

the way to his heart

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/86521731) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/86521731>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander , David Hollander , Yuna Hollander
Additional Tags:	Canon Divergence , No Tuna Melts , Episode: s01e04 Rose (Heated Rivalry) , Chronic Illness , celiac disease , Celiac Shane Hollander , Discussions of food and diet , Caring Ilya Rozanov , some sickfic elements , Caretaking , Pining , Literal Sleeping Together , Hurt/Comfort , Episode: s01e05 I'll Believe in Anything (Heated Rivalry) , Episode: s01e06 The Cottage (Heated Rivalry) , Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander
Language:	English
Series:	Part 9 of the chronic illness club
Stats:	Published: 2026-06-11 Words: 10,130 Chapters: 1/1

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by [anincompletelist \(soldouthaz\)](#)

Summary

“It’s okay. I don’t need anything.”

“I am not going to eat in front of you while you have nothing, Hollander,” Ilya scoffs. He plucks a can of cold ginger ale from the top shelf as casually as he can manage and slides it over the island, interrupting Hollander’s fidgeting thumbs. “You must be hungry, yes? It’s been hours since you left hotel. I can make something. Easy.”

“Make... what?” he asks warily.

Ilya rolls his eyes and tosses a look over his shoulder. “Do not worry. I will find something that works for your special hockey diet,” he teases. He reaches back into the fridge. “Tuna melt okay?”

“No,” Hollander says primly. “And it’s a disease. Not a diet.”

He pulls his hands out of the cold and turns, blinks. “What?”

Notes

shout out to [this](#) tumblr post that inspired me to finally finish this when i was convinced it would be too niche and self indulgent. it was incredibly validating and i hope this fic is too!

also disclaimer as with any chronic condition -- this is inspired by a few of my own real life experiences and is mostly a vent fic since getting diagnosed celiac earlier this year, but i doubt that any two situations are exactly the same from person to person.

p.s. since the divergence is the tuna melt (shane never walks out), things progress romantically a bit quicker and more smoothly than in canon. also, i’m making that happen in 2015 in this particular timeline. *tw for a couple of minor, off screen implications of vomiting*

obligatory warning that i always have and frequently use em dashes and semicolons, and with the amount of brain fog i have currently you might see more of them. usually i go back and try to pick some out, but i’m tired and any mistakes are completely my OWN x

When Ilya steps into the kitchen, he thinks: this is the longest time they've ever spent together before.

He can hear the thud of Hollander's socked feet on the tile just over his shoulder, still has the imprint of him in Ilya's bed behind his eyelids, slow and sleep-rumpled as he pulls on one of Ilya's shirts. Ilya is glad that Hollander is behind him. He doesn't think he's stopped smiling since they left the bedroom.

Or the bathroom. Or the hallway after that. He has been greedy.

Ilya steps into the kitchen and thinks: how much longer until it ends?

But the answer is not right this second, so he takes advantage. He circles on Hollander and palms indulgently at his hips, chest against his back, lips to his neck as he walks him toward the island.

With one last kiss to the edge of his mouth, Ilya pulls out a stool and says, "Sit. I will make lunch."

Hollander sits, but he shakes his head as Ilya rounds the countertop to get to the fridge.

"It's okay. I don't need anything."

"I am not going to eat in front of you while you have nothing, Hollander," Ilya scoffs. He plucks a can of cold ginger ale from the top shelf as casually as he can manage and slides it over the island, interrupting Hollander's fidgeting thumbs. "You must be hungry, yes? It's been hours since you left hotel. I can make something. Easy."

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"I can't tolerate gluten. Like, at all. So, no, I can't have a tuna melt," he reiterates, staring hard at the label on the ginger ale. Ilya watches him trace the logo with his thumb. "Not the bread, anyway."

Closing the fridge door, Ilya takes a couple of steps to plant his palms on the granite opposite where Hollander sits. He opens his mouth and then closes it again. It feels like he should have some sort of reference for this, some example to point to and say *but*.

Feels like he should have some excuse for why he had not known this sooner. Had it been simply because they hadn't had the time? Or had he not wanted Ilya to know until now?

“So if you can’t find anything that is okay you just... do not eat?”

“I mean. Yeah.” Hollander lifts a shoulder. “Sometimes I bring my own food, if I know I’m going to be somewhere for a while. I meal prep a lot. But I can’t afford a flare during the season, so. Better just to not risk it usually, if I don’t know.”

“You get sick?” Ilya asks.

“It depends on how sensitive you are to it, I guess. But yeah, I get pretty sick.”

Corporate events. Banquets. Award ceremonies. Photoshoots. Tables full of complimentary food Ilya had never run into Hollander at. He’d thought about the diet, yes. That for some reason or another Hollander was choosing it. He had made jokes. He hadn’t thought it was because he physically *could not have it*.

“How did I not know this before,” Ilya mutters.

“I just don’t really talk about it much. It’s easier to just call it a diet and keep things vague,” Hollander offers. His thumb pushes too hard and both of them flinch when the can dents in and out with a *pop*. “And with us, it’s—usually, it’s fine.”

“Usually,” Ilya echoes.

“Yes.”

“Is it *not* fine sometimes?” he presses. “We have not eaten together before.”

It’s the first time he’s realizing it. Something in his chest tightens.

“No, but there’s still cross contamination. Like I said, I’m pretty sensitive to it. So I have to make sure I don’t accidentally ingest anything from someone else either.”

“Ingest?” Ilya asks. “*Accidentally?*”

Hollander finally sets down the can with a steep breath, eyes flicking up to Ilya’s face and then away again. “Yes. You, um. You remember Vegas?”

Ilya frowns. “After the awards? Yes.”

“There were finger foods for appetizers. Little pastries and baked goods. When you kissed me in the bathroom, I realized you’d been eating them.”

“But it was too late,” he fills in with growing dread. “It made you sick?”

Hollander shrugs. “For a little bit, yeah. It happens. It wasn’t something that I really had to think about, uh, before us. Not in that way, anyway.” He turns the can round and round in his hands. “Also, I knew the type of wine you were drinking at the afterparty before we went upstairs wasn’t safe. So I couldn’t kiss you either.”

Ilya has his own regrets from that night, but he would not have thought of this. He thinks of how confident he'd acted despite how out-of-place he'd felt, the unexpectedness of Hollander's want, how he'd defaulted to arrogance to protect himself from it. The way he had taken and taken without subjecting himself to any of the consequences of it.

He pictures Hollander leaving and going back to his own hotel room, alone and sick, and feels his own stomach sour.

"You also, you know. You put your fingers in my mouth a lot. Which is fine. I like that. But that can be risky too if you've been eating with your hands. And some soaps and sanitizers have gluten in them, too," Hollander adds after clearing his throat. He stares hard at his ginger ale and sighs. "God. This is fucking mortifying."

Peeling his clammy palms off of the granite, Ilya draws in a breath deep enough to make his ribs burn, and then he faces his kitchen again. One of the last few times they were together, Hollander had taught him the word *compartmentalize*.

"Okay," he says. "What is easy and safe now?"

Hollander looks up. "Like—*now*, now?"

"Right now," Ilya confirms.

He shakes his head again, taking his elbows off of the island. "You don't have to do that. I should be going soon anyway." Ilya is already back inside of the fridge, though.

"I have rice. Chicken. This is good?"

"Well, technically yes but also no." Hollander chews at his lip when Ilya cocks a brow. "The rice and chicken itself is fine, but I have to be careful with other things. Pots, pans, spices and seasonings."

"What about if it is sealed?" he asks. "I have salad. Still new. I have not opened it yet."

Hollander hesitates. "I could try. Can I see it?"

Grabbing one of two of the clear boxes from the shelf, Ilya turns and hands it to him, the lettuce and toppings rattling around inside. He watches Hollander examine it; the front first, eyes moving like a scanner across the fine print, then flipping it over and combing through the nutrition facts printed on the back. After a minute, he nods.

"It doesn't have croutons or anything, so it should be okay."

"You are sure?"

"Yeah. It's not marked, but things like salads usually aren't. And I've had this dressing before, I think."

"I will call the company," Ilya decides.

“Rozanov,” Hollander warns, but Ilya has already opened the fridge again, grabbing the other identical box from the shelf to seek out the number.

“Will take just a few minutes. Then you can be sure.”

He doesn’t look up to see it, but he hears Hollander sigh. When he speaks again, his tone is a touch gentler.

“I... okay. That’s—that’s nice of you. Thank you.”

“Drink your ginger ale,” Ilya instructs. He presses his thumb into the phone number in tiny print on the back so he won’t lose it. “What do I ask them?”

“Just ask if this specific product is considered celiac safe,” Hollander says.

Taking the box with him into the living room, Ilya pulls his phone from his pocket and dials. He hears the tab on the ginger ale pop as the line rings. Luckily the customer service line for the niche health brand Ilya had randomly added to his last grocery delivery answers quickly, and the representative is nice while they answer his questions—and yes, it is free of gluten and celiac safe. The tension in Ilya’s shoulders lessens just a little.

They eat at the island with some disposable silverware leftover from the last time Ilya had the team over, which Hollander claims is not environmentally friendly but admits is safer than using the sets that Ilya washes with the rest of his dishes.

He really does leave not long after that, but not before Ilya manages to get him upstairs again for another round and a second shower, and kisses that are for the first time *knowingly* safe.

When he’s alone in the house again he settles into the couch with the his phone and the throw blanket that still smells like Hollander, turns the television on for background noise, and starts searching.

He is determined never to be the reason that Hollander doesn’t kiss him again.

+

Can’t make it tonight. Sorry.

The message comes the morning of the game. It has been over three months since the last time at Ilya’s house, and even if they text more often now, it isn’t the same. Ilya hasn’t counted the days but he’s felt dwindling time like a pulse, steady and always there, in the background of everything else.

Why? he sends back.

If Ilya hadn't been anticipating it so much, he might have taken the time to be more clever about it.

He had also maybe stopped consuming anything with gluten in it sometime toward the end of last week. Just to be safe. Unrelated.

I'm sick, Hollander says.

Ilya chews at his lip, sets his sweaty, post-practice forehead against the wood of his stall. *So you are not playing today?*

No, I'm still playing.

"Trouble in paradise, Roz?" Marly asks, swatting his thigh with a towel as he passes by. "You frown any harder at that thing and you're gonna crack the screen with that ugly mug."

"Maybe Jane's getting tired of it," proposes St-Simon.

Ilya ignores them. *But you are sick*, he sends Hollander.

... *Yeah?*

Celiac sick? he types, equal parts proud of himself for knowing the word and nervous about if he's using it correctly. He brings his thumb nail up to his mouth and digs his teeth in.

The typing bubble pops up, disappears, pops up, and goes away again. Ilya stares at the screen as if he can summon a response through sheer force of will. Miraculously, a minute later, it works.

Yes.

"There is no trouble, and Jane loves my face. If she did not," Ilya announces at large, pausing for effect, "she would not want to see it so much."

Marly snorts, clapping him on the shoulder. "That is *not* what I thought you were gonna say, man."

"—and she would also not sit on it so often."

"*There* it is," St-Simon sighs.

Ilya pokes Marly in the chest. "So maybe you should take your *noses* out of my business and put them somewhere more useful, ah?"

Marly lifts his hands in surrender and St-Simon raises a brow. "Nothing else to say to that, Marly?"

"Unfortunately I can confirm that his face is a crowd pleaser," Marly laments. "And the nose doesn't hurt either."

Ilya grins with all of his teeth as St-Simon groans from across the room. “TMI, man!”

The others begin to filter in for showers and a change of clothes. Ilya finishes pulling his on and sends Hollander another text. *Send me address.*

“Hey, you wanna grab some lunch before we gotta be back here later?”

“No,” Ilya tells Marly. Marly scoffs.

Hollander says *For what??*

To break in and steal your sex toys, Ilya types. Maybe he is feeling a little bit clever after all. *I will come over after the game.*

The plan had been that they’d meet at the condo here in Montreal, but Ilya knows he has a real apartment somewhere else. He doubts Hollander wants to be sick in the same place they usually fuck, where the cupboards are practically bare and the only thing the bathroom has in it is extra towels and a backup multipack of lube and XL condoms.

And here he goes again, asking for things he shouldn’t. The last time it’d paid off, but maybe this is too far. Maybe Ilya gets to know about the celiac thing and not about what Shane Hollander’s home looks like when he isn’t compartmentalizing. Is he keeping Ilya out, he wonders, or keeping himself hidden?

His answer is quick and anticlimactic: *No.*

Hollander, Ilya types as he strolls out of the locker room, bag on his shoulder. *If you do not tell me I will have to ask Pike and he will probably hit me. Then you will not be able to look at my pretty face anymore (((*

When no immediate response comes, Ilya shoves the phone into his pocket and leaves the building. He gets to his car and uses the GPS to find the nearest grocery store with what he needs, then drives the fifteen minutes—closer to thirty, with the Montreal traffic in the city—and when he arrives, there’s still no notifications. Ilya grabs a water bottle from the passenger seat, downs it warm, then pulls up the thread again.

I will not stay if you don’t want me to. But I am at least dropping things off.

Things? comes almost instantly. And then, before Ilya can confirm or deny, *That’s stupid. If you’re coming by anyway you might as well come up.*

Ilya nods to himself exasperatedly. At least they’re on the same page now. He settles a pair of dark sunglasses on his nose and locks the car to head into the store. Hollander sends the address when Ilya’s putting a six pack of electrolyte drinks into his basket.

He doesn’t look at it yet, but he smiles as he finishes shopping. When he’s done he types, *Need anything else? I am at the store.*

Reluctantly, Hollander sends back a small list of several things he hadn’t had time to get. Ilya wheels his cart to the checkout. Everything is already there.

+

Montreal plays well, even with their star center sick. And he is *sick*.

Ilya doesn't take it easy on them but he'd be lying if he said he wasn't *aware* of Hollander the whole game. Shoulders always slightly hunched as if to protect his midsection—or to conceal the pain there. The way he braces five steps ahead of a check to the boards or an incoming shove. The sweat lining the pale skin of his brow and upper lip when he leans down for a face off, mouth guard chewed to anxious ruin. Ilya can't even come up with anything to say to him when they're there; he's worried any chirp he might have would crack down the middle and show his concern, and he thinks Hollander might actually punch him if said something like *are you okay?*

They are alike, in that way.

The cooler he'd bought specifically for this fits all of the groceries inside of it, and no one stops Ilya on his way inside the building. Immediately, it's different here. Instead of the steep gray staircase and private door of the condo, this apartment has a lobby colored in tans and browns and drenched in lights that are warm instead of harsh fluorescents. The elevator rides smooth and seems clean, and everyone that Ilya passes on the way up is nice but not overly talkative. It makes him smile as he watches the floor numbers climb, thinking about that being one of the reasons Hollander had chosen it.

Sunglasses don't exactly work as well as cover when it's dark outside, so Ilya had pulled on a jacket he'd found in the backseat of his car instead, the hood pulled up and his head down when he walks. The hallway outside Hollander's unit is quiet, nothing like the thrum of a hotel floor with the ice machine whirring down the hall and voices stumbling in too late. Holding the handle of the cooler with one belt elbow, Ilya uses the other to pull his phone from his pocket and double check that Hollander had, in fact, texted him *Doors unlocked* on his way over.

He touches his fingers to the silver handle and pushes. The door opens, and Ilya steps into a very dark foyer.

He kicks off his shoes by the others stacked near the doorway, shoves his hood back, then follows the light coming from the next room over.

"Hollander," he calls out, just to be certain, "I'm here."

Setting the cooler down on top of the kitchen island, Ilya glances at the small dining table opposite him now, then over toward where the lamp glows in a cozy looking living room. There's a singular wall of windows that shows off the view of the city but otherwise this place feels... smaller than Ilya would have expected.

The condo's bare-bones, wide open floor plan sometimes feels like walking into a desert. This apartment is minimalist but not uncomfortably so, to the point where Ilya feels like he couldn't put his feet on the coffee table or get a crumb or two on the carpet. There's books on a shelf tucked against the wall behind the couch with soft spines, eggshell curtains pulled half shut and stretching to the floor on the windows. On the back of the dining room chair is Hollander's pullover, a roll of athlete's tape and vitamin bottles on the wood as if recently used.

If the condo is Hollander, Ilya supposes, this place is *Shane*.

"Rozanov?" comes echoing from the corridor off to his right, and Ilya wanders underneath the archway between the kitchen and the bookshelf in the living room to follow.

A toilet flushes as Ilya approaches a hall bathroom, the door already halfway open. There's spitting, and when Ilya rounds the corner to lean against the doorway, Hollander is standing—or swaying, maybe, as he reaches out to grip the towel rack with one hand and wipes the back of his mouth with the other.

In a white t-shirt and a pair of gray sweats and socks, Hollander gives him a small, wry smile.

"I did warn you."

"I did not say anything," Ilya maintains, even as he watches sweat begin to gather against the pale skin of Hollander's forehead. How long had he been on the floor before Ilya arrived?

Closer to him now, Hollander stops in front of the sink, grabs a toothbrush from a designated holder and a bottle of mouthwash and sets to scrubbing and rinsing away the evidence. He scrubs the brush against his gums like a punishment. Ilya's fingers twitch at his sides so he won't reach out and wrestle it from his hands.

Sure enough, a bit of pink ends up in the white foam when he spits into the drain. They both stare as the water washes it away.

"It was J.J.'s birthday yesterday. The guys wanted to go out. It was a new place," he explains with the resignation of someone who's probably thought about it since the moment it happened. "I ordered the beer I usually get and I stayed away from the appetizers, but—" he shakes his head, taps the toothbrush against the side of the sink and puts it back into its holder. "Something must've—something must've been wrong."

The water turns off, Hollander's palms on the edge of the counter, his head hanging low in between his shoulder blades. Sliding further into the bathroom, Ilya sidles right up into the gap between the doorway and Hollander and sits, facing the wall while Hollander faces the mirror. Ilya stares down at the jagged edge of his white knuckles between them and crosses his arms so he won't touch *those* either.

"Okay, so what now? You have medicine for it?"

Hollander shakes his head again. “No. No medicine. I have to just—start over. Hope it doesn’t last too long. Try again.”

“No medicine, okay. But you have a plan for this, yes?” he asks. “Tell me.”

At this, Hollander raises his chin and turns it just slightly, just enough to glance at Ilya over their shoulders. The tilt of his mouth isn’t disapproving, but it’s something else Ilya itches to straighten out. Get to the bottom of.

“Rozanov,” he says. Pleading or warning.

“Hollander,” Ilya returns.

“You don’t need to spend your night taking care of me because of my own mistake,” Hollander sighs, looking away again. He grabs the hand towel from the wall and dries off his palms. “You won. You were going to party. You were going to get *laid*. You still could.”

Ilya lifts a shoulder. “Maybe I want to be here.”

For the first time all day, a root of color takes hold in Hollander’s face. He takes in a long, shuddering breath, molars grinding and looking up at Ilya from beneath his lashes, assessing.

“I’m not having sex with you,” he tells Ilya again. “I’m serious. I feel like shit.”

With visible effort, Ilya does not toss his head back and groan. “Not everything is about sex, Hollander.”

“Really?” He eyes Ilya warily.

“If I only cared about fucking you, I would have spent my two hours in a *very* different store today,” Ilya says, perhaps too earnestly.

“Two *hours*?” Hollander’s mouth opens, his eyes wide. “I—I thought you were already there and just asking if I wanted anything last minute.”

Ilya looks away. Hollander’s knuckles have turned pink again. So have the tips of Ilya’s ears.

“There is a celiac friendly bakery an hour from Montreal,” he admits with a shrug. “I went to the store, then drove there to pick up the order, then came back for the game.”

There are more than just the one, and it was admittedly farther. But not all of them were rated as highly, and not all of them had options that he thought Hollander would like, celiac or not.

Hollander has grown very quiet, their roles reversed as he stares at Ilya’s face and Ilya stares straight ahead at his own feet. “Why would you do that?”

“Because not everything is about sex, Hollander,” Ilya says, more meaningfully this time, voice cracking slightly with the delivery.

The bathroom is quiet for a long few minutes. Eventually, there's the click of Hollander's throat as he swallows.

"What did you get?"

He doesn't feel up to eating yet, but he lets Ilya tell him about it while he leads them to a bedroom further down the hallway, and he seems excited by at least a few of the items Ilya chose. The sheets are already peeled back on one side of the bed and Hollander drops onto them with a huff, curling over himself until his elbows are on his knees, hands in his hair.

"Tell me what you need," Ilya murmurs, not wholly unlike he has under different circumstances. He stands beside the bed, fingers spanning the back of Hollander's neck, rubbing at the tension and sticky skin.

"My entire fucking body hurts," he mutters.

"Pain killers?"

"Already took it," Hollander gestures to a notepad on the bedside table with a pair of glasses folded on top of it, the time marked down when he last took a dose. "The over the counter stuff doesn't do much, but—" he makes a dismissive sound.

His phone is on the sheets beside them, a book on the nightstand, a dark television screen fixed on the wall opposite the bed. Ilya hums, scratching at the hair at the back of Hollander's neck.

"Maybe you lay down? I brought many things. I can come and show them to you."

The nod he gets is delayed as he keeps running his fingers through Hollander's hair. "Yeah. That's—hm. If you're going to the kitchen, can you get me... the, um..." Hollander trails off. He scrubs a hand over his face. "Fuck, I can't think."

"You want peppermint tea? I think it helps. There is ginger and camo-something too, if you want," Ilya chances.

"Chamomile?" Hollander fills in. It earns Ilya a hint of a smile in response. "I'll try that. Thanks, Rozanov."

He makes a noise when Ilya stops scratching his head, which had very obviously been unintentional by the way his head snaps up, eyes split-second wide. Ilya bites down on a grin and nods toward the bed.

"Turn on TV. Get comfortable. I will put the groceries away and make your tea and then you have my fingers all night. Okay?"

"It's still not a sex thing," Hollander grumbles as he pulls his feet back up onto the bed and fiddles with the sheets.

"I think if you moan it's maybe a little bit a sex thing," Ilya argues.

“Oh my God,” Hollander spits. “I did not *moan*. Go make me fucking tea.”

“Now who is the asshole?” he asks as he walks back into the hallway, grin having broken free.

Hollander calls after him, “Still you!”

They split the night up into courses. Ilya goes to the kitchen, washes his hands, and makes the tea first, and they take turns bickering over an old hockey game on the television while Hollander drinks and Ilya, true to his word, scratches over his aching, feverish head. The tea helps with the nausea so he doesn’t end up getting sick again, and Ilya feels good about the fact that he’d picked something that works.

He insists on taking his own empty mug to the kitchen to wash it when he starts to get antsy about sitting too much, and then he stands at the island and instructs Ilya on how to make somewhat of a charcuterie board from the groceries while he downs two electrolyte waters. They pick over it from either side of the counter, a few different cuts of meat, nuts, dried fruit, and a dairy free cheese that Hollander says helps during flares.

When he starts to wilt against the cabinet, eyes heavy and words coming slow, Ilya moves them to the couch in the living room. It’s a nice, plush looking sectional that has more than enough room for them both to spread out, Ilya with his legs up on an ottoman in front of him, Hollander reclined against the arm, head turned sideways to idly watch the sitcom playing on the TV, feet in Ilya’s lap so he can dig his thumbs in right above the socks and rub.

It turns out that a relaxed Hollander is much more agreeable to eating sweets. *Sweets* might be somewhat of a stretch, given that everything Ilya bought is made with all-natural ingredients, absent of allergens and environmentally friendly, but it’s worth pretending to enjoy it when Hollander outright moans at the taste of the pastries and goes back for a second and third without hesitating or double checking. Ilya’s smile isn’t the least bit fake.

He turns off the television when the sitcom reruns start bleeding into obscure infomercials instead, the microwave clock glowing in the kitchen when he goes to put the leftovers away and wash his hands again.

“Oh,” Hollander says when Ilya asks if he has a toothbrush to spare. “You’re staying?”

Ilya pauses across from him in the hallway. “It is two in the morning, Hollander,” he clarifies. “Yes, I was thinking I would stay.”

He hadn’t planned for it, but he’d assumed, somewhere around the time Hollander sat up and turned into him on the couch, head on his shoulder and breaths evening, still and lax with near-sleep, that it might be a possibility.

But Hollander stands opposite him now looking lost in his own apartment, lip caught between his teeth and unsure, and Ilya reconsiders. He tries to catch his eye.

“You want me to go?”

“No,” Hollander says abruptly. Firm. “No. I don’t. I just—I hadn’t thought about it, I guess. I didn’t even realize it was so late.”

Ilya holds his gaze. “I can go.”

“No, you can stay. I—” he cuts himself off with a shake of his head, and Ilya can see the color in his cheeks even with only the lingering light from the bedroom. “I want you. To stay.”

“Good,” Ilya says. “So. You have toothbrush?”

His face turns even more red when Ilya teases him about his stash of wrapped, disposable toothbrushes—*they’re nice to have for roadies, Rozanov, that’s all*—and he brushes his own teeth after Ilya and manages not to gag anymore when he tries, which feels like a win. That part of it Ilya does not make jokes about.

In the bedroom, Ilya experiences the same sort of epiphany he had in Boston; that sleeping together, actually only sleeping, is not something they’ve done together other than the nap they’d taken at Ilya’s. This—the whole nighttime ritual, the choosing a side instead of just collapsing onto one when they’re finished with each other.

Hollander seems to feel it too. Ilya keeps his eyes down mostly, fiddles with the spare phone charger Hollander loans him on the nightstand and does not draw attention to the fact that they’d each picked the side the other hadn’t wanted.

He peels his shirt over his head and shifts to sit up against the headboard, legs outstretched and ankles crossed in front of him. He’s already plugged in the phone and he’s got no cigarette, no drink in his hand, no protection from the way he can feel Hollander’s eyes flicking over to him every few seconds while he fidgets with his own nightstand.

So Ilya stares openly, dropkicks himself fully off the edge from subtlety to intention until it breaks Hollander out of whatever rut he’s in. He slides off his sweats and folds them to set on the ottoman at the end of the bed, and then takes a seat, gingerly, beside Ilya in the bed.

Ilya drags a pillow underneath his head, turns and lays on a hand to keep looking. “You do not get hot? Sleeping in your shirt?”

Hollander’s nose flares on his inhale. He seems to have the same problem as Ilya, searching for something else to do with himself and coming up with nothing. “I, uh. Usually I sleep without one, but right now I’m all...”

“All...?” Ilya prompts.

He shifts underneath the sheets pooled at his waist. “My stomach.”

“What about it?”

“It’s—it’s different right now. Because of the inflammation.”

“So?”

Ilya watches the silhouette of his face from the side as he opens and closes his mouth, a divot forming between his brows. “It’s just not... what you’re used to seeing, I guess.”

“I don’t have to see, if you don’t want,” Ilya offers. “We can turn off the lights and I will not touch. But you should take it off. You have had a fever all night. You will sweat through the sheets.”

Somewhat solemnly, Hollander seems to consider this. “I hate sweating through the sheets.”

Ilya fights a smile. “I know. Very strict about bedding. No cum on the sheets, no sweat on the sheets, no blood on the sheets—”

“That was *one* time, and I maintain the fact that it’s unhygienic,” Hollander announces to the bedroom, but the flush in his cheeks and the way he won’t meet Ilya’s eye betrays his modesty.

“Right. So.” he gestures, sitting up. “Take your clothes off, Hollander. I will turn off the lights.”

The lack of the lamplight coming from the bedside table submerges the room into darkness, and Ilya is noisy as he shifts around on the mattress, making it obvious that he’s facing away while Hollander undresses.

There’s a thin curtain hanging over the window on the far wall, filtering the excess light from the city and making the stars a blur. Ilya finds himself admiring the differences of this apartment and his own home; the way the muffled city noise doesn’t feel as lonely as the long driveway up to a glass house surrounded by trees, the way Hollander’s simple, see-through curtains don’t keep out as much light as the tall, thick drapes on his floor-to-ceiling ones, even in the darkness.

“You can—you can turn back now. If you want,” Hollander tells him once he’s underneath the sheets.

When Ilya does, he finds Hollander lying on his back beside him, chin tipped toward the ceiling, one hand folded behind his head, the other resting stiffly at his side in between them. The filtered light barely reaches them here but Ilya can see the constellation of his silhouette once his eyes adjust, the sheen on his brow, the round tip of his long nose, the split of his lips as he draws in a breath, holds it, and says nothing.

Keeping the sheet and blanket between them, Ilya scoots closer, bringing one of his own arms above them to graze his knuckles up the safe area from Hollander’s wrist up to his elbow. Hollander shivers with it, turns his arm slowly so that Ilya can do the same up and down the vulnerable, slightly ticklish underside of his forearm, the thudding pulse just inside his wrist.

“Relax,” Ilya murmurs, moving just his head close enough to press his lips to his shoulder.

He’s expecting Hollander to scoff at him, to catch the glint in his eyes as they roll back in his head. He braces for a playful shove to the shoulder, but what he gets instead is Hollander

pulling away just enough to turn onto his side, away from Ilya, and then there's a hand reaching back to wrap fingers around his wrist and bring it with him.

With a strength he doesn't have to use often on Ilya, Hollander uses the grip to yank until the carefully laid separation of blankets between them dwindles to nothing, Ilya's chest hot against his back.

"I thought—?" Ilya says when Hollander brings his arm across his middle, right where the firmness of his ribs gives to the hollow underneath.

"I still don't want you to see," Hollander admits on a breath, "but maybe... touch is okay."

Touch, Ilya knows. Touching *Hollander* specifically is just like hockey. Intuitive, instinctual, so familiar it's thoughtless—but never without care. Intention. Something he can enjoy because there isn't anything left to prove; not when he already knows he's the best at it.

He lets the tip of his thumb sweep up and back down again, jumping from one of Hollander's ribs to the next over and over. When that seems fine, he tightens his grip slightly, just enough to really be holding him, and Hollander sighs in response.

After several minutes he shifts, unsatisfied, and Ilya tests smoothing his palm slightly lower. He stops when Hollander tenses, but the noise he gets when he lightens his touch and drifts just his fingertips over the skin is enough to have Ilya burying a smile in his shoulder.

When Hollander turns enough that Ilya's palm slips over his lower stomach, Ilya asks, "This okay?"

"Yeah," Hollander breathes into the crook of his own arm, eyelids fluttering. "Yeah. It feels good, actually."

Ilya hums. He finds the spot where neck meets shoulder, the freckle Ilya likes to think is a secret only for him, and touches his mouth to it.

He lets himself map things out more freely now with the affirmation. His fingertips, naturally thick and rough with over a decade now of hockey and bad decisions, trying to be gentle as he touches the soft skin between Hollander's hips, the places where the same sort of work has yet to dig deep enough and scar.

It's different from usual, like Hollander said. The area underneath Ilya's palm has been many things the times they've been together. Flat and smooth under Ilya's mouth, rippling underneath a cascade of sensation, pulled taut just before a trembling release. He drifts to the spot often, the delicate stretch of skin from one hip to the other, the pocket of softness in the middle that feels almost forbidden on someone like Hollander. It'd been privilege enough to go searching for it. But to have *found* something? To be allowed to put his hands, his lips, his tongue and teeth to it and draw it out, to inadvertently stake that sort of claim—Ilya feels nearly as dizzy and covetous of it as he had when he won the fucking *Cup*.

Here, now, it is different but not unfamiliar. He lays his palm flat, slow and careful, and rubs across the skin where it's tender and warm and swept lightly with soft hairs underneath his

navel, swollen on the inside and distended slightly on the out. He tries to do it the way Sveta had to herself when she wanted Ilya's presence but was too fraught with cramps to accept his touch, her fingernails that had soothed him to sleep for years dancing along her own abdomen instead. Like the way he's watched smitten teammates do with the swell of their partners growing bellies at backyard barbecues or team events. The way he's seen close friends embrace each other with a hand tucked between the shoulder blades or the back of the head—the sort of touch Ilya can only recall in fits and fragments, can never be totally certain is a memory or something his brain has conjured up to get him through the lonely nights.

The sort of touch they don't get to have. But if Ilya is already driving hours to surprise him with food he can eat and spending the night and sleeping in the same bed without having sex, he might as well break all the rules he can get away with.

"Mm. That's nice," Hollander says on a slow exhale, which really is just the same as *that's good* and yet it lands differently, makes Ilya's throat feel thick. He hooks his chin over Hollander's shoulder and makes himself ask.

"Was it bad like this? After Vegas?"

Four breaths, long and slow under Ilya's count come and go before he answers, but he doesn't go tense. Ilya keeps moving his hand.

"The flight home wasn't great," he admits. "And the next twenty-four hours weren't awesome. But no, it wasn't a full flare like this."

It's a better answer than Ilya had dared to hope for, but still. "I wish I would have known."

"It wasn't just your fault," Hollander murmurs, voice low and sleep heavy. "I saw you eating the desserts and I let you kiss me in the bathroom anyway. And then instead of going back to my room and avoiding any more exposure, I watched you drink wine I knew I couldn't have and then went back to yours."

The shrug he gives is slow and measured, careful not to dislodge Ilya from behind him. His tone lowers to a whisper.

"I knew better. I just..." he trails off.

"Yes," Ilya agrees quietly. "Me too."

The room goes quiet again, the hum of cars passing by outside on the street, the fan, their breaths. His wrist is aching. He keeps moving his hand anyway.

"Rozanov?"

"*Da*, Hollander?"

The pause holds long enough that Ilya thinks he might've fallen asleep. Then, "Thank you."

"Is nothing," Ilya says, eyes closing.

“It’s not,” he insists. “Goodnight.”

He thinks about saying it—about tucking himself closer and murmuring *goodnight, Shane*, about pointing out that somehow, all these years, all these touches and somehow *this* is the most intimate thing they’ve ever done, about how earnestly he’d mean it if he said he would have stayed on the bathroom floor the entire night if he’d needed to, if his only use was fetching damp towels, pushing the hair back from his sweaty temples, swiping the sick from the corner of his mouth with his thumb until the mess is gone.

He chokes on it at the last second.

“Goodnight.”

He stays awake until he’s certain Hollander is finally asleep and then lets himself drift off in the aftermath, fingers grazing ribcage as if attached and pulled.

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“You scared me,” Ilya tells him, which is so much of an understatement that it nearly feels like a lie.

Shane is blissfully unaware of this from where he sits reclined in his hospital bed, his eyes half shut and a dopey smile tilting his mouth. Ilya’s at the bedside already which he told himself that he would not do, precisely because he thought he might find himself in this exact position: one of his hands lifted to touch the bruise blurring Shane’s freckles and the other clutching his good hand so tightly it must be numb, unsure of which of their palms was slick first.

But he is okay. He’s *okay*.

It was a clean hit. Logically, Ilya knows this. It is the kind of hit that, if he’d taken it himself, he would have waved off any concern with a few ill advised jokes and then pulled Shane’s stubborn frown down to clear it away with his lips, bruises and slings and all.

Ilya was not the one that was hit, though. And after lately, after Florida, after Russia, after probably a long, good while before that if he’s honest, things are... different. Not in any way that Ilya can name just yet—all they have done is been honest. The wanting is one thing, but the reality is the same as it’s always been.

Except that he knows now. It’s concrete, that they’re on the same page. Ilya hasn’t had that in a long time. He does not like the split-second sinking panic that he’d felt earlier at the prospect of it being taken away.

“Can you stay for a little?” Shane pleads, already pouting. He gestures toward the side table. “I have food they brought me. I was gonna eat.”

Ilya should check the time on his wrist. He doesn't. Nods. "I have flight later, but I can stay for a little bit."

He helps Shane sit up against the pillows and get the water bottle open, then reaches for the box of food they left for him sitting on the table. It's thin cardboard, hand packed. Ilya pushes the tab out from its holder at the front and pops the lid, and pauses before he sets it down on the lap tray in front of Shane.

It's a late breakfast, Ilya assumes, with a slice of buttered toast, some fresh fruit, a pre-packaged cup of cereal, and a small bottle of milk to go with it. Shane reaches for it, and Ilya tugs it away from him.

"This is food they brought you?"

"Yeah," he half-whines, wriggling his fingers for it. "M'fucking starving."

"Have you touched it?" Ilya asks.

"Mm?" Shane hums. "No. No, they just now brought it. 'Fore you got here." His brow furrows, somewhat delayed as he watches Ilya scan the back of the cereal cup. "Why? S'it bad?"

Wheat and wheat flour are included in the very first ingredient line. Ilya sets down the cereal and examines the bread next with the butt end of the plastic fork provided, and even without the fine print he's now aware of the spongier texture of gluten free bread. This is not it. The fruit would be fine, he thinks, if not for the fact that whoever packed it and brought it in must've handled it roughly enough that the grapes and apple slices have toppled over into the bread. The milk is likely the only thing not contaminated.

"Yes. This is all wrong. Did you tell them about your allergies?"

Shane frowns, dropping his hand. "Oh. Um. I—I don't remember. This is the first time they're letting me eat, I think. Sorry."

"No sorries," Ilya says. He closes the box again, careful not to touch it anymore than necessary. He is not planning for his fingers to go near Shane's mouth right now, but he supposes he can never be too safe. Especially since the medication they have him on seems to be making him... rather *tactile*. "They should know this. I will go ask them if they have substitutes. I will be quick, okay?"

He leans over to press his lips to the top of Shane's head, and Shane presses into it with a contented sigh. He leans back into his pillows again to wait, eyes closed and trusting.

"Thank you, Ilya."

He nearly stumbles walking out of the room. It isn't the first time, but hearing his name in Shane's mouth will be a marvel that won't wear off for a *while*, Ilya thinks.

It doesn't take long to find the nurse's station. They aren't entirely pleased that he asks to accompany them down to the kitchen to oversee the replacement, but Ilya will be damned if

it's on him that something still manages to get through.

Shane gets a gluten free bread roll instead of the toast, a fresh cup of fruit, and eggs and yogurt instead of the cereal. Then he instructs them to take note of a lunch that is firstly something Shane is able to eat and secondly something he will actually *like*, and escapes back up the elevator before the nurse's eye can twitch at him any harder. He will have to leave Shane a note to double check it later before he eats.

The floor is still relatively empty when Ilya walks back toward his room, pushing the door open with his elbow as he holds the box in one hand and a can of Canada Dry from the vending machine in the other.

"Okay. They did not have the cereal, but everything else they switched and put in a new box. Also I gave them lunch order but you will have to check later if—"

Ilya cuts himself off abruptly when he glances up and realizes they aren't alone anymore. His feet freeze inches inside the doorway.

"Rozanov," Yuna Hollander says, which is more of a warning than a welcoming, Ilya thinks.

"Ah," Ilya flounders, drink sweating into his hand. "Hello."

She stands nearly a foot shorter than him in the spot Ilya had been in before by the bed, only probably definitely more threatening than he'd looked doing it. Her hand is shaking lightly where it's on the side of Shane's head, and Ilya's gaze falls to her purse, hastily discarded at her feet, and her husband, sitting wide eyed glancing between all of them from the small sofa by the window.

They must have just arrived. Ilya's chest aches a little, thinking about Shane being here overnight without them with only Pike for proxy. He also feels somewhat guilty for accidentally beating them here. He should leave now, probably.

"Let me see," Shane demands, easily distracted as he reaches out his arm for the food.

Tentatively, Ilya steps up to the vacant side of the bed, feeling uneasy with Shane's mother in front of him and his back turned to Shane's father. Hyper aware of his movements, Ilya opens the new box and places it down on the lap tray, and Shane eagerly peeks inside.

"Aw. They took the cereal away," he laments.

"Yes. Was not safe."

He busies himself with unwrapping the plastic from Shane's fork and the straw, popping the tab on the ginger ale and slipping it inside as Shane begins to eat.

"Um. Shane?" Yuna interjects urgently, reaching for the box. "Maybe I should double check with the nurses first before you eat? I have a copy of the card with your specifications in my purse. David, honey, where—?"

“Mm, no. Ilya already talked to them for me,” Shane says, and shovels a forkful of egg into his mouth.

The room goes very quiet. Ilya sets the Canada Dry on the tray and pointedly pushes it in Shane’s direction, and Shane nearly chokes with the excited noise he makes. He shoves the straw into his mouth before he’s even finished swallowing the eggs and moans as he takes several sips. A marvelous distraction, if Ilya weren’t terrified.

“...Ilya,” Shane’s mother repeats. He can feel it when she looks directly past him to make eye contact with her husband.

Shane hums, mouth already full of something else now, and holds up his fruit cup to Ilya. “You want some?”

Ilya smiles. Stiff, polite. “No. I’m okay. You are hungry. You eat it.”

“And you’ll still stay?”

He hesitates for a moment, everyone in the room waiting on his answer. At the pace Shane is eating, it should not take long; Ilya can keep his promise, and then flee the scene as soon as physically possible.

“Until you’re finished, yes.”

Shane sighs, “Okay,” and then proceeds to take the next bite as slowly as possible. Ilya hates him.

Ilya loves him. He really, really does.

The only available seats are the couch beside Shane’s dad and the chair behind Yuna on the other side of the bed, so Ilya stands untethered sort of in the middle, shifting on his feet. Yuna’s hand has fallen from the side of Shane’s head down to his shoulder, her grip not pressing, but Ilya knows *protective* when he sees it. He can feel her eyes on him.

“It was... nice of you to visit Shane,” she says.

Ilya flashes her the same smile. “Captain duties, yes?”

“Sure,” she agrees easily. “I’m sure Shane appreciates it. Should it not be your teammate coming to visit, though?”

“Marleau did not mean to hurt him. He told me to tell Hollander he is very sorry.”

Between them, Shane mimics Ilya’s *Hollander* underneath his breath and giggles. Against all odds, Ilya feels his cheeks heat.

“Seems like they’ve really got you on the good stuff, son,” chuckles Shane’s father, graciously.

Shane nods. “*Really* good. It’s crazy. I was gonna eat all that bad food before Ilya came and switched it out. Didn’t even think ‘bout it.”

“And Ilya knows your accommodations,” Yuna presses.

“Yeah. I had to tell him when he tried to make me a tuna melt.”

Her eyes snap to Ilya’s face. “He makes you food.”

“Mhm. His kitchen’s really nice. I got the architect’s name,” Shane informs them all very seriously, but his mother has not stopped looking.

“We are friends,” Ilya offers. Another something in the sweet spot between an understatement and a lie.

Finally, her gaze shifts back to her son. “Is this true, Shane?”

Shane opens his mouth, but his father—luckily—beats him to it. “Let’s give him a minute to eat, hon. Come sit down. If they are friends, Ilya’s only staying a little bit longer. The questions can wait.”

Across from Ilya, Yuna’s slim shoulders rise with a heavy breath. She gives him back a tense smile of her own, touching a hand to the side of Shane’s face again before she goes to sit down by her husband.

“Sorry. I just—wasn’t expecting it, is all.”

Yes. Ilya suspects most people would not.

With the visitor chair free now he returns to his former spot and sits beside Shane’s bed, using Shane himself as somewhat of a shield from their attention. His parents talk amongst themselves but Ilya’s full focus goes into making sure that what Shane is babbling about to him as he eats is not anything particularly incriminating. He feels somewhat like he had about the food, determined not to let anything that happens while he’s under the influence of the meds and the concussion have brutal consequences when he comes back to himself.

Perhaps *Ilya* is feeling a little bit protective also.

When the box is empty and Shane is happily sucking away at his ginger ale, Ilya cleans up the trash and makes his goodbyes as subtle as he can. Aside from the way Shane insists they make new plans because *Marleau fucked up the ones we had before*—both of Shane’s parents raise their brows, either at the plans or the cursing—he gets away with a relatively clean break.

He’s just allowed his shoulders to fall from his ears in the hallway when the door opens again behind him, and Ilya pauses just before the elevator at the sound of his name.

“Rozanov?” Yuna Hollander stops him, having followed him out.

Ilya swallows and turns around. “Yes?”

“Thank you. For making sure his food was safe. Usually we inform them if he’s not carrying his allergy card, but they took him straight from the rink and we weren’t able to get in until this morning.”

“No problem.”

Still somewhat wary, she seems to think for a moment before straightening her shoulders and sticking out a hand. It makes Ilya’s lips twitch so unexpectedly that he has to cough to cover up his smile at the familiar gesture.

“And... it’s nice to meet you. Officially.”

He slips a hand into hers and shakes—the way his mother taught him, not his father.

“You too.”

She does not say anything sensible like *stay the absolute fuck away from my son* and Ilya does not say anything too honest like *checking his food is probably the least of the lengths that I would go to for him* so, all things considered, he considers it a success.

Only once the doors close him into the elevator does he let his breathing match the frantic pound of his pulse, the floor-giving-way-beneath-him feeling of having something that makes the idea of losing it so terrifying.

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The fact that David catches them doing nothing more than playing video games when he walks into the cottage is pure fucking luck.

He and Shane had been frozen through it all. From David stumbling through an apology and explanation, through Shane rigidly collecting the missing phone charger and suddenly blurting out that he wants to have dinner with them tonight. All four of them. Through the afterwards, after David, albeit confused, agrees, and through the subsequent panic attack Shane had once they were alone again, catastrophizing about lying and coming clean and what he owes to the world—to Ilya, to his parents, to *himself*.

The thaw of it still isn’t fully gone even now, standing in the Hollander’s kitchen with David while Shane and his mother talk in the sitting room. Shane wants to tell them at the table. Ilya is determined not to spiral until the food has been served.

He isn’t quite sure how he’d ended up in the kitchen helping, but he likes that he’s been trusted openly now around Shane’s food, in charge of his and Shane’s plates while David makes his and Yuna’s. They don’t adhere to a full time gluten free diet but their kitchen is definitely celiac friendly, everything neatly labeled, Shane’s things stored separately and safely.

Ilya wonders what that must be like. It does not help his nerves, thinking about his own family now, so he pushes it away and pours himself into David's friendly small talk instead.

"This is a family recipe," David says of the pasta on his and Yuna's plates, taking care to sprinkle just the right amount of parmesan on top.

Ilya glances up from the gluten free one he's made for him and Shane. "Oh? It looks delicious."

"It really is," David agrees. There's a pause. Ilya continues chopping up the small tomatoes for their salad. "You should try some."

Ilya opens his mouth to turn it down without thinking; the entire plate has gluten all over it. If his fingers and mouth are going anywhere near Shane tonight—and he is very much planning on that, in a sex way or a *non-sex* way, depending on how tonight goes—then he cannot touch that plate.

But he also has no feasible reason to say no otherwise. He smiles tightly at David.

"I'm okay. Thank you."

With an extra fork, he stabs a couple of pieces of penne onto the end and holds it in front of him, but he doesn't extend it in Ilya's direction. "Just a bite, at least. You'll be missing out."

In the otherwise empty kitchen, the click of Ilya's throat is audible when he swallows. His eyes dart toward the archway where he can hear Shane's voice from the sitting room, and he pictures the way his fingers had gravitated toward Shane's mouth to keep him from biting through his lip in the middle of his panic attack earlier. How many times Ilya had kissed him before they'd left because it'd been the only thing that'd gotten his shoulders to relax enough to breathe again.

He looks back down at the pasta. They only have two weeks. He can't do it. He can't risk it.

"I..." he starts, searching for an excuse that makes sense.

"Ah," David nods, setting the fork back on the plate. His mouth lifts at the corner. "I thought so."

Fuck. Ilya puts the knife down. "Mr. Hollander—"

"Just David, please," he says, reaching for a damp towel to clean his hands.

"David," Ilya amends, keeping his voice low. "Please, this is not—Shane wants to talk at dinner, I did not—"

"Did you know," he begins casually. "That Shane has not had one friend that's ever committed to eating gluten free with him?" He looks up at Ilya then, holds his eye. "I understand, of course, that people aren't going to shift their whole lifestyles around it. But you wouldn't believe the amount of people who aren't even *accommodating*. The ones that refuse to adjust for even simple changes. The ones that act annoyed or frustrated. The ones

that used to make him so afraid of speaking up that he'd rather get sick than have to say something."

He thinks of before, of Shane sitting in his kitchen in Boston, of how many years they'd known each other before he ever said anything about it. About how he'd let Ilya make him sick just for a kiss in a bathroom and a night that should have gone differently. Or Montreal after that, when he'd said *you don't need to take care of me* and Ilya had said *maybe I want to* and how he'd looked up at him like maybe that was the first time someone had said that, when he was ashen pale and inflamed and hurting, blaming himself.

"When did you start cutting out gluten, son?" David asks.

He still has it sometimes, occasionally. Mostly only when he finds himself in a position where there isn't any other option and asking for one would invite more questions than peace of mind. But even that's less and less these days. He doesn't think there's anything left in the pantry or the cupboards or the fridge that wouldn't be safe if Shane came over. But from the moment he'd first started making it a conscious choice every time that was feasible?

"Two years ago," Ilya admits, which doesn't encompass everything, but certainly tells him enough.

David nods, unsurprised. Pleased, maybe. The pasta, Ilya realizes belatedly, had been a question.

His own father had given him tests, had offered rewards or punishments. But a question only has an answer; is just instinct that Ilya has spent years now honing.

"How did you know?" Ilya asks quietly, unable to help himself.

"You spoke up for him at the hospital," David tells him, turning back to the plates. "The fact that you knew at all told us something special, but you advocating for him when he couldn't do it himself?" He shakes his head, voice thick at the edges. "That means more to us than I can tell you. That's—that's all we've ever wanted for him, really."

Ilya looks at his own plates. It doesn't feel like a sacrifice. He thinks he would survive on cardboard if it meant getting to have Shane.

"He is safe with me," Ilya murmurs as Shane and Yuna's voices move to the dining table outside the kitchen, setting the table. He is not very good at this and his own voice cracks down the middle, eyes burning, but David's smile widens.

"We know, Ilya."

When Ilya steps into the dining room, plates in hand, and takes his seat beside Shane, he thinks: I could do this forever.

Shane smiles up at him, nervous and brave as he takes Ilya's hand underneath the table, and he thinks: It isn't even a sacrifice.

End Notes

i'm on tumblr @anincompletelist ! x

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