

Shane tore his eyes from Ilya as he took in the mess on the counter, where Ilya had been deseeding a pomegranate – which was the main contributing factor to the crime scene in front of them – next to a carefully sliced mango and a fresh carton of eggs.

“What the – what is going on?” Shane demanded, still bleary-eyed.

Ilya rounded the counter, coming to a stop in front of Shane, who was staring at him, confused and ruffled. He took both Shane’s hands in his. “I missed you. I wanted to see you. So I am here.”

“But, you have practice today,” Shane protested, “and a game tomorrow!”

“I told Wiebe I was a little sick. I will be back in time for the game tomorrow.”

“But, you can’t –”

“Shane,” Ilya said, “I can count the number of practices I have missed on one hand. Is okay.”

He hesitated, looking torn. Shane’s eyes flicked over Ilya’s face.

“Are you sure?”

Ilya kissed him firmly. “Yes. Now go back to bed. It is very hard to surprise someone with breakfast in bed if they are not in bed.”

“Hm,” Shane hummed, one hand moving down. “I’m not so tired now, I think.”

Without further ceremony, Shane dropped to his knees. Ilya groaned, his hands snapping to the top of Shane’s head. He was pressing his mouth against his track pants, the thin layer of fabric doing very little to disguise his thickening cock.

“Fuck, Shane.”

Shane wasted no time in pulling down his pants, leaving them halfway down his thighs. He looked up at Ilya, eyes hazy – not with sleep, but dizzying need. He licked one long stripe up Ilya’s cock, which was already mostly hard, pausing at the tip to dip his tongue into the crease.

He swirled his tongue around the head, and Ilya swayed backwards. Shane’s mouth took him in more fully then, his hand wrapping around the base. He bobbed his head over him, saliva dribbling out of his mouth, dripping down to wet his hand. Shane looked back up to Ilya and gripped his hips, urging him to move. After a deep breath, Ilya rolled his hips forward, his cock hitting the back of Shane’s throat. He shut his eyes, trying not to come, and thrust a few more times into his mouth.

Shane moaned around him, the vibrations running their way up through his groin and into his core. He clenched his fingers in his hair and hauled Shane to his feet. He kissed him, wet and messy, and walked them, mouths never leaving each other, into the living room.

“Don’t stain the couch,” Shane said breathlessly.

Ilya rolled his eyes, but he grabbed a towel from the clean laundry basket and draped it over the arm of the couch.

He spun Shane around, pressing a hand between his shoulder blades and guiding him face-down into the cushions, ass up and bent over the couch. He scrambled to get the lube, hidden in a little drawer in the coffee table, and slicked his fingers.

Shane was panting, calling his name, begging for more within minutes.

“I’ll give it to you,” Ilya said, “you want it, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Shane moaned, “I want it, I want your cock. I want you inside me, please.”

“Tell me,” Ilya said, pulling his fingers out and going to get himself ready. He’d had a thorough education in Shane’s sexual preferences over the last several months. “Tell me how badly you want me.”

“I want you so bad,” Shane said, sounding pained. He cried out as Ilya pressed just the head of his cock against his hole. “Oh *fuck* – it’s all I can think about sometimes.”

“More,” Ilya demanded, sliding the first inch in.

“I – I think about just being – *ah* – a hole for you,” he panted, Ilya pushing in another inch, “being open for you, all the time.”

Ilya shuddered, his cock twitching inside of Shane.

“Like it was made for you,” said Shane, hanging his head now, breathing heavily, “like I was made for you.”

“Yes, Shane,” Ilya grunted, bottoming out in his ass, “you were fucking made for me. You’re so perfect for me.”

He snapped his hips, relishing the sound of Shane gasping loudly. He grasped the back of his neck and started to thrust vigorously, smooth, powerful strokes into Shane’s body.

A coil of heat tightened in his groin, so pleasurable it bordered on pain, and he knew he wouldn’t last much longer.

“Fuck, harder, baby, I can take it.”

Ilya hitched one of Shane’s legs so his knee was on the arm of the couch, angling his hips up slightly and thrusting back in. Shane shouted out, head craning back.

He started babbling. “Fuck, right there. Yes, Ilya, god – I love you, I love it –”

“Tell me,” Ilya said again through stuttered breaths.

“There’s nothing like this – ah, fuck – nothing, baby, you make me feel so good, nothing has ever made me feel so good. I would fucking die for your cock. *Fuck*, Ilya,” he gasped, “I’m coming – I’m –”

Shane tensed, shaking underneath Ilya’s hand, tremors surging through him. Ilya felt dizzy at the feeling of Shane clenching around his cock and he broke, hips stuttering, ropes of come shooting from his body. Ilya thought he might have let a high, broken sound escape his mouth, but he couldn’t worry about that now.

He wanted to collapse forward onto Shane, maybe slide them both onto the couch, but he forced himself up, snatching the towel before it could drip. He tossed it into the washing

machine and came back with a clean, damp washcloth. He cleaned them carefully, Shane in something of a daze.

Ilya, with a grim resignation, gathered himself to return to the necessary business of making Shane's lunch. He was not successful in persuading Shane to return to bed, but he did convince him to at least lay down on the couch. From there, Shane was still able to have a prime view of Ilya wrestling with the pomegranate and muttering to himself, "fucking demon food, why do you like these".

Ilya wanted to bring his food over to the couch, but Shane was firmly against crumbs in the living room (Ilya wanted to point out that come and lube were fine, apparently, but managed to resist).

Instead, he presented Shane with his overly-large plate of food at the kitchen table, and Shane clapped lightly, and went about nibbling at the different offerings while narrating the experience like a judge, stopping only when Ilya gave him a firm tug on the ear.

Shane chuckled to himself and dug into his scrambled eggs more enthusiastically.

"You're too good to me," Shane said off-handedly, scooping some of the eggs onto a piece of toast.

"No such thing," Ilya said, starting on his own plate.

"I've, uh," Shane said, now carefully cracking salt over his food, not looking at Ilya, "been feeling a little bad."

Ilya raised his eyebrows. "Why?"

"Well," Shane shrugged, chewing through a large bite, "you're here every chance you get, and I don't make it down to Ottawa nearly enough –"

"Shane," he said firmly, "you have a real job."

"Your job is real too."

Ilya waved a hand in the air, like he was physically pushing the words away. "I have a fun job. Look," he placed both hands on either side of Shane's face, "you don't even have enough time to sleep or eat, let alone drive to Ottawa. So don't waste another second thinking about it, okay?"

"Okay," Shane smiled. He tucked back into his breakfast, eating in companionable silence for a few minutes.

Ilya watched Shane thumb over his phone, tapping it a few times. When Shane spoke again, he sounded forcibly casual.

"Hey, so, it turns out I can come back to Ottawa with you tomorrow. I can go to the game, too."

Ilya froze with a forkful of eggs halfway to his mouth.

“I thought you were working?”

“Oh, no,” Shane said, looking back at his mostly clear plate, “right. I, uh, forgot – I’m not in the next few days.”

Ilya set his fork back down, uneaten. “You mean multiple days in a row? Like more than two?”

“Yeah.”

“That never happens.”

“It happens sometimes.”

Ilya huffed, frustrated. “Shane.”

“What?” Shane asked innocently.

“Tell me.”

Shane scraped his fork over his plate. “It’s – there were some weird reviews, and a couple people are just, like, making a big deal out of it.”

Ilya’s eyebrows scrunched together as he tried to derive some meaning out of this.

“Tell me better, please.”

“Fine,” Shane said in defeat. “The hospital got hundreds of crazy reviews online, most of which mentioned my name. It’s *fine*, ” Shane said at the mulish look on Ilya’s face, “they think it’s bots. Like maybe Russian ones, or something.”

Ilya straightened so abruptly his chair screeched as he skidded back several inches. Anya, who’d been sleeping upstairs, barked once, distantly.

“It’s just spam,” Shane insisted, “it’s nothing! But a couple journalists were nosing around wanting to report on the Russian angle, so they just said it was better for me to switch my shifts around for a few days.”

Shane kept shrugging as he talked, which was, for some reason, making Ilya more angry.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Ilya asked, wincing a little at how accusatory it came out.

“Because I knew you’d be like this,” Shane said, his voice going dry.

“Like what?” Ilya asked defensively. “Caring about my boyfriend?”

“You take it hard,” Shane huffed, his fork clattering as he dropped it on the plate, “and then you mope –”

“*Mope*, ” Ilya repeated indignantly. He got to his feet. “Is that what I’m doing? I should just forget then, yes? Who cares if my boyfriend is being harassed –”

“I’m not being harassed!”

“No?” Ilya challenged, running his hands through his hair, “you didn’t need to shut down your social media pages? You didn’t have to change your phone number, because your fucking co-worker leaked it online? You didn’t –”

“Okay, enough,” Shane said loudly. “I get it!”

“Okay, so –”

“*So*, I can handle it, it’s fine!”

“And I can’t handle it, is that what you are saying?” Ilya asked. There was a spiraling tension building in his chest, wisps of fear and insecurity and bitterness whirling together. He clenched his teeth, wishing he could turn away and being terrified Shane might just disappear if he did.

“Jesus, no,” Shane said, getting to his feet too, “stop twisting my words!”

“Then tell me what you really mean!”

“I’m scared you’ll get spooked!” Shane shouted. “There, are you happy? You always get this look on your face, like you’re all fucking twisted up about it, and I worry that – I don’t know, you’ll just think it’s too hard and you’ll just –”

“Shane,” Ilya said. He didn’t soften, exactly, but a thread of hesitation poked through. “I love you. You *know* that I love you.”

“Yeah, exactly,” Shane threw up his hands, “you said, when we first got together, that you didn’t want to be the reason my life got hard. So if I let you think any of it’s hard, then...”

Ilya deflated, his shoulders dropping as he moved to center himself in front of Shane. “*Moya lyubov*,” he said, pleading now, “I don’t – I didn’t mean that I wanted you to keep all this from me.”

“Well,” Shane said, “I felt like I had to. To keep you.”

Ilya groaned and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, inhaling slowly through his nose. “Come here,” he said, reaching out a hand.

Shane paused for a moment and then, like he always did, he went to him. Ilya reveled in the feeling of Shane’s warmth and tugged him over to the couch. They flopped onto it in one slightly uncoordinated movement, Shane landing nearly in Ilya’s lap.

“I’m sorry,” Ilya said finally. “I should not have made you feel like – like that.”

“I know you didn’t mean to... I just love you. I would do anything for you.”

“I know,” Ilya said, placing a hand on his cheek. “But that can’t include you trying to deal with all of this alone.”

Shane nodded. Ilya watched his face work for a moment, the little crease in between his eyebrows. “It has... been hard, sometimes.”

“I know,” Ilya said.

He held Shane close, scratching the back of his head lightly with his nails. He felt the hot fan of breath against his neck and, despite it all, smiled.

“I will do better, trying not to... overreact. To be what you need, instead of,” he gestured broadly, “making it worse. Not,” he admitted, “that I won’t worry.”

“I know,” Shane conceded. “And thank you.”

“But Shane, it goes both ways,” said Ilya. “You have to let me help.”

Shane grumbled and shoved his face into Ilya’s chest.

“I mean it,” and there was a tinge of amusement in Ilya’s voice now, “I know you are very stubborn –”

“I am not.”

Ilya didn’t dignify that with a response. “But I can help. Let me.”

Shane rolled his head back to look at him. “I will tell you, okay?”

“Good,” Ilya said, nodding, “and?”

Shane groaned. “And... you can pay for the security thing you wanted. The review, whatever.”

“Thank you,” said Ilya, “and if the security review says this apartment,” he glanced around, “is not the safest option?”

Shane bit his chest lightly. “Don’t push it.”

Ilya tweaked his nose. “Another day, then.”

The tendrils of anxiety settled, a little, and Ilya tried to think only of the movement of Shane in his arms, his slow, steady breathing. But he couldn’t help but wonder, distantly but constantly, if there would ever be a way to re-do their world so Shane would be safe, with him, always.

The phone in his hand felt absurdly like a brick, heavy and offensive in its silence. He tapped at it again, waiting, hoping that some sign of activity would appear..

“FUCK,” he shouted. He got the stupid idea to throw it against the wall, but dismissed it just as quickly. What would he do then?

“Roz, calm down,” Bood said, shuffling nervously behind him.

The best Ilya could muster was a furious glare, a muscle clicking in his jaw.

“He’s fine,” Harris tried, “right? He called you, so –”

“He had a crazy fucker put him in a headlock,” Ilya snarled. “And I’m fucking stuck in Arizona!”

Bood, Troy, Luca, Wyatt and Harris had formed something of a semi-circle around him, loose and carefully outside swinging distance.

Ilya had trudged off the ice after a vicious, but ultimately victorious game, and checked his phone like he always did. He had a voicemail from Shane, and clicked on it, smiling – but then he heard:

“Hi – uh, hi baby. Don’t freak out, okay? Everything is fine, I swear. I am completely fine. But, uh, this guy was brought into the ED today and, well – I could tell he was on something, you know? And when I was examining him, he was kind of in and out, and then, he just kind of came to. And like, he recognized me. Or... I don’t know. He said your name and he looked at me, and he seemed kind of angry. Then I looked down and then – yeah, he just got his arm around me. My – my neck.

It was only like a minute, I’m seriously, completely fine. But they have to evaluate me, just in case, and I’ll be stuck making a report, so I probably won’t be able to call you after your game, and I know you would expect to hear from me so... ” there was a bustle of voices in the background, *“sorry, they’re waiting for me. I have to go. Just – don’t freak out, I’m completely fine. I’ll call you as soon as I can.”*

Despite Shane’s pleas, Ilya had, in fact, freaked out. Most of his teammates had fled the locker room at the first opportunity, leaving a few to – mostly unsuccessfully – calm him down.

Ilya jumped when he felt vibrations in his hand.

“Shane,” he said urgently, “are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Shane sounded tired. “I told you not to worry.”

The sound of Shane’s voice sent a powerful wave of relief through his body. A hand over his face, Ilya said, “someone tried to choke you.”

“Barely,” said Shane with a breathy laugh.

Ilya collapsed with shaky legs onto the bench in the visitors locker room. He had shed his top layer of gear but was still wearing his sweaty hockey pants and shirt, and they felt unnaturally tight against his skin.

“What happened – the tests? And the man, what did –?”

“Ilya, baby, calm down first,” said Shane steadily.

Ilya groaned and hung his head down. He glanced at his teammates, who had been watching with interest, and now startled and directed their gazes randomly around the room. Ilya snorted and waved them away, watching their backs as they grabbed their bags and left. He would probably feel guilty later.

“Take a deep breath,” Shane said.

Ilya forced a breathful of air through his nose, exhaling noisily.

“Good job,” said Shane approvingly.

“How are you so calm?”

“I work in an emergency room,” Shane said wryly. “This isn’t even the worst shit I’ve seen today.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better,” Ilya said, looking up at the ceiling.

“The eval came up fine. Maybe a bit of light bruising,” said Shane, and, hearing Ilya let out a pained sound, said, “it’s *nothing*, I promise. It’ll be gone in a couple days. It was the police report that took the most time.”

“Did you find out why...?”

Ilya’s breath caught in his throat, and he frantically tried to tamp down a treacherous wave of tears.

“Ilya,” Shane said, knowing what was running through his head, “this is not your fault.”

“Then why,” Ilya said bitterly, “did he say my name?”

“I –” Shane seemed lost for words for a moment, “look – he came in jittery and angry and, I think, on a lot of drugs. He was aggressive. He probably would have done something like this no matter what.”

“You can’t know that.”

“It’s fine. And I notified the security people, like I knew you’d want me to do, so they’re... I don’t know. Doing whatever security people do. I think someone from the company is coming to the apartment to do a spot check or something.”

“They fucking better,” Ilya said, “the amount they charge. Maybe they should monitor overnight –”

“Baby, please,” Shane laughed incredulously, “the guy is in police custody. He can’t do anything to me.”

“But –”

“But nothing! I already let you con me into a new apartment, with its live stream cameras and a guard at the gate and everything, so just count your blessings, okay?”

Ilya sighed heavily. “I wish you had gotten into the research program.”

“I – what?” Shane seemed confused by the sharp turn of direction.

“Not just because you wanted it, and because you deserved it,” said Ilya, rolling his head forward, “which we both know you did. But also, then, you wouldn’t be... exposed like this, every day.”

“I still would have been in the ED sometimes.”

“Yes,” Ilya said. He was wallowing, he knew, but he couldn’t help it. “But not as much.”

“Ilya, you know I love my job,” said Shane, sounding firm. “This is part of it.”

“I know,” Ilya said, “but I’m allowed to be worried. Especially when I get a voicemail saying my beautiful, perfect boyfriend got choked out by meth head.”

“It probably wasn’t meth,” Shane said, “it seemed more like PCP, to me.”

Ilya huffed a dry laugh, then frowned.

“I’ll come home, I can be home tomorrow –”

“Ilya, no”, said Shane, “you’re only halfway through this roadtrip –”

“Who cares –”

“I care! And I know you care, and your team *definitely* cares.” Shane said. “Look,” he took a steadying breath and his voice dropped, low and serious, “I promise you, if I wasn’t okay, I would tell you. I’ve been honest, haven’t I?”

“Yes, you have” Ilya said, thinking back to a phone call two weeks prior where Shane dry-heaved on the phone over someone mailing a printed picture of his dick to the hospital. (Shane had been far more upset over this than he seemed to be about getting choked, saying, “what if my supervisor had opened it? So fucking humiliating. And who the fuck *prints out* a picture of their dick?”)

“And I’m being honest now. I’m okay.”

“Okay,” Ilya said finally, defeated, “okay.”

“Go eat dinner,” Shane said, “I’m not actually done with my shift –” Ilya sighed, “– don’t even say it. It’s fine.”

“Okay, just,” Ilya took a deep breath. “I love you.”

“I love you, too. I’ll call you when I get home... we can fall asleep together, yeah?”

“Yes, I’d like that.”

“And maybe,” Shane dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, “we could do a bit more than sleep.”

Ilya grinned. “Yes. Get yourself ready for me.”

He could hear Shane bristle a little. “Okay, bye, baby. And tell everyone I said hi. Oh, and tell Evan that his daughter’s rash looks like poison ivy, he can get cortisone cream over the counter.”

“I told them to stop texting you their medical questions.”

“I don’t mind,” Shane said, “I kind of like it. And Lisa’s over the moon to have someone to share the load.”

After a goodbye that felt more painful than normal, Ilya knew he had a few hours to kill. Ilya ended up at dinner with Troy, picking at a plate of grilled chicken – despite his jokes to Shane, the team nutritionist would have *him* in a chokehold if he actually lived off cereal – and looking around listlessly.

“Was everyone else too afraid to see me tonight?”

Troy rolled his eyes. “No one is afraid of you.”

Ilya scoffed.

“Okay,” the corners of Troy’s mouth twitched, “maybe Luca was a *little* afraid. But I think that’s just how he is.”

Ilya sighed. “I will apologize to him tomorrow.”

“It’s fine,” Troy shrugged, “you were scared. It’s okay.”

“Is not.”

“Remember when Cassie went into labor three weeks early while the team was in Anaheim?”

Ilya laughed begrudgingly at the memory.

“Now *that* was some fucking meltdown.”

Troy's smile faded a bit. "Look – I know it's not really my place," he said, "but I don't think Shane is regretting anything."

Ilya looked at him sharply. "I didn't say that he was. What, did he –?"

"No," Troy interjected, "*you* did. Look," he gestured to Ilya, "you're so quick to look for all the downsides for Shane."

Ilya stabbed at his food. "There are too many," he said glumly. "He has..." Ilya's mouth twisted, "given up too much for me."

"Ilya..."

"And now," Ilya said, cutting his chicken with unnecessary force, "he gets attacked."

"Ilya, stop it," Troy said, a bit steely now. "That's not your fault."

Ilya didn't respond, hoping – pathetically, perhaps – that Troy could convince him.

"You know, at Bood's Boxing Day party a few weeks ago," Troy pressed, "I was talking to Shane."

Ilya glanced at him, intrigued against his will. "And?"

"And," Troy looked like he wanted to laugh, a little, "that man fucking loves you."

The grin that appeared across Ilya's face was quick, a flash in the pan, but it was real. The sheer, boundless joy that came with Shane's love, love that he still wasn't convinced he deserved – was enough to crack through his defenses, at least for a moment.

"He was telling me about his work and he's happy as can be," said Troy, "and then, out of nowhere, he just, like, trails off. One second he's telling me about drilling through some guy's skull and the next he's just gone quiet."

"I don't understand."

"Neither did I. Then I turn around and I see you passing through. You had one kid on each leg, remember? You were messing with them, pretending you were going to shake them off."

"Nick's kids are getting very strong," Ilya said, loosening slightly. "It was actually hard to get them off."

"And Shane just goes totally stupid. I mean, soft and like... disgusting. And he's just watching you, and it's like there's no one else in the room."

Ilya looked down at the table, shrugging.

"Come on," Troy said, "you can't be surprised. The night ended with you both somehow in each other's laps in that tiny deck chair. I don't even know how you managed that."

“Shane is very flexible,” Ilya said. “Yoga.”

“Well, it was gross,” Troy laughed, “but, like, in a nice way.”

“You’re one to talk, you and Harris ran off to the woods! Did you think we did not see?”

Ilya took great satisfaction at the red flush that appeared on his cheeks.

“We’re not talking about me right now!” Troy said, flustered. “The point is – it’s *good*. You and him. You look at each other all sappy and suck face when you think no one’s looking.”

“You can look,” Ilya shrugged. “I would, if other people were as hot as us.”

Troy made a noise somewhere between a scoff and a snort. “But really, Ilya. Shane is *happy*. Everyone can see it. Hell, he fucking called his parents halfway through the party, drunk on eggnog, just so he could show them you doing that stupid handstand you’re so proud of.”

“Yes, Yuna called me the next morning, very mad. Said is stupid and I’m risking breaking my neck during the season.”

“You’d think you’d just won the Stanley Cup with the way he was going on about you.”

Ilya sat back, considering his words, turning them over in his mind. He nodded, once, and Troy looked reasonably pleased.

Then, abruptly, Ilya frowned. “Who invited Hayden Pike to the party?”

“Uh, Wyatt I think, why?”

“That didn’t go so well.”

“What, he and Shane seemed to really get along? And he’s local to Montreal?”

“Exactly,” Ilya said. “Shane deserves better and more talented friends than Pike.”

Troy rolled his eyes, opened his mouth, and then seemed to think better of whatever it was he was going to say. He reached a hand out and rested it on Ilya’s arm. “Look, just... let him love you.”

“What?”

“I just worry you’re going to be all self-sacrificing, like you have to be noble or something stupid like that. But sometimes the best thing we can do for someone is to let them decide for themselves what’s worth doing.”

March 2022

“Please, Ilya,” Shane gasped, tears built up in the corner of his eyes. “I need to come, please let me come.”

Ilya had one hand on Shane's cock, stroking lightly, something but not enough. It was the fifth time he'd worked Shane to the edge, stroking and sucking at his cock and fingers pushing into his hole, always pulling back at the last moment.

Ilya had already come, once, straddled over Shane's head, thrusting shallowly into his mouth, but had become painfully hard again over the last twenty minutes – or was it thirty?

"Hm, I don't know," Ilya murmured, licking the salty sweat on his neck, drinking in Shane's little squeaks, "I think you could go again."

"No, fuck," Shane pleaded, "I need to come, please."

Ilya stroked more vigorously now, his eyes fixated on the way Shane's mouth dropped open, his eyes squeezing shut. He felt Shane's body tense.

"One more," Ilya said, "one more time, Shane, yes?"

"Ah – fuck, I – god, okay."

Ilya withdrew his hand, leaving Shane untouched and his chest heaving.

"God," he whispered. He moved so he was hovering over Shane, and he dropped gentle kisses across his chest. "You're so good. So good, so perfect for me."

Shane whimpered, putting his arm across his face so he was buried in his elbow.

"No," Ilya said, pulling his arm away gently. "I want to see."

His breath came out shaky, but Shane let him lower his arm, and he gazed back at him, pliant and wild and with wet, wide eyes.

"You've been so good for me," said Ilya, pressing his lips against his collarbone. "Tell me how you want to finish. You can have anything."

He panted below him, his eyes sliding down to Ilya's dick, red and thick, resting against his thigh.

"Fuck me," Shane breathed. "Like this, I want to look at you. Hold my legs up."

The ache of his dick intensified, and Ilya grabbed behind both of Shane's knees and pushed them up so they were folded on his chest. Cock already slick and ready, he thrust into Shane without preamble, setting a punishing pace.

"Yes, yes, yes," Shane chanted, "fuck, Ilya. Don't stop."

Ilya never, ever wanted to stop, his hips moving mindlessly, anything and everything was just *Shane, Shane, Shane*.

He hit up against his prostate, pumping into him relentlessly, hot, gasping breaths against his face. "Come for me," Ilya gritted out, feeling his own orgasm chasing him, "I want to feel

you come on my cock.”

This pushed Shane over the edge, finally, and he yelled as he came, tears squeezed from his eyes, his whole body trembling as he shot his release. Ilya watched his come paint his chest and he groaned, stiffened and flooded Shane’s hole with his come.

They didn’t speak for several minutes, their chests heaving. Eventually, Shane rolled over to grab his phone where it had landed on the floor after Ilya had knocked into the nightstand.

“Fuck, the hospital called.”

“Ignore it,” Ilya said breathlessly, propping himself up on one elbow. “It’s your day off.”

“They called four times,” Shane said.

Ilya groaned and flopped back onto the bed. Shane took a second to steady himself and then clicked the number. Someone picked up on the second ring, and he was talking fast into the receiver.

“Yeah.... Oh Jesus, fuck. Okay... Yeah... Yeah, 20 minutes.”

He hung up, turning to Ilya with a guilty, pinched look on his face. Ilya, knowing what was coming, groaned again.

“I’m sorry,” he said insistently, “I’m really sorry. There was a massive accident at a building site, half a building collapsed or something. They’re calling everyone in, I have to go – fuck, I need to shower.”

This was a rather grim thing to say naked and not even fully soft, but Ilya could hardly argue with that.

“Will I reschedule with Svetlana?”

“What?” Shane frowned, halfway off the bed already. “No way. I’ll be home by tonight, they can’t have me on shift past seven.”

“Moya lyubov,” Ilya said, “you weren’t even supposed to be working today. You’ll be exhausted.”

“I’ll be fine,” said Shane, hustling over into the bathroom, sticking his head back out to say, “don’t cancel, I mean it.”

The sound of rushing water drifted through the open door, and Ilya dragged himself out of bed, joining Shane for a shower, quick and precise. He was grateful for the dual showerhead, since Shane was something of a water-hog.

When they emerged, Shane picked back up on their conversation as they toweled themselves off.

“Seriously, though, don’t cancel on Svetlana or I’ll be pissed.”

Ilya had been teasing him lately at the talent Shane held for getting his way, but he was starting to think maybe he was just weak when it came to Shane.

“Why?” Ilya huffed. “Are you afraid of her?”

“Yeah, a little, obviously,” said Shane, grabbing at his pants, “but more importantly, she’s flying out to Montreal to see you. And me, I guess. And we only have, like, less than two days and then you have to be back in Ottawa. So she’s coming.”

“We really don’t have to. I could see her myself, even.”

“You came with me with Hayden’s last night –”

“*Hayden’s*. Pike is fiftieth best player in Montreal –”

“There are only twenty players on the team.”

“Yes, and what does that tell you?”

Shane gave him a shove as he walked by him on the way to the closet. “Stop it, I think we’re really becoming friends now.”

“I know, sweetheart. That is why I was so nice to him.”

“Was that you being nice?” Shane raised his eyebrows, pulling on his shirt.

Ilya’s mouth twitched. “I like the kids very much. And Jackie, she is too good for him. Pike was... there.”

“Gee, thanks,” said Shane sarcastically, now pulling on his socks.

Ilya acquiesced, saying, “fine, I will keep plans with Svetlana. I love you.”

Shane leaned down and kissed him hard, and said, “I love you too,” and was out the door.

Ilya always did feel a little unmoored when Shane was at work. He changed the sheets, and then drifted down the kitchen, trying not to miss Shane too much.

Anya wove through his legs, nosing at him hopefully as he pulled out various ingredients for the protein balls Shane liked. (They were a sandy mixture of protein powder, oats and flaxseed, with a few paltry scoops of peanut butter. Shane had insisted Ilya try one, once, and his mouth went so dry he couldn’t bother filling a glass of water and just held his mouth under the tap instead). But he knew the recipe by heart, and had noticed Shane’s freezer stock getting dangerously low.

He was glad when Svetlana finally arrived that afternoon, tall and imposing and looking so very odd in Shane’s apartment.

Ilya took her on a tour, and he noticed her eyes track over his things – his toothbrush in the bathroom, looking worn and flat (did he need a new one? Probably). His protein powder in

the pantry. A worn dog bed in the living room.

She didn't comment on it, but he watched as she nodded to herself, eyes sharp with clinical interest. They spent the rest of the afternoon on a brisk, windy walk around Montreal, until Svetlana declared that the knots in her hair were becoming hazardous and demanded to return home.

Ilya could tell how tired he was before Shane even opened the door at the end of the day, the heaviness of his footsteps and the clanky rustling of the key in the doorknob speaking for him. But, seeing Svetlana perched at the counter, wine glass in hand, Shane stood up straight, hitching a smile to his face.

They exchanged a hug, made more awkward by the fact that Svetlana had been moving to stand at the same moment Shane leaned over, ending with her head in his armpit and Shane flushing a deep pink. Ilya delighted privately at the thought that he could tease Shane about it later. Maybe he'd reenact it for him, and Shane would roll his eyes and tell him to fuck off, but he would laugh, too.

Shane flashed him a dangerous look, as if he was foreseeing this all unfold. Ilya's shoulders shook with laughter, which he tried to cover by turning back to the stove.

They were sitting down for dinner when Svetlana asked abruptly,

"So, Ilya lives here?"

"Well, uh," Shane stammered. He looked at Ilya. "Not exactly – he's here, uh –"

"I'm here whenever I can be," said Ilya.

It had been easier, actually, to anchor themselves around Montreal. Shane's job was chaotic, but at least it was always in the same place.

"So it will be like," she gestured to them, "this, then? Long distance?"

"Is more... medium distance," said Ilya.

Shane looked slightly alarmed, an effect Svetlana had on many men. "Yeah, I mean, I can't leave my residency, so... but," he glanced at Ilya, "we have a plan."

"A plan?" she asked. "Tell me."

"Right now, I can't be too far from the hospital," said Shane, "but... I've applied for a research program, which," he clicked his fork against his plate nervously, "I'm really hoping I get this year. I managed to get a new advisor at McGill who's really pulling for me, and with her help at the university..."

Ilya grasped his hand and squeezed once.

"There's a good shot," said Shane. "And then my schedule would be totally different. I'd be doing research and teaching most of the time. I'd maybe have one day a week in the ED."

“So...?”

Shane looked at Ilya, pleading silently for him to take over.

“So we move in together, and live in between,” said Ilya resolutely. “An hour away for each of us.”

Svetlana’s face went slack. “Ilya – you are going to move to the suburbs?”

Ilya gave her a flat stare, gesturing at her with his knife. “Ottawa is practically the suburbs already.”

Svetlana laughed in disbelief, picking up her wine glass and taking a sip, lips staining red.

“Is fine,” Ilya said, “many players already live far away. Some of my friends are out that way.”

“Yes, the ones with little kids and picket fences.”

Ilya felt his face pull taut for a moment, startled. He prayed that Svetlana would keep quiet; her eyes sharpened in his direction, but she mercifully didn’t say anything.

“Well,” she said, swishing her wine glass around, watching the liquid spin, “then I guess I should visit as much as I can, now. I wasn’t built for the suburbs.”

The rest of the night went down soft and easy, pink cheeks from the wine and the three of them spilling into the living room, putting on a movie and talking over the whole thing. Shane rested his head in Ilya’s lap, and Ilya caught Svetlana shooting them furtive glances, a pleased, satisfied smile on her face.

By the end of the second movie – a French, artsy film that none of them, even Shane, could follow – Shane was snoring lightly in his lap. Svetlana made her way to the guest room, pausing only to pinch one of Ilya’s cheeks very hard, her eyes wet, and left him to haul Shane into bed.

“I’m awake,” Shane said, sitting up on the bed, grumpy as Ilya unbuttoned his shirt and tugged his t-shirt over his head.

“I know, sweetheart.”

They laid down together, face-to-face, Shane tracing a finger over Ilya’s cheekbones.

“You went all quiet earlier,” he said softly.

“When?” Ilya asked, but he knew what the answer was going to be.

“When... uh, when Svetlana,” Shane took a breath, “when she, like, mentioned kids.”

Ilya pressed his lips together.

“Can I... do you... why?”

Ilya let out a breathy, quiet laugh. “Is dangerous to give her ammunition. Next she’ll be telling me I need to sell the last of my sports cars.”

“You *do* have to sell your sport car –”

“I only have *one*,” Ilya whined.

“Yes, and it’s orange.”

“Orange is cool.”

“It’s like driving a big, stupidly dangerous traffic cone.”

Ilya tried not to smile, and probably failed.

“But seriously,” Shane said, his smile fading. He rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. “Do you... want kids?”

Ilya searched for the words, painfully aware of each moment passing in silence.

“I mean,” said Shane, sounding nervous, “it’s fine – I didn’t mean to bring this up out of nowhere –”

Ilya interrupted him, forcing the words out before he could think too much. “I like kids.”

Shane’s mouth snapped shut.

“I think... maybe I am good with them.”

“You are,” Shane said softly.

“But I used to be... afraid. That maybe I would be like my father was,” said Ilya. He felt the mattress dip as Shane rolled to face him again. He knew Shane wouldn’t interrupt; he never did, when Ilya spoke about his family. He always just let him talk.

“And then, after what happened, when I...” Even though it had been years, now, Ilya’s mouth struggled to shape themselves around these words, “when I tried – to kill myself.” He stopped, his chest tight.

Shane’s mouth went into that sad, desperate little frown, the one he always had when he was trying not to cry. He usually did, when they talked about that time in Ilya’s life.

They had talked about it once, completely and thoroughly, and more often in dribs and drabs, and now Shane organized Ilya’s antidepressants into a little monthly pill box, meticulous and color-coordinated.

Ilya soldiered on, “I thought, this is it. I am like my mother. And I can never do that to a child, so that was off the table. And I had wanted it, and it killed me to have it taken away,

even in my own head.”

Shane pressed his lips against Ilya’s throat.

“But,” Ilya said slowly, “I have been thinking... maybe...”

“Maybe...?”

“Maybe,” Ilya said, and he looked into Shane’s brown eyes blinking up at him, “you have made me brave. And loving you... has made me want more. Want everything.”

The little frown deepened, and Ilya knew Shane was losing his battle against the tears welling up in his eyes.

“I think, I would like to do it, with you,” said Ilya, “if it’s what you want too.”

Shane nodded, blinking rapidly, a few errant tears escaping down his cheek. “Yeah – yes. I would.”

Ilya smiled softly, rubbing a tear into his freckles with the pad of his thumb.

“I mean,” Shane clarified, “someday. Not yet.”

“No, not yet,” Ilya agreed. “You have many lives to save. And I have some more hockey to play,” he kissed him. “And besides, you haven’t even made an honest man out of me yet.”

“Where did you learn that phrase?”

Ilya shrugged. “I listen to many podcasts on the drive.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” Shane said, sitting up with a bolt of energy, “will you read to me tonight?”

“Shane, moya lyubov, please,” Ilya pleaded with him, “your brain needs rest.”

“Just a little bit,” Shane insisted, handing him the Russian copy of *Frankenstein* he’d bought him the year before, “I think it’s been helping. Like, I still can barely understand a fucking word but I have to start somewhere. Please.”

Ilya grumbled but took the book anyway. “One day you are going to cram so much stuff into your big, sexy brain that it will explode.”

Shane just settled in his usual spot, draped over Ilya’s chest.

“It’s important,” said Shane, “I want to be able to do this for you. Besides, one day you’re going to be speaking in Russian to our kids and I, for one, don’t trust you not to use it as a weapon against me.”

An indescribable, nearly painful, wave of affection flooded Ilya’s chest, and he gripped the book hard for a second. Then he sat back and began to read aloud.

May 2022

Shane was, as he liked to do when he was stressed, reorganizing his closet. He had large piles of clothes on the ground, and he was picking them up, one by one, to fold neatly and place back into its proper spot.

“You just have to tell him,” said Rose, voice tinny over speakerphone.

About a month ago, Ilya had been invited to a premiere in Montreal and, with some coaxing, had managed to convince Shane to go with him. He had been horrifically nervous, tugging at his suit collar while Ilya looked effortlessly stunning, but Ilya had taken his hand at the start of the night and kept a firm hold.

Ilya had, however, laughed himself silly when Shane had casually explained that he had met a very nice woman by the bathrooms, pointing her out as she glided by.

“What did you talk about?” Ilya had asked, delighted.

This woman, named Rose, had, upon learning he was a doctor, immediately showed him how she could pop out her shoulder blades and looked back at him seriously, asking, “is that normal?”

“I’m not sure what she does,” Shane had admitted, feeling guilty, “I should have asked.”

Ilya had snorted into his drink so enthusiastically that he’d had to put it down, coughing and laughing and, when he’d had his fill of Shane’s bewildered look, kissing him very hard.

Rose was still in Montreal, actually – she hadn’t been in the movie that had premiered, she was only attending since she was in the city shooting another film. But they’d managed to grab drinks or dinner a few times, and she liked when he could keep her company through the slog of the make-up chair.

“That’s what I said,” Iris chimed in. She was lounging on Shane’s bed, turning the pages of a magazine idly. When Shane told her about his new friend Rose, she had blinked once, shrugged, and then asked what they were going to get for dinner.

Shane sighed. “He’s going to be mad.”

“Yes, but,” said Rose, “it’s your choice.”

Iris didn’t say anything, but she let out a tiny cough. Shane eyed her, and she pressed her lips together.

“I know you don’t agree.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Look, I’ve thought about it a lot,” he said, trying valiantly to sound self-assured. “It’s the right choice.”

“Then why do you sound so constipated?” Iris asked.

Shane flicked a shirt at her, which she batted away with one hand.

“Maybe I’ll just tell him —”

That earned him an instant, resounding “*no*” from both women.

“Don’t lie,” said Rose, tsking a little at him, “it’s not worth it.”

“Fine,” he said grumpily, flopping into the still massive pile of clothes on the floor. “But I’m not happy about it.”

By the time Ilya arrived that evening, his closet was mercifully back in order (Iris hadn’t helped, exactly, but she did provide a running commentary on the pieces she found offensive enough to get rid of). Ilya kissed him once, soft and tired, and collapsed onto the couch. He had arrived from Florida and had driven straight to Montreal for a single night, before he’d be pulled back into their intense playoff run.

Shane drank in the sight of him. Ilya’s curls were frizzy and tangled, the way they always were after a flight, and he had dark circles lining his eyes. His body lay limp on the couch, sprawled out, and he was carefully positioned to avoid putting any weight on his left elbow.

Fuck. How could he tell him now?

Ilya cracked one eye open. “What is wrong?”

“What?” Shane asked, laughing nervously. “Nothing.” He was standing awkwardly by the kitchen counter, and, for something to do, turned to empty the dishwasher. In the process of moving, however, he elbowed a plastic bowl off the counter, and he winced as it bounced noisily across the floor.

“Ok, you’re being weird,” Ilya said, sitting up with immense effort. “What has happened?”

Shane’s eyes darted around anxiously, but Ilya patted his hand on the couch beside him, beckoning him over. Feeling cornered, Shane sat next to him, back straight and hands in his lap, feeling oddly prim.

“I – I heard back... about the programme.”

“Oh,” Ilya grimaced. “It was not good news?”

“Well...” Shane took a breath.

“What?”

“Not exactly,” Shane sighed. “Look, it’s complicated. But I’ll start by saying that it’s all good, okay?”

If anything, this made Ilya look more alarmed. “Please just tell me.”

“They couldn’t offer me a spot in Montreal,” Shane explained.

Ilya’s face fell, a frown tugging on his lips. He opened his mouth, then, obviously thinking through Shane’s words, closed it again. After a few moments, he said, “what does that mean... in Montreal?”

“My advisor, the one who I attached my research application to – she’s, uh, moving. She’s transferring to the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver, to open a new center for the research group there..”

“Vancouver,” he repeated slowly.

“Yeah, so.” Shane cleared his throat, which had gone uncomfortably dry. He wished he’d thought to get himself a glass of water, for the added benefit that it also would have given him something to do with his hands. “She offered me the place, but I’d have to go to Vancouver, for the start of term in September.”

Ilya had gone very still, which was impressive considering the floppy quality of all of his limbs at the moment. He nodded in that way that told Shane his mind was moving fast.

“Ilya,” Shane said, concerned, “it’s okay, I’m not – it’s okay, I’m staying here.”

He turned stiffly to look at Shane. “Staying here?”

“I’m going to turn it down,” Shane said, trying to sound nonchalant. “I, uh, checked with the other residents on this project, the ones in Montreal and Ottawa, but they’re all, like, completely dug in. No one is willing to trade, even if I could get permission, so... I’ll continue with my residency here, same as before.”

Ilya’s face went tight, and he opened his mouth.

“It’s okay, really,” Shane said hurriedly. “I mean, I know it does make our plan to move in together... hard. But we’ve managed long distance for the last year, so I think...?”

He trailed off at the look on Ilya’s face, which was going steadily more pinched.

“Ilya?”

“No,” said Ilya, his voice hard, “you can’t – that’s not how this goes.”

Shane jolted, a little, his head cocking in surprise. “Look, I know we had a plan, but – like, I’m sorry, I don’t know what else to do. I’ve still got a few years left for residency, but then... we can make it, I know we can.” Tears threatened his voice. “I mean, do you not want...?”

“*Shane*,” Ilya said, sounding horrified, “I don’t mean – I would, of course I would. I mean, *no*, you are not turning this down.”

Frustrating as it was, at least the conversation was turning to more expected territory. Shane’s shoulders slumped down and his chest unfurled a little.

“I knew you were going to say that,” Shane said, “but look – it’s too far.”

“*No*. ”

“Ilya,” Shane said, “it’s over a five hour flight away. We’d be on opposite coasts and we’d hardly ever see each other. And this isn’t, like, a few months. It’s years.”

“No, Shane,” Ilya said, sounding near tears. “You can’t – you’ve worked so hard –”

“I know I have,” Shane said, the words came out tight and sad, “but I can’t be on the other side of the country from you. I just can’t.”

“But –”

“Think about it,” Shane said insistently, trying to impress the reality of the situation into Ilya, “do you want to be thousands of miles away from each other?”

Ilya looked hurt, his head going back like he was physically revolted by the idea. “I – of course not. No.”

“See,” Shane said. “It would suck. We can’t.”

“But this isn’t right,” Ilya burst out, leaping to his feet. “You deserve this. You could do so much good –”

“I still will,” said Shane, exasperated and also, however much he might not want to admit it, still feeling the sting of disappointment, “I’m still a doctor, I’m still doing what I love!”

“But you wanted *this*.”

“Well, I want you more.”

Ilya froze, except for his eyebrows, which furrowed together. Shane thought he looked scared.

Ilya stalked over to the kitchen. Like he was on auto-pilot, Ilya pulled out two glasses, filled one with water, for Shane, and another with zero-alcohol beer, for himself. (Shane still managed to feel distantly pleased that Ilya was taking his advice for playoff readiness).

Shane came up behind Ilya where he was bracing himself on the kitchen sink. He tentatively put one hand on the back of his head, and was relieved when Ilya didn’t shake it off.

“Look, you’re exhausted,” Shane said quietly, stroking his hair, “let’s just... rest, for a bit. We can talk about it later. I know it’s a lot, but it’s going to be okay.”

Ilya was still clenching onto the sink, his knuckles white, but he turned to look at Shane. His eyes were an angry red.

“Come here, baby,” Shane murmured, and he pulled Ilya into him, his face tucked into his neck. Ilya went, pliant and boneless.

They didn’t talk much for the rest of the night. They sat on the couch, quiet except for the pained whimpers out of Ilya as Shane carefully massaged his calves. Eventually, Ilya took him by the hand and led him wordlessly to bed. They fucked slow and sweet, on their sides, cradled against each other in the dark. When Ilya came, Shane could feel his face, damp and hot, pressing against his shoulder.

Shane woke before dawn. Normally they would be wrapped around each other, limbs tangled, but this morning Ilya was already awake, sitting propped up against his pillow.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” said Ilya softly.

“Ilya,” Shane puffed as he scooted over enough so he could nestle into his chest, “did you not sleep?”

“I slept,” said Ilya, “a little.”

“And what were you doing the rest of the time?”

“Thinking.”

“Oh yeah,” Shane leaned his head back, searching his face and trying not to feel nervous. “About what?”

“I have new plan,” said Ilya simply.

Shane sighed, muttering, “it’s too early for this.”

“I heard your plan,” said Ilya, “it was bad, but still, I listened –”

“Ilya.”

“Listen,” said Ilya seriously, cupping his face. His hand was rough and warm and so familiar. “You will take job –”

“I said –” Shane interrupted. He felt a strange panic, and he got the impulse to clutch onto Ilya’s wrist and never let go.

“Listen, please,” Ilya pleaded. “You say yes to the research programme. In July, I am free agent. I am still very good – Vancouver will take me. I will come with you.”

Shane sucked in a breath.

“Ilya,” said Shane, stunned. “No.”

“Yes.”

“Your whole life,” said Shane, “is in Ottawa. All of your friends. The Centaurs.”

“Yes, I know.”

“But,” Shane felt like Ilya must not understand, must not realize what he was saying. “You love it there. You love *them*. You’ve always said you owe everything to Ottawa, and – the team, they’re always with you. You’re so close to them, you can’t –”

The idea, admittedly, had crossed Shane’s mind at first, but he’d dismissed it just as quickly. The Centaurs, and the family Ilya had created with them, had put Ilya back together through the worst part of his life.

Shane ached for the version of Ilya from all those years ago. He sometimes wished he could claw his way back to him, somehow. He felt strangely guilty that he hadn’t been there, even though they hadn’t met yet, but he had found comfort, many times, in the knowledge that Ilya had found people who could hold him.

“Yes,” Ilya said gently. “They love me. And I love them. That’s how I know they will understand.”

“But,” Shane said, his eyes brimming with tears, “I can’t ask you –”

“You aren’t asking me,” Ilya reminded him. “Look, it was one thing when it was Montreal to Ottawa. But you’re right, we can’t live a country apart for five years. I could not stand it.”

Shane sniffed. “But I can stay. I’ll stay.”

“I don’t want you to,” said Ilya. “Hockey is – it’s good. It’s important to me. But it will only last a few more years.”

“I’d say you could go ten.”

Ilya chuckled. “Seven, maybe.” He rubbed his thumb against Shane’s cheek. “What you’re doing Shane – it’s your whole career. The entire rest of your life. It has to happen. It has to come first, this time.”

Shane swiped angrily at his wet eyes as the tears spilled over, shaking his head.

“Tell me honestly, Shane,” said Ilya seriously, “look me in the eye and tell me you don’t want this job.”

Shane’s mouth opened, but he couldn’t make the words come out.

“Okay,” Ilya nodded, as if something had been settled. Maybe it had. “Say yes.”

“Yes,” Shane whispered. “Okay.”

June 2022

Shane was trying very hard not to pace up and down the stairs, which, to be fair, would be difficult considering he was boxed in on both sides, by his parents as well as a sea of Centaurs fans, clad in red.

He couldn't quite believe he was here, a strange sense of un-reality dogging him all day, starting with watching Ilya hydrate himself to an aggressive degree first thing in the morning, up until Ilya waved and blew him a kiss as he stretched out on the ice.

It just seemed outrageous for the Centaurs to be up for their *fourth* Stanley Cup win.

But at the same time, it wasn't *so* unbelievable. In the last six weeks, Ilya had transformed himself, relentlessly, into a sharp, brutal, focused version of himself that Shane had found thrilling and, if he was being honest, deeply erotic.

He understood, really, why they said Ilya was a once-in-a-generation talent. There truly was no one else like him. But he couldn't think about that now, not unless he wanted to get hard with his parents sitting next to him.

Ilya hadn't told anyone about the impending move to Vancouver, Shane knew, and it had tugged on him as he watched them huddle together before the first face-off.

"Honey," Yuna said sharply, "sit down. You're making me nervous."

"It's perfectly normal to stand at a game."

"It's the intermission."

He sat down, but after a minute of him jiggling his leg incessantly, his mom pushed him back onto his feet.

The team filed back on the ice, and Shane craned his neck, wanting to see. He thought maybe Ilya glanced up at him, but only for a moment before all attention was on their last twenty minutes.

When the final buzzer rang, 3-1 in favor of Ottawa, Shane was jumping up and down in his seat wildly, clasping hands with his mom while his dad grasped his shoulder, shaking him back and forth.

Shane watched on the jumbotron as tears poured down Ilya's face, his arms shaking as he hoisted the cup in the air. Finally, Shane stumbled down the steps with the other families, reaching for him with both hands.

"You did it, baby," said Shane, clutching at his face, "I'm so proud of you."

Ilya kissed him, breathing into his mouth, and the glitter of cameras sparkled behind his closed lids.

He had to hang back, though Ilya wouldn't let him go far, waiting for Ilya to speak to the reporters that were waiting for him, wanting to talk to the captain of the generation.

"So, Mr. Rozanov," a young woman asked, hoisting up the microphone, "you were on a tear through these playoffs, leading your team to its fourth championship. That's quite a feat. Can you tell us what motivated you to take it all the way home?"

And Ilya, eyes gleaming, spoke with only the smallest tremor in his voice about his team, and how playing with them was the honor of a lifetime. What a gift it was to get to this game, together.

"And," Ilya said, gaze flicking over to Shane, "I have someone very special in my life. And I wanted to do it for him."

Yuna, sniffing loudly, wrapped her arms around Shane, who smiled and leaned back against her.

The celebrations stretched well into the evening, and by the time they made it into Ilya's bed, their eyes were shutting against their will.

But Ilya whispered to him, just as they drifted off, "Vancouver will have to take me now."

Shane, not for the first time that day, blinked back tears.

30 June 2022

They were sitting on a patio, the weak, early morning sun peeking out at them. Shane was trying to ignore the simple fact that it was only one day until Ilya's agent would be making the call to Vancouver. It was too strange a thing to think about, having just come off the Ottawa parade.

Relax, Shane thought, trying to center himself. Right now, they were sitting with their coffees, and things were quiet, and Ilya's nails were scratching gently, lazily on the back of his arm. He closed his eyes.

They had spent an impromptu night at Harris's family orchard – Shane had been forced to declare very loudly that *no*, they could not get another dog right now – but left early to pick Anya up from his parent's house. Or that was the plan, at least, before Ilya convinced him to stop in a small town on their way back, one of those tiny hamlets with a few odd shops and, thankfully, a coffee shop to feed into his caffeine addiction.

Ilya had delighted at the quaintness of the experience, having had to ring the bell on the counter upwards of ten times before an elderly, unsteady woman came trundling down the stairs, nearly tripping over her cat in the process. She gave them both annoyed looks at the intrusion, despite the fact that the sign had said they were open, and immediately retreated back up the stairs as soon as she handed them their coffees, not even waiting for them to pay.

They had dropped some cash next to the register, chuckling to themselves as they took a seat outside, relishing the fact they, apparently, had the whole place to themselves.

“How are you feeling?” Shane asked tentatively. “About tomorrow?”

Ilya didn’t respond for a moment, stirring his coffee thoughtfully. He looked very poised, until an angry looking bee appeared, circling his hand. Ilya jumped, swatting at it.

“Ilya, stop it,” Shane laughed.

“It’s my coffee,” Ilya said defiantly. He waved his hand at it again, and this time it dove, stinging him. “Ah, fuck,” he grimaced, shaking his hand, “is too early for this.”

Shane, who had leaned back, smart enough to give the bee a wide berth, refused to get distracted.

“Don’t change the subject. How are you feeling about tomorrow, really?”

“Ah, fine,” Ilya said. “I just want it to go through. Farah says I have nothing to worry about, but still... And once it’s done I will tell the team.”

Shane nodded, and they sat back, sipping at their coffees for a couple minutes, both lost in thought. Shane still felt this persistent pit in his stomach; he’d been trying, with limited success, to imagine Vancouver as a new adventure for them. An adventure... far away from all the other people Ilya loved. The people *Shane* loved.

Ilya coughed. Shane glanced at him, breaking his train of thought. He looked a bit pale.

He coughed again.

“Are you okay?”

Ilya frowned, rubbing his chest.

“Ilya?” Shane asked again, eyeing him. “Are you okay?”

When Ilya took a breath, it went in slow. “I feel... weird.”

“Weird?” Shane asked. Ilya’s hand rubbed more urgently at his chest, and all Shane’s attention condensed into a sharp point. “Weird how?”

Ilya’s hand traveled to his face, prodding at his lips. “I think,” he took a wheezy breath, “something is wrong.”

Shane was still, absurdly so, for exactly three seconds. Then he was on his feet, moving quickly to Ilya’s side, his own heart pumping fast.

“Don’t move,” he ordered him, “don’t stand. Lean forward a little, that’s it. Try not to panic, okay?”

Shane looked around; there was no one else here. He plunged his hand into his pocket, pulling out his phone and dialling the number automatically.

“My boyfriend is having an allergic reaction, likely anaphylaxis,” Shane said into his phone. He had a hand on Ilya’s pulse, and Ilya was hunching forward, breathing heavily. His stomach lurched a little – it was too much, moving too quickly – but he refused to let the thought take root. “I need EMS right away,” he said, telling the operator where they were.

The voice on the phone said, “It’s – it’s looking like it’ll be 25 minutes –”

Shane had never before understood what it meant when someone said their blood went cold – what could that possibly mean, he’d wonder – but he understood it now, understood it if it meant everything in your body feeling wrong, completely and all at once.

Shane stared at Ilya for just one more moment, his hand still at his chest, and made a decision. “I have to find an epi-pen. I am going to leave the phone with him.”

Ilya looked at him, wide-eyed and scared, his breathing becoming more rapid. He reached one hand out. “Wait – no, Shane –”

“I have to,” said Shane, and without another word, without even another look back, he took off at a run. There was a small stretch of stores up the road that he had taken stock of on their way in – a greeting card shop, a bookshop, a mechanic – and, blessedly, a pharmacy.

Shane felt nothing – not his legs burning, not the lack of air in his lungs, not even the voice that had been screaming at the back of his head could reach him now. He ran faster.

The door was locked when he arrived, and he pounded on it.

“Fuck,” he shouted, “please, open the door.”

Thirty seconds went by, his fists hitting against the glass incessantly, and he was just thinking about turning back when a harried looking clerk came to the door.

“Sir – we’re not open yet –”

Shane pushed his way in. “I need an epi-pen. My boyfriend is going into anaphylaxis.”

The clerk gaped at him, speechless and of no use to Shane whatsoever.

“I’m a doctor,” Shane said, hoping for some reason that would help. “*Now*, please.”

A pharmacist emerged behind the counter, and she was the most welcome sight Shane had ever seen, waving a box at him. “Here, take it.”

Shane was sweating by the time he got back to Ilya, who was – *thank god, thank fucking god* – still conscious. His breathing was dangerously shallow, and he had tears in his eyes, which welled over when Shane appeared next to him. The voice of the operator was sounding next to him – “it’s fifteen minutes away.”

“Shane,” he whimpered, one hand reaching for him.

“I’ve got you,” Shane said, kneeling next to him, opening the box with hands that were still steady. He uncapped the safety tip and positioned it on Ilya’s thigh. With a breath, he pressed down on the injector. “I’ve got you.”

For the first few seconds, nothing happened. Then, gradually, Ilya’s breathing started to soften. A minute passed, and Ilya took his first deep breath, exhaling slowly. Shane kept his hand at Ilya’s wrist, monitoring his pulse.

“That’s it,” Shane said, “nice and slow. Keep breathing.”

“I’m feeling... better.”

“Good,” Shane said, watching him carefully. “Just keep breathing for me.”

After a few minutes, the color was starting to return to Ilya’s face. Shane, who had been clutching onto the epi-pen in case he needed a second dose, felt his hand unclench slightly. Ilya’s pulse had slowed and steadied under his thumb.

“You are...” Ilya took a breath, “a good doctor.”

A prickle of tears hit him. He swallowed. “Thank you.”

The ambulance finally arrived, and by that time Ilya was getting a little too close to feeling normal. He’d started to say, “I think I’m fine –” but a withering glare from Shane and a tight “don’t even think about it,” promptly shut him up.

Shane couldn’t take his hand off Ilya’s wrist as he spoke to the paramedics.

“31-year-old, no previous history of anaphylaxis,” Shane could hear a tiny shake enter his voice. “Bee sting about thirty minutes ago. Epinephrine was delivered at about 7:20. Improvement after one to two minutes.”

They bundled Ilya into the ambulance, and Shane climbed in after him, prompting a little smile from Ilya.

“The car?”

“Who cares.” Shane said.

At Shane’s request, they bypassed the rural hospital and transferred Ilya to the Ottawa General Hospital’s emergency department, and Ilya enjoyed the feeling of them ripping through the streets with the sirens on. He became a bit more glum upon learning that he was in for several hours of monitoring, which greatly surprised him.

“But it’s boring here,” said Ilya. Shane shot him a glare again.

He perked up when Shane’s parents arrived mid-morning, sporting Rozanov jerseys and bringing a pointed, tearful scolding from Yuna. Ilya had looked at Shane and said, “tell her

it's not my fault! I did not know!"

Harris and Troy arrived an hour later, having kindly agreed to help get their car home – it hadn't been particularly difficult for them, since Shane had abandoned the car key on the patio table. They stayed for a while, until they were shooed out of the room upon the arrival of Ilya's doctor.

"We could discharge you this evening," a doctor said, "or perhaps better overnight –"

Ilya opened his mouth, but Shane cut in to say, "overnight. Yes, definitely."

A look of mutual understanding passed between the two doctors. "Okay."

"Do I not get a say?" Ilya grumbled.

"No," Shane said.

Shane waved goodbye to the doctor, thanking him and getting up to close the door. He sat in the chair at Ilya's bedside and realized, for the first time since the ambulance arrived, that they were alone. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, Ilya was watching him.

"Shane," Ilya said. "I am okay."

"I know."

"You do not have to sit up so straight," Ilya said, gesturing at him.

If he was hoping that Shane might laugh or roll his eyes, he was disappointed. Shane's mouth twisted as a deep well of delayed terror opened in his chest.

"Sweetheart," Ilya said softly. "I am okay, yes?"

Shane nodded, but he could feel his composure weakening and covered his face with his hands.

"Hey, come here," Ilya murmured, holding out a hand. Shane leaned forward so his forehead was resting on Ilya's side. He breathed in deeply, inhaling the scent of his sweat and day-old cologne. Ilya stroked the back of his head.

"Moya lyubov, takoy smelyy," Ilya whispered. *My love, so brave.*

Shane sniffed once, then again, and then he erupted, messily and loudly, into a flood of tears. The torrent of fear clawed and choked its way out of his throat, painfully tight, like spitting up nails.

Ilya let him cry, murmured to him softly in Russian, unintelligible but unbearably sweet.

"Fuck, I thought – I was so fucking scared –"

"Shane –"

“You could have fucking *died*, from a fucking bee, what the *fuck* –”

“Sweetheart, please –”

“What if it had been the wrong choice? If I didn’t get into the pharmacy, and I came back and you’d gone into cardiac arrest –”

“*Shane*,” Ilya interrupted gently. “You did not make the wrong choice. You saved my life.”

Shane took a big, shuddering breath.

“I am very lucky, always, to have you. But I think this morning especially I am luckier than I could have ever realized,” Ilya said firmly. “I didn’t even know what was happening. You saved me,” he repeated.

“Yeah,” Shane hiccuped, “okay.”

“Plus,” Ilya said, “it was very sexy.”

Shane gasped, laughing in a weak, limp sort of way. “Ilya!”

“What?” Ilya shrugged, “it was! One minute you are my normal Shane, next you are *doctor* Shane, snapping into action like action hero. How could I not think is sexy?”

Shane laughed again, a little stronger this time.

“And anything that ends with me being alive is very sexy on principle,” Ilya tweaked his nose. “I plan to be around for a very long time.”

“Good. Don’t fucking scare me like that again,” Shane said. He was trying to sound stern, but the words came out sappy and tender.

“Okay.”

“And you’re packing an epi-pen in every bag you have. And I’ll get one too, obviously – and my parents, I’ll get one for them as well –”

“Yes, okay, moya lyubov. Anything you want.”

Ilya held him, awkwardly, with Shane’s upper body splayed on top of him, for a while, shushing him quietly.

Eventually, the door burst open and Bood and Wyatt came spilling in.

“Fuck,” Wyatt said, “the king lives!”

Shane sat up, laughing a little, but he saw the tinge of true relief on their faces.

“You doing okay, man?” Bood asked.

“Yes,” Ilya said, “I’m –”

“Not you,” Bood clarified, clapping Shane on the shoulder. “I meant your better half – making him start his day by saving your life, rude of you –”

“This is the love I get,” Ilya scoffed, but Shane could tell he was pleased.

Shane felt himself unfurl a little, leaning back in his chair. Bood and Wyatt flanked each side of Ilya’s bed, pulling out various snacks – until Shane cut in, saying, “no, stop, he can’t have any of that – no, put it away!” – and game consoles that Shane did let them keep, which Ilya grabbed at with excitement.

There was a quiet knock on the door, and all four heads turned at once.

“Dr. Hollander?”

“Uh – yes? You’re looking for me?”

“Dr. Houltter,” the young man in scrubs said, sticking out a hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Sorry, do I know you?” Shane asked, shaking his hand.

“No,” he laughed. “Honestly, uh – your boyfriend was causing a little bit of a stir in the staff room. And I knew you guys were together, so I thought I’d come say hello. I’m on the EMS research programme too.”

Shane looked at him for a long moment. “You said your name was Dr. Houltter?”

“That’s me.”

Ilya grinned at him. “Go ahead, sweetheart. Go talk about your research. Bood and Wyatt have promised to keep me company.”

Shane smiled, and hustled out of the room.

1 July 2022

Shane guessed that Ilya hadn’t expected to start the first day of free agency having Shane unload him from the car.

“Come help me walk,” Ilya said.

“You don’t need help walking. You just want an excuse to put your hand in my back pocket.”

“Yes, is win-win.”

Shane deposited him on the couch, a little more gently than he normally would. Ilya stretched, glancing around with a searching look on his face.

“It’s here,” Shane said, tossing over his phone.

“Why do I have a missed call – five missed calls from Farah?” Ilya asked. “I – Vancouver couldn’t have rejected me yet, free agency doesn’t start for another three hours.”

“Call her back.”

Farah picked up after two rings. “Ilya, hi. Thanks for calling me back.”

“What’s going on?”

“You tell me, Ilya,” said Farah, sounding harried. “I got a message from Shane saying we needed to talk this morning before things got started.”

“I – what?” Ilya said, looking at Shane now. “What’s going on?”

“Sorry, Farah,” Shane said with a satisfied grin. He had been enjoying himself too much. “I wanted it to be a surprise.”

“Surprise? What is surprise?” Ilya asked. “Shane – you didn’t –” he looked flustered, “you’re not trying to back out of the job, are you? Shane, you promised me –”

“No,” Shane said, “that’s not it!”

“What then?”

“I have the job. I just have it in Ottawa, now,” he said, pausing to let the words sink in.

“What?” Ilya repeated, not understanding.

“This research group spans four different universities. One of which is the one in Ottawa.”

“And you – you could just –?”

“Well,” Shane laughed, “it wasn’t a ‘just’. That doctor I met yesterday, Dr. Houlter, he’s part of the research program too.”

“And?”

“And I didn’t know his name,” said Shane, beaming as if that explained everything. He saw Ilya look confused and said, “I know all the residents on this program, I went asking if anyone would be willing to transfer back in May. But I didn’t recognize him – and well, he’s new. It turns out that one of the residents had to withdraw at the last second, and he was offered the place. And – I asked. Begged, maybe,” Shane said. “And yeah... he’s willing to move to Vancouver.”

“Willing?”

“Well,” Shane shrugged, “it took a little bit of convincing. But he likes the city, and once he found out that I was in Dr. Okoye’s lab, then it was game over.”

“But Shane – that’s your advisor. You said she is the best, top of her field –”

“Yes, and it was the bargaining chip I needed to get it over the line,” Shane said firmly. “I don’t care. I am getting everything else, I can give up this one thing.”

“Shane.”

“Uh, that and... I may have promised season tickets to the Centaurs. Sorry.”

Ilya laughed deliriously, waving his hands as if to say *I don’t care about that*.

“We were making calls most of the afternoon –”

“So that’s where you went?”

“To the program directors, to the residency directors, to our advisors. I was scared it wouldn’t work. But, by some miracle... it did.”

“Shane,” Ilya breathed. “That was a big risk. Rocking the boat like that. Blackmailing some poor resident to move to Vancouver.”

“It wasn’t blackmail. If anything it was bribery.”

Ilya let out a disbelieving, stunned laugh. “Are you sure about this?”

“Yes,” said Shane, “more than anything.”

And Shane, who had promised himself he wouldn’t cry, not *again*, had to keep an iron grip on his composure as he watched the broad grin stretch across Ilya’s face. He launched himself at Shane, wrapping his arms around him.

“So,” Farah called out from the phone, “I take that as a yes to Ottawa, then?”

“Yes,” Ilya said, and his voice was quivering, “that’s a yes.”

Once they hung up, Ilya grasped Shane’s face in his hands, squeezing so his cheeks puffed forward. He kissed him frantically over his freckles, whispering, “I love you, Shane. I love you so much.”

And Shane said it back with everything he had to give. “I love you too. More than anything.”

Ilya dropped his forehead to rest on Shane’s, their noses brushing together.

“I am going to make you happy,” Ilya promised. “Forever.”

Shane smiled, leaning into him. “I know.”

Anyway... not to belabor the point but all love requires sacrifice but if it's the right person there is joy to be found in the sacrifice... you get it!

Thank you for reading!!!

All comments + kudos are very appreciated! Now that it's finished, I do hope people might share it if they want to, I would love to reach new readers who might like this story.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!