

mosquito

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by [gone_girl](#)

Summary

Ilya had never denied himself anything. He liked to feel good, and usually wanting felt good.

Notes

tw: recreational drug use, racist, misogynistic, and fatphobic language, casual homophobia (including slurs) between friends, a car crash involving animal death, references to child abuse, and kinda roundabout discussion of suicide

thank you boltcutters my love

Over the entire long course of his first season in the States, Ilya had not missed much about home. There was only one significant exception.

Sveta had welcomed him back with what she'd claimed was going to be a party. He'd grit his teeth and smiled; there were so few people that he actually wanted to see, but he'd agreed to come because Sveta was the most important one, and if she wanted to throw a party then he was going to come to her party. So he'd dressed himself nice but not too nice, some new American jeans and a jacket he knew she liked on him, and knocked on the door feeling as though he was stepping off to his own execution.

In the end, the party had entailed an oyster spread, a bottle of Beluga, and an eightball. There was not a single soul in attendance except for Sveta, in a scrap of red fabric that technically passed for a dress and a smile so big it made her pretty face look silly.

They'd worked their way through some of the food and a lot of the vodka. They'd talked, they'd danced, they'd sweated out some of the liquor and did some coke to make up for it. Now they were catching up how they did best: enthusiastically, and on many surfaces.

"This is such a good party," Ilya said. His ass and his back were getting chafed raw by the carpet. The way Sveta was bouncing on his lap crossed the wires in his brain and made the sting feel bright and bubbly, like a champagne chaser.

"I knew you would love it," Sveta said, laughing. Her curls were starting to frizz; it was a big room, but it was getting humid.

With the music still playing and Sveta taking up all of his attention, Ilya did not at all detect Nikolay crossing the threshold until it was too late.

"Fucking whore!"

Sveta and Ilya both froze, snapping their heads to the side. Nikolay was standing there with his hands in fists by his sides, looking stricken.

"Hello," Ilya said. "We have not met. I've been away. But I've heard a lot about you."

Nikolay wasn't looking at him at all. He stalked forward. Sveta glanced down at Ilya. She was biting her lip, and her eyes were sparkling. She patted his chest affectionately and got up to face Nikolay. She was buck naked, neck and ears and wrists sparkling with diamonds and hair fussed. Somehow it was Nikolay, fully dressed and with his hat still on, who looked absurd.

"Kolya," she said kindly. "You didn't tell me you were coming over."

"It's a good thing I didn't," Nikolay said. "How could you? How could you do this to me?"

Ilya had never spent much time with Nikolay; Sveta hadn't started dating him until a few months ago. He didn't like him. He was nearly ten years older than they were and, based on how Sveta talked about him, had the mind of a child.

“Oh.” Sveta made a dismissive noise. “You can’t be so upset. Just calm down and—”

“I gave you everything,” Nikolay wailed, and Ilya had to stifle laughter. Sveta cut him a look, and he put a hand over his mouth.

She folded her arms, her small breasts pushed up by the action. Ilya’s eyes were drawn there, to the delicate pendant resting on her shining skin. He scooted himself up to sitting, leaning his head against the dining table leg to watch. “You gave me some jewelry,” Sveta said archly.

“I left my *family* for you,” Nikolay said, gaping. “I should’ve known, everyone told me you were a fucking *whore* not fit for marriage—”

“That ugly woman?” Sveta asked. “And that mentally deficient child? Great sacrifice, yes.”

“She is not so ugly,” Ilya objected. “Just fat. Since the kid.”

Sveta was biting her lip again, trying not to laugh. “Am I fat, Kolya?” she asked, pinching a bit of skin on her flat stomach. “Be honest with me.” She was coked the fuck out. In all fairness, Ilya was too. He burst out laughing, which made Sveta giggle.

Nikolay was crying now: a grown man, standing there with enormous tears rolling down his face. “Wicked awful girl,” he sobbed. “Half-breed fucking cunt whore.”

“So sad,” Sveta said, pouting clownishly at him. Her bottom lip, smeared with gloss and Ilya’s spit, stuck out. “It is so sad, isn’t it? I must not have been a half-breed fucking cunt whore six months ago. I must have been a little princess who transformed into a horrible witch.” Ilya broke into fresh laughter. Fuck, he’d missed her so much.

“Oh, Kolya.” Sveta approached him, throwing her arms out and puckering her shining lips. Her eyes were wide. “Marry me, so that I can become that princess again! Kiss me!”

Ilya was actually doubled over with laughter, so for the second time that evening, he did not notice Nikolay’s movement until it was too late. But he heard the blow, and he felt the tremor through the carpet of Sveta’s body hitting the floor.

Ilya stood up and strode forward. He did not take even a split-second to think before he hit Nikolay.

It took Nikolay three blows to fall, not one, but his body hit the floor much heavier. Ilya kicked him in the stomach, which didn’t appear to hurt. Ilya remembered belatedly that he wasn’t wearing shoes, and Nikolay was in all his layers. Just like a good check, he thought, his mind shockingly clear: power came from the hips. This time, Ilya drew his whole leg back and rotated his hips through it. His foot landed in Nikolay’s solar plexus, making him grunt and convulse forward like an infant.

That taken care of, Ilya turned to look at Sveta, who was sitting up with one slim hand pressed over her mouth. Her shoulders were shaking. He knelt, fear jumping to the back of his throat. He’d never seen her cry.

But, as it turned out, she wasn't crying. She was laughing.

"Your ass," she said, voice muffled by her hand. "Oh my God, Ilyusha, it's so red. Like two little cherries. Ooh, let me take a bite."

Ilya laughed. "Let me see," he said. He tugged at her thin wrist. Her lip was split, and it was already getting puffy and red. "You want some ice?"

"I'll get it," she said. Ilya tried to help her up, but she shook him off, even with a little wobble in her knees. "Whoa. I feel like a hockey player. Five for fighting."

"You make a sexy one," Ilya said. She was fine. He let go of her, and she walked to the table and grabbed ice from the tub of oysters. She turned to look at him, a big grin on her face. Water trickled down her arm.

"Kolya," she said. "If you don't go now we're going to fuck in front of you."

Ilya considered introducing himself properly; they'd met before, but Nikolay might not remember who Ilya's father was or why that would mean retaliating was useless at best and dangerous at worst.

Then he looked at Sveta, the crazy glitter in her eyes, the shine of the ice against her teeth. Fuck it, he thought. Let this get back to his father. He'd love to see the look on the stupid bastard's face if he found out Ilya was brawling with random sergeants.

"Unless you want some," Ilya said to Nikolay. "You want a bite? Svetik says it looks like a cherry. It tastes like one too."

Sveta was laughing hard. "Ilyusha!"

"It may be his last chance in some time," Ilya said solemnly. "Even if your wife takes you back, my friend, she does not have a cherry like mine."

Nikolay lifted his shirt to show Ilya a gun tucked into his belt. The fear came back, bitter as cocaine, dripping into the back of his throat and getting his blood rushing.

"Ooh," Ilya said. "Ooh, big man has a gun. Get the fuck out of here. Idiot."

Nikolay rolled over, coughed, and stood up. He was still a little winded.

"I should kill you both," he rasped out. "No court in this country would convict me after what you've done to me."

Ilya reached out. Nikolay put a protective hand over the gun, but that wasn't what Ilya was reaching for. He went lower, grabbing Nikolay's crotch and squeezing hard enough to hurt. He heard Sveta inhale sharply behind him, but she didn't step on his punchline.

"Hm," Ilya said. "Yes. They would let you go, thinking that the real culprit must be someone with balls."

He felt Sveta's hand on his back. It was warm, almost burning against the irritated skin.

Ilya let Nikolay go and patted his shoulder. "Off you go," he said. "It's a Friday night. You'll find something to do."

Nikolay looked past Ilya at Sveta. There was real grief in his face, powerful grief and intense rage. Ilya had miscalculated, he realized suddenly. This was a man who was capable of using that gun. The fear jumped higher, numbing out his mouth.

But then Nikolay turned around and he walked out without another word. The front door slammed behind him, and they were alone again.

Ilya and Sveta, as one, sank to their knees on the carpet, laughing. It was relief just as much as it was mirth.

"When you told him to kiss you," Ilya managed. "Svetik."

"When you grabbed him," Sveta said weakly, wiping tears from her eyes with the hand not holding ice to her lip. "I really thought he might use that gun!"

"I thought the same!" Ilya gasped. "I thought—fuck, that was crazy."

"Yeah," Sveta said. She popped the last pebbles of ice into her mouth and kissed him. The cold was a delicious shock, melting ice mingling with the taste of blood from her split lip. He moaned, grabbing her and lifting her up.

"Where's the bag?" he said into her mouth. "I want to do a line off these fucking tits."

She giggled. "Table."

He deposited her on her back on the table. She let him make two lines, framing the diamond sparkling on her breastbone. He took one, her slender fingers massaging through his hair. Fuck, it was good coke.

"Can I get a turn?" Sveta asked. "I want to do lines off *your* tits."

Ilya looked at her skeptically as he moved his head to do the second line. "No," he said. "I don't have tits."

Sveta gasped. "But I gave you everything!"

Ilya didn't expect the rush of laughter that left him, blowing away the line. "Fuck!" he said. "Svetik, it's everywhere!"

She licked her finger, swiped it through the mess on her left tit, and then held it up in front of his face. He opened up and let her gum the coke into his mouth.

"See," she said, her voice darker. "I give you everything." Her other hand, still cold from holding the ice, palmed his chest, pinched his nipple. The twinge of pain and the feeling of her icy fingers, the bitter drip down his throat, went straight to his cock.

“And you do have tits,” she added, punctuating the words with a little smack against his pectoral muscle.

Ilya could not argue with that. He let her arrange the coke the same way he had, one line on each tit. When she moved over to do the second one, he whispered, “Am I fat, Kolya?”

It was so delightfully easy to make her laugh. The coke scattered over his chest. “Stop!” she said. “Oh my God.”

“Oh my God,” he mimicked, and grabbed her. She was very easy to lift up and put back down again, exactly where he wanted her.

She rode him on the table, making the tableware clatter with every bounce. He circled her waist with his hands, guiding her so she could fuck him harder. His thumbs rubbed along her sweating skin, the creases under her pretty tits.

“Fuck,” he said breathlessly. “Fuck, your body. Your mouth.”

“It feels good,” she said, leaning down to kiss him so he could taste the blood again. The heavy metallic taste mixed intoxicatingly with the bitterness from the coke. “It’s so good, Ilyusha, oh, I forgot how nice it is.”

“Give me one,” he demanded.

Sveta bit his lip, but not hard enough to bleed. “Greedy boy,” she chided. “You get to get beat up all the time.”

“Come on,” Ilya said, pouting. “Give me one, please. I wanna feel it too. Come on, my mouth is too numb to feel a little love bite like that. Hit me, Svetik, hit me as hard as you can. I want you to hurt me.”

Sveta slapped him, but she had no room to do it properly, because they were chest-to-chest. He supposed that was his fault, as when she’d come to kiss him he’d locked his arms around her waist. He couldn’t help it; he just loved her long body, the slight weight on top of him.

“No,” Ilya said, releasing her waist. “Sit up, come on. Wind up, use your whole arm, not just your hand. And turn as you do it. Power comes from whole body rotation.”

“Yes, Coach,” Sveta said smartly. Then she wound up, used her whole arm, and rotated her whole body to slap him.

It landed exactly right, a sharp *crack* echoing through the large dining room. The pain blossomed sharp and sweet, even better than he’d expected. “Oh, *fuck*,” Ilya gasped out, and came.

Much of the night passed that way. He fingered her until she came. They had two shots each and then danced around the dining room naked to Sveta’s insane techno playlist. She stuck her whole face in the bed of ice as he tossed a couple oysters back. He choked on it as she came up. Her face was wet and ruined, makeup smeared everywhere, lip fat and scabbing over.

“Don’t I look pretty?” she said, grinning.

“Marry me, Kolya!” he retorted, making her burst out laughing. “God, I can’t look at you! Bend over.”

He fucked her over the table. They ate more, drank more, did more coke, fucked more, danced more, ate more, drank more. Eventually, with the sun coming up, they began to settle. Sveta pulled all the heavy blinds shut and they retired into her bedroom.

“*Excellent* party,” Ilya said lazily, stretching out and folding his hands under his head. He wasn’t sleepy—they’d done a lot of cocaine—but the vodka had mellowed him out enough to relax into Sveta’s massive and absurdly soft bedding. Sveta was sat crosslegged next to him, one knee touching his hip and the other against his armpit. She lit a cigarette. “Give me that.”

She leaned back, but it wasn’t enough to escape his long swiping arm, and he put it in his mouth. “You can’t smoke,” he said. “You can barely talk with that melon on your mouth.”

“Funny,” Sveta said, lighting another one. She dropped the lighter on his stomach and started playing absently with the hair on his chest. He closed his eyes, enjoying the feeling of her fingertips on his skin. He inhaled deeply. Russian cigarettes were another thing he’d missed in America. A perfect coda to a perfect night.

“Do you remember when we met?” she asked.

He did. She’d been a calamitous tiny thing, sneaking in from the girls’ rink where she was supposed to be taking figure skating lessons to argue with her father about joining the boys. Her big eyes, sultry on an adult, had looked downright ridiculous on a little girl.

“Yes,” Ilya said. “Your father said he also wished you had been born a boy but you hadn’t so you better put the sparkly coat back on.”

Sveta slapped at his chest. “What?” she cried. “No, when I met you and your mother outside the changing room!”

“Oh, yes,” Ilya said. They’d technically met later that day, after they’d each finished their respective classes. They’d been walking out of their respective changing rooms, each with a small sweaty hand clutching their mother. It was their mothers who greeted each other first, who became friends first. “But that’s the first time I saw you. When you argued with your father. And that’s when I knew we would be friends.”

Sveta smiled a little ruefully and reached over him to ash in the tray on the nightstand. “My mother called.”

Ilya watched her expression. It didn’t really move. “How is she?” he said carefully.

Sveta shrugged. “Okay,” she said. “I suppose. I don’t blame her.”

“You should,” Ilya said. He certainly did.

“It’s hard enough to be half my mother,” Sveta said dryly. “I cannot imagine being all her. She’s happier in Cuba.”

“Do you want to go see her?”

“Fuck no,” Sveta said, blowing out smoke. “I think I’m more like my father anyway. And anyway I don’t speak any Spanish.”

“How do you know?”

“Um.” Sveta made a face. “Yo soy Svetlana.”

Ilya tapped at her swollen lip, making her laugh and wince away. “How do you know you’re more like your father?”

“She started crying on the phone,” Sveta said.

“Cunt,” Ilya said, disgusted.

“It’s been ten years,” Sveta said, not sounding nearly as angry with her as Ilya would’ve liked. “I don’t think she understood how long it had been until we talked again.”

“Cunt,” Ilya repeated, with feeling.

Sveta leaned over him to put out her cigarette in the ashtray. On second thought, she grabbed the ashtray and balanced it on his belly. “It was around Christmas. She probably just got drunk.” Sveta lit another cigarette. “Sentimental,” she added, like it was a curse word.

“Christmas?” Ilya asked. More than six months ago. “You never said anything on the phone.”

Sveta shrugged. “Say what?” she said. “It doesn’t matter.”

That was true. Ilya tapped his cigarette on the ashtray, watched the ash get cold as he took another drag. “My mother was like that too,” he said. “Sentimental.”

Sveta watched him. Her pupils were still dilated wide, making her eyes look dark and soft. The picture flashed in his mind, just for a second: his mother lying stiff and still, her mouth blue, vomit all over the comforter, when she knew (she *knew*) it was always Ilya who went to find her first thing in the morning for breakfast.

“It’s selfish,” Ilya said. “To be that way.”

Sveta huffed out a laugh. “Yeah,” she said. “I never forgave your mother.”

The same way, Ilya supposed, that he had never forgiven hers. He put out his cigarette, let the little prickle of anger he’d felt at her words float away. “How’s your father?” he asked.

She lit him another cigarette and even placed it between his lips for him, to show him she wasn’t angry with him for asking that question. “How’s yours?” she asked.

“I wish he’d die,” Ilya said, casually.

“Well,” Sveta said, as if to say *there’s your answer*. And that was quite enough of that, for both of them. They smoked quietly for a few minutes.

“Do you?” Ilya asked. “Wish you were born a boy?”

Sveta shrugged, a little wistful. “Why bother thinking about it?” she said. “I have my sparkly coat on.”

“You could have come with me,” Ilya said, feeling a little wistful himself. “You would’ve been a great player. You can really take a hit.” He imagined it for a moment: Sveta with her sly physicality and her sharp wit in a different body. She really *would’ve* been a great player.

But then again, he thought, he didn’t need Nikolay to prove that Sveta could take a hit, and she didn’t need hockey to prove that he could. They’d both learned that about each other many years ago, back when they lived with their mothers and fathers.

She laughed. She brought her knees up to hug them, wedging her small toes under his flank. She took a thoughtful drag on her cigarette. “It would have been fun,” she said. “But no point in wondering. We’ll never know.”

“Well,” Ilya said. “At least this way we can get married.” This he actually meant. He was, selfishly, grateful that she had been born into this slight, sweet body. He’d never have to marry someone who turned him into something barely human.

Sveta laughed again. “Oh, Ilyushenka,” she said affectionately, putting a hand on his face and stroking the bruise she’d put on his cheek. “You’re the only one unsentimental enough to marry me.”

He closed his eyes, feeling her soft hand on his face. “Would we still fuck if you were a man?” he asked.

“No,” Sveta said thoughtfully. “I wouldn’t be a faggot.”

Ilya had to suppress laughter. He opened his eyes with mock anger. “Hey,” he said. “Yes you would. For me I bet you would.”

“No I would not,” Sveta said as she stuck her cigarette between her teeth. She clambered to her feet and planted one on each side of his body, so he was staring up at her. She put her hands on her hips. “If I was a man I would be king of hockey and king of the world!” *Like you*. She would never say that.

“Oh yeah?” Ilya said, laughing as he put the ashtray on the side table. Then he grabbed her ankles and pushed, making her fall on top of him with a little *oof*! “Well, if I was a woman, I wouldn’t be a dyke, but I’d still eat this pussy.”

“Exactly,” Sveta said, tapping his nose. She shimmied up his body to sit on his face, and he wrapped his arms around her thighs. Just before he pulled her cunt to his mouth, something occurred to him.

“What happened to that girl you were seeing, anyway?” Ilya asked.

“She caught a flight,” Sveta said, with a faint hard note in her voice that told him to let it go. He did.

He ate her out. She blew him. Sveta threw the comforters on the floor so they could lay between the cool sheets. When they fell asleep they were close but not touching. They rarely cuddled. Neither felt the need, and anyway, both of them ran too hot.

When Ilya thought about it, it staggered him how little time they’d actually spent together. An hour or two, four or five times a year. Sometimes Ilya got so greedy for it he’d waste it the same way he devoured a lick of caviar off his hand, barely even tasting it as it melted away. He’d just take mindlessly, and then after Hollander was gone he’d notice belatedly all the things he’d neglected to savor. He should’ve taken his time, he’d think regretfully, should’ve licked every drop of the sweat beading like exotic roe.

It was just that going slow never seemed to have much merit in the moment. Sveta once for his birthday got him an expensive bottle of champagne. He’d drank it so fast he got the hiccups. She died laughing at him, and he liked making her laugh, so he never really regretted it. He never lay awake days later, thinking of the sweet fizz he’d wasted letting it run down his neck or the aftertaste he never got to enjoy because he’d chased each greedy gulp with a bump of ketamine. He couldn’t remember the name of the champagne now, or even really how it tasted.

One October, Ilya started having weird dreams. None that meant anything, but they were vivid, extremely vivid. In the dreams, time moved very slowly, and he was skating. Not on ice; he could be anywhere in these dreams, the Fens or his father’s office or Sveta’s bedroom, but always he could feel the rhythmic tension in his quads, the pushoff in his calves, the glide on the soles of his feet. He was skating on dry land, and the sun was always bright.

Ilya didn’t know what it meant and he tried not to let it bother him, because after all, it was better than the nightmares which had plagued his adolescence. But one of the best things about playing hockey was going to bed exhausted and banged up, because it meant he slept like a rock. Until now.

The dreams made him work harder, not only or even particularly at hockey. He took bumps from strangers in clubs, took up fucking married women, picked fights with teammates and opponents nearly indiscriminately. He tried very hard to pick a fight with his accountant, too, but his accountant was a third-generation probably-connected Russian-American from Brighton Beach who spoke with a completely bizarre accent and refused to take even a single mouthful of his shit.

“Ilyukha,” she said, sternly. “You call me again with bullshit like this and I’ll have you blacklisted from Tati’s Cafe.”

Ilya hesitated. That wasn’t the sexy, high-octane threat he’d been hoping for. “But I love Tati’s Cafe,” he said, frowning. He’d considered trying to get traded to New York just so he could eat Tatiana’s plov every day.

“I know,” Katya said. “Now go be good and stop bothering me.”

Then she hung up on him. Thwarted, Ilya threw his phone down.

He was itchy. He wanted—*something*. Practice had let out late today, but it hadn’t tired him out enough. The season was still young and he hadn’t yet developed a nice layered set of aches. He needed something.

They were playing Montreal in two days. He’d seen Hollander only two weeks ago, but that had, somehow, only sharpened his greed. Anyway, now was as good a time as any to jerk off about it, Ilya figured, and stuck his hand in his pants.

His heart wasn’t in it. He couldn’t even come. He was so bored he was going to crawl out of his fucking skin. He called Sveta.

“Do you know what time it is right now?” she asked, obviously wide awake.

“Are you busy?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, and then *she* hung up on him too.

“Bitch!” Ilya said to his phone, and threw it again for good measure. Then he went hunting for it. It was rare that he couldn’t come thinking about Hollander, but clearly he needed something more now.

Send pics

Hollander never sent him shit anymore. Too afraid of getting his phone stolen or hacked or whatever. But it would rile him up, at least. Hopefully.

Horribly, Hollander didn’t even answer him for two hours. Ilya went to the gym even though he wasn’t supposed to be trying to run himself down, especially so early in the season. But what the fuck was he supposed to do?

No

Ilya swore at his phone, making the woman two treadmills down stumble and nearly fall. That was funny. Ilya turned up the treadmill and sprinted until he felt like he was going to pass out.

Practice in the morning and a set of sprints in the afternoon, while tiring, made him fantastically hungry. Which was okay, he guessed. Satisfying his hunger was satisfying a need, even if it wasn’t satisfying the main one. Whatever the main one was.

Ilya made himself a steak, ate it. Made himself another one, ate that one too. He ordered a pizza to his apartment and worked through it over the course of some gangster movie. He liked it because of the sex and the violence, but did not like how at the end everyone who didn’t die went to prison. They should have at least earned death, Ilya thought, feeling sorry for them. He imagined prison, trapped in a little cage with a book, and felt a wave of real nausea.

What the fuck was he doing here?

He got up, kicking the empty pizza box to the floor, and stomped out of his bedroom. He rummaged through the little drawer by the door, trying to decide—yes. Ferrari. He stepped into a pair of slides, abruptly too wired to bother with boots or a coat.

The first rumble of the car put everything into focus. It didn't make him calm, but it wasn't calm he was looking for. Ilya loved this car; how low he was to the ground, the purr of an Italian V8. It made everything fit right, made something inside of him click into place. Like a good hard hit, like the ringing of a bell.

You couldn't really put a 458 to good use in Boston. Too many speed traps and bored cops, waiting around at ten o'clock on a Wednesday after this rosy little city had tucked itself into bed. So Ilya went west, staying courteously under 130 kilometers an hour until I-90 darkened and emptied around him. Then he tilted forward minutely on the accelerator, feeling the pedal firm under the foam of his slides, and his breath stopped.

The car surged forward, pressing him back against the seat. The engine, hardly buzzing until now, swelled to life. Like a fucking symphony, this engine, fuck. The trees blurred away in the night, the whole world dissolved away, just the rush of air, that sublime engine, the hard acceleratory push of his back against the supple leather.

It was so beautifully reactive. Like a part of his own body, a set of limbs he could step into. The highways towards the middle of the state were well maintained; it felt like emerging onto fresh ice with a crowd screaming for him, his mind and his body and his skates and the ice all clicking together in perfect form just for him. He could do anything, and he would.

Ilya eased up on the gas to catch his breath. He loved this fucking car.

Time slipped away easily like that. It began to rain. Ilya had probably driven straight into the bad weather, he was probably halfway across the state. He didn't want to stop. His heart was beating in his throat.

It was time to go home. But what was at home? A pizza box he hadn't picked up. Netflix, still playing on auto. The walls of his room, wrapped around his empty bed. Ilya swallowed and leaned on the gas again, promising himself he was going to take the next exit.

The rain had picked up; visibility was bad. So Ilya didn't see the deer, not properly. All he saw was the flash of its eyes, the shine of its wet pelt in his headlights before he hit it.

The sudden impact scared the shit out of him, as if it was him that had been hit instead of his car. He yelled to nobody, white-knuckling the wheel, and the car began to skid on the wet asphalt. Ilya clenched his entire body very tightly and pressed his feet into the floor, avoiding the sensitive gas, and had the wherewithal to scrabble for his seatbelt. There was a curve in the road, and he could see the divider coming at an oblique angle. It was coming up close, too close, less than a meter from his face through the window. He tried again to straighten the car out. It worked, but not fast enough. The car hit the divider just ahead of him, where the wheel well was. There was a sickening noise from the wheel, and then a miserable screech from the body. Ilya thought crazily that his head had detached from his body and was spinning like an

owl's, but no, it was the car. He knew with sudden certainty that he was going to die. He was going to die alone, in rural Massachusetts on a Wednesday night. Then everything was still.

The seatbelt was cutting into his chest. Ilya disengaged it; the click brought him back.

"Fuck," Ilya said, and then laughed aloud. His ears were still ringing. He was fucking alive. *God*, he was alive.

He sat there, breathless, for another minute. Rain was rinsing the deer's blood gently off the windshield. It was spiderwebbed, but not so broken that rain or blood could seep inside. Ilya leaned forward, traced his fingers along the cracks. His heartbeat slowed. He wondered where the deer was. He looked back, but it was long gone, dissolved away in the rainy night.

Ilya's fingers were still shaking when he got his phone out, which was silly. He opened his conversation with Hollander, staring down at the terse *no*. He turned in the seat and took a picture of himself, grinning, with the windshield in view. Then he stared at the picture. His eyes were too wide, and there was a red shadow on his face from the blood on the sunroof. He looked crazed. Not sexy at all. No, no. He deleted it.

He called Sveta instead. It was now a truly unforgivable time in Moscow, probably seven or eight in the morning.

"Do you remember," Ilya said, "when we flipped your father's Vanquish?"

"Yeah," Sveta said sleepily. She yawned. "They don't make you people do morning practices?"

"It's at seven," Ilya said. Plenty of time. "I was just thinking about that. How if we didn't have the windows down the broken glass would've blinded us. And the bruises, from where your chest hit the steering wheel."

"I remember," Sveta said, fondly. "Oh, God, he almost killed me for that."

Ilya's father had beat him, too.

"Wasn't it worth it?" Ilya asked.

Sveta gave a low chuckle. He heard her fumble around in her bed. "Ilyusha, what have you done?"

Ilya got out to assess the damage. The poor thing, he thought, finally starting to regret this. The left front wheel well was destroyed. The axle was probably broken. There was damage to the body near it, too, but it seemed cosmetic. Rain was soaking into the back of his shirt and pooling in his slides. He remembered that he had not brought a jacket.

"Ilyusha?"

"I'm here." He grabbed a blanket from the trunk and put it down so that he wouldn't get the seat wet. He was sobering up now, which was what it felt like, coming down the day after half a gram. "I got in an accident."

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Fine,” Ilya said. He gave the gas an experimental tap. The engine sounded fine, but he felt a horrible dragging noise through the floor and stopped, afraid to hurt it more. “Not driveable.”

“Where are you?” Sveta was sounding more awake now. She lit a cigarette.

He had no earthly idea. He sighed and shut his eyes, trying to do the math on how far west he’d gone. He was suddenly completely exhausted. “Probably near Worcester. It’s raining.”

“Call Katya,” Sveta advised. “This isn’t a good look.” She paused. “Which one was it? Not the Maybach?” She sounded like she was asking after her own children.

Ilya snorted, wishing sorely that it had been the Maybach. “No,” he said. “The Ferrari.”

Sveta sighed. “Is it totaled?”

“I don’t think so,” Ilya said. He rested his forehead against the wheel, breathing in the buttery smell of the leather. She was right. This was a bad look. “I’m going to call Katya. Can I call you back after?”

Sveta didn’t say anything for a minute. When she spoke, her voice was very carefully controlled. “Was it on purpose?”

It took a second for his brain, wrung dry of adrenaline, to catch up with what she meant. “No,” Ilya said, repulsed. “No.” He thought of explaining to her the deer, the rain. The deep malignant boredom that had been sinking in steadily for two weeks. His last call with Alexei, yesterday. He only had to explain it to her, and he knew she would understand. Sveta always understood him. He listened to her take a drag. Then he hung up without saying goodbye.

Ilya leaned back against the blanket, which was disgusting because he typically put it down to avoid cumstains on the leather. But Ilya really couldn’t bring himself to care. His feet were wet and cold. He pulled his soaked shirt away from his chest and peeked down at the red slash across his body. That was going to bruise, he thought with some satisfaction. He called Katya, half-expecting her to accuse him of bullshit and hang up.

She didn’t. She was quiet for a minute. He could hear her long nails tapping against the phone. Then, “Okay. Someone will be there in forty-five minutes. Is the car still in the middle of the road?”

“No,” Ilya said. “Shoulder.” His one stroke of luck. Well. He looked down again at the seatbelt bruise forming, and revised that thought. The cherry of luck on his lucky shit sundae.

“So I’ll send the tow truck in the morning,” Katya said. “Unless you really want it taken care of now?”

“It will rust,” Ilya said sheepishly.

“Tow truck now.” Nails, screen. “Are you okay?” It was almost an afterthought. “Are you drunk? Did you take anything?”

“No, no, nothing,” Ilya said quickly. “Fine. Not hurt at all.”

“Ilyukha,” Katya said, in that stern, kind tone she had probably perfected with dozens of clients just like him. “Be honest with me. It’s all confidential.”

“You’re not my lawyer, you’re my accountant,” Ilya said irritably. This was so fucking embarrassing. “But no, I am not drunk, and I didn’t take anything.”

Katya switched to English. “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.”

“Are you having a stroke?” Ilya said in Russian, bewildered.

“Repeat,” Katya said firmly.

“Peter,” Ilya said. “What?”

“Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.”

Feeling absurd, Ilya said, “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.”

Apparently satisfied, Katya told him to sit tight and hung up. He thought of calling Sveta back, but decided against it. He didn’t want to hear her voice again, even and cool, trying to detect some weakness in him.

No, that wasn’t fair. That wasn’t what she was doing. Ilya was so fucking tired. The rain had washed away the blood of the deer, and it was thinning to a mist, as if it knew it had done its job.

He was awoken to a sharp rap on the window. It was the tow truck driver. He was Russian, thank God; Ilya felt too wrung out for English anymore.

But Ilya’s ride wasn’t here yet. He checked his phone. It had been thirty minutes.

“Can I come with you?” he asked the tow truck driver. “So I can get out of the rain?”

The tow truck driver refused with a look of such absolute loathing that Ilya wondered if he’d accidentally used some bizarre Russian-American idiom about fucking your mother. Ordinarily Ilya would have repeated the sentiment in plain Russian, but he was so profoundly exhausted that he honestly thought he could probably sleep in the rain.

But he wasn’t wearing a jacket, or shoes, and he couldn’t get sick now. They were playing Montreal on Friday.

Ilya argued the tow truck driver down to waiting on the shoulder for Katya’s man. They sat silently side by side in the tow truck for eight minutes before the guy showed.

“Pleasure,” Ilya said, rolling his neck out to make sure that the rain from his hair had thoroughly soaked into the headrest. Then he got out and into Katya’s man’s car. A Hyundai, with fabric seats.

Ilya tilted his head back, intending to go right to sleep. He missed the Ferrari's engine, but he was too exhausted for the Hyundai's whining to make a difference.

"So you totaled your Porsche," said Katya's man, in Russian. Ilya opened his eyes, slowly. He looked out at I-90, pouring out smooth and black ahead of them, and wondered why nobody would just let him go the fuck to sleep.

"It is a Ferrari 458 Italia," Ilya said tiredly. "And I'm going to have it repaired."

Katya's man snorted. "Your type would." Ilya had been expecting someone his own size or bigger. Strong and silent. Maybe some sort of a frightening scar. This guy was short, middle-aged, potbellied, and still in his sleep clothes. Certainly not silent.

"Do you have a problem?" Ilya asked. "Katya's paying you to nag me?"

He barked out a laugh. "That cunt! Pay me!"

Ilya quite liked Katya, but he was too tired to get angry. He pressed absently at the bruising on his collarbone, traced it down the diagonal of his torso. "Strong words," he said. "Why do you say that?"

Katya's man shook his head, obviously fuming. Ilya could not imagine having the energy to care so much about anything at all. "I owe her twenty thousand dollars," he said. "Next week it would be twenty-four. She told me she'd keep it at twenty if I drive you to Boston. To your door. I'm a fucking engineer."

"Easiest four thousand you ever made," Ilya said. He didn't even really get a kick out of the look of hatred Katya's man gave him. Ilya dug his canine tooth into the tip of his thumb, staring out the window. He released his thumb and looked at Katya's man again. "What is it? Drugs?"

"I'm a fucking engineer," Katya's man repeated, scathingly.

"Sure," Ilya said. "Twenty points a week on, what, a business loan, sure. You gamble, then?"

Katya's man said nothing. Ilya rested his head against the window. All of America looked the same, even during the day. He liked it better at night, watching the world smear away into the dark.

Ilya dreamed that night that he was alone at the South Pole. The sun was bright. He squinted against it and looked around. The snow was soft and sparkling. His body was warm, but his hands were cold. Wasn't there supposed to be bears? Penguins. He took a step forward. He was skating. The sky was huge and blue. He started to sweat.

Finally Montreal game day arrived. Marleau had the look he had when he knew Ilya was worked up about Jane, which was fine and did not matter because Ilya *was* worked up and just because it wasn't necessarily *about* Jane didn't mean it had nothing to *do* with Jane. Marleau was a good friend, anyway. When Ilya goaded his team into playing rough they did.

It was a hard game. A needlessly tough game, given how early it was in the season, but Ilya was on edge. And he was team fucking captain, which meant he dragged his whole team to the edge with him.

Ilya was hard already when Hollander let him in. Hollander was spitting mad, his brows drawn together and his lips flattened. He hated losing on home ice.

Yes, Ilya thought to himself, already nearly beyond the capacity for complex thought. Yes.

“You fucking know that wasn’t—”

“Down,” Ilya interrupted, delighting in the way rage bristled through Hollander’s entire broad frame. “Now.”

“Why do you play so dirty?” Hollander demanded. “It’s not cute, Rozanov, you don’t need to —”

“All this fucking talk,” Ilya said, shrugging off his jacket and leaving it on the floor because he knew it drove Hollander crazy. “I don’t come to hear bullshit. I don’t want to hear anything from you.”

He stared Hollander down. Hollander was practically vibrating with fury. Ilya could feel the heat on him from here. It felt like when he came inside from the snow as a child. His hands would be red with cold, and he’d thrust them over the stove and then cry because of how much it hurt to go from burning cold to burning hot. And he still did it again every time, because he could never wait to warm them properly.

Hollander got to his knees, his eyes bright with hatred and never leaving Ilya’s face. Ilya grabbed Hollander’s hair and pulled his face forward, rubbing the bulge in his jeans over Hollander’s red cheek. Fuck. Hot even through the fabric.

“Take it out,” Ilya said, fingers still tight in his hair.

Slowly, Hollander undid his button, unzipped his fly.

“Faster,” Ilya said. If he didn’t have his dick in Hollander’s mouth in two fucking seconds he was going to die.

And Hollander did what he said. Two hours ago, he’d checked Ilya so hard that Ilya’d seriously worried his shoulder was dislocated. They were already in overtime and if there was anything Hollander hated more than losing on home ice it was losing in overtime, because Hollander hated second chances wasted. Hollander hated anything wasted. It was part of what made him a thrilling player: meticulous, intelligent, and ruthless. Shane Hollander was a fucking animal, a lithe quiet one who dealt fair, controlled brutality. Ilya had been half-hard since that check, maybe.

And now, after fighting tooth and nail in overtime, after a dirty game on home ice, after flattening Ilya against the boards, that careful, brutal creature was on his knees pulling Ilya’s dick out because Ilya told him to.

He slapped his cock against Hollander's cheek. Hollander blinked shyly against it. Ilya's knees nearly gave out. "Open," he said roughly. Hollander opened. Ilya thought, dimly, he was doing it again, he should wait a second. Then Hollander, with his big hands gripping Ilya's sore thighs, stuck out his tongue like he was getting impatient. Ilya couldn't resist pushing into his mouth.

Why *would* he ever resist this? Ilya thought. His hand in Hollander's hair pulled, forcing Ilya's dick deeper into his mouth, and Hollander made a muffled beautiful sound. What, exactly, would be the point of depriving himself of having this as soon as he possibly could? The flush deepening on Hollander's face, the tears welling up in his eyes, the drool escaping his lips and dripping down Ilya's cock. The fact was, face-fucking Hollander was life's greatest pleasure. He could not think of anything that compared. Ilya was not in the business of denying himself.

Hollander moaned around it. One of his hands disappeared from Ilya's thigh, and from the movement of his shoulder Ilya could tell he was jerking himself off as Ilya used his mouth. Hollander choked, his lovely throat working desperately. Ilya dragged Hollander off his dick and he gasped for breath, his face even redder than it had been before. Tears were pouring freely down his face. A string of spit stretched between the head of his cock and Hollander's gorgeous mouth. Hollander clearly had not even noticed.

"You have more to say?" Ilya asked. He knew he was meaner when he won. It actually had very little to do with his own victory; he just loved how Hollander reacted when he lost. How the anger and the humiliation actually lessened his resistance, made him easier to break.

"Fuck," Hollander groaned. His voice was destroyed, sending a thrill through Ilya. "Please."

"Please," Ilya mocked. "Please what?"

"Please," Hollander rasped. "Fuck my mouth."

Hollander's hand was still working himself furiously somewhere out of sight. Ilya couldn't tell if he was straining forward to take Ilya's cock back in his mouth or if he was just letting Ilya hold a lot of his weight by his hair. Both possibilities were entirely too delicious to resist. Never let it be said Ilya was not a man of the people. He dragged Hollander's head forward, making them both moan with relief as Hollander took it.

It was unbelievable, that he got to have this. The best ecstasy he'd ever taken, the bloodiest fight, the Stanley Cup. The crash. None of the thrills he'd ever had came close, because he was the only one who got to have Hollander gagging on his cock and crying for more. He was sure of that. He was the *only* one who could turn Hollander into this. In this private way, Hollander belonged to him. And it was sort of reciprocal; sometimes he felt, insanely, as though Hollander was the only thing that really did belong to him.

"Slut," Ilya said reverently. "Pretty boy slut. So fucking beautiful, how you take it."

The hand not in Hollander's hair lay on his cheek, which gave him the dual benefit of feeling both the shape of his own cock in Hollander's mouth and the tears staining Hollander's face. His shoulder was hurting bad. He was going to come, he realized abruptly.

And then Ilya was presented with a choice, a decision so huge and terrible he thought it might cleave him into two miserable pieces: should he come on Hollander's face or in his mouth?

His brain, snowy and buzzing, couldn't decide. He wanted—no, *needed* both. It was catastrophic.

He pulled Hollander off his dick again. "Hollander," Ilya said, wondering if he could hear the panic in his voice. "I am going to come."

Hollander was gasping and crying. Spellbinding, but extremely unhelpful.

"Mouth or face?" Ilya asked urgently. "Fuck, I want both. And ass," he added, inspired.

With Ilya holding Hollander's head still, Hollander took Ilya's cock in his other hand, stroking Ilya and himself at the same punishing pace. "Greedy," he panted. "Greedy fucking whore."

The rare vulgarity made the decision for him: Ilya came on Hollander's face. The dull pain in his shoulder sank down through his entire body as he came, heavy and overwhelming. It brought him down to his knees with Hollander, his head dropping to Hollander's shoulder, hand still clutching his hair.

Hollander's arm was around his shoulders. He was still touching himself, was making these precious little noises in Ilya's ear. Ilya lifted his head and saw his handiwork: Hollander's flushed tearstained face now streaked with come, his eyes squeezed shut because it had gotten in his lashes.

"Picture," Ilya murmured in Hollander's ear. He batted Hollander's hand away from his dick so he could take over. "Need picture of you like this."

"No," Hollander whined. "iCloud."

Ilya adored him. He licked his come off Hollander's cheek and mouth, leaving broad stripes of saliva where his tongue had been. "What," he said, pressing a quick kiss to Hollander's lips, "is iCloud?"

True to form, Hollander took him seriously and tried to answer. "It's—on your phone—" Hollander let out a frustrated groan. "Fuck. I'm gonna come."

"Yes," Ilya said. He kissed Hollander, pulled his hair sharper, jerked him off faster. "Come. My perfect slut."

"Yeah," Hollander gasped. Ilya was supporting his entire weight now. "Rozanov."

Hollander came on Ilya's hand, and Ilya, greedy as ever, licked that up too. They stayed there for a few minutes, crumpled into each other and kissing as they got their breath back.

Ilya pulled away from Hollander just enough to take off his shirt. He took Hollander's chin and used the shirt to clean away the filth from his face. Hollander let his face be tilted this

way and that, his eyes still closed and the angry red in his cheeks fading to a pleasant pink. Ilya could not resist a little kiss to his nose.

“All done,” Ilya mumbled. “And no picture.”

“iCloud is the server where your photos are saved,” Hollander said, opening his eyes. His voice was still raspy. Ilya wished he could kiss his vocal cords. Oh well, he thought. At least his dick had managed that. “And it’s pretty easy to hack even if you change your passwords regularly.”

“I do,” Ilya lied. “I change password every week. Let me take pictures.”

“Yeah, okay,” Hollander said, leaning into Ilya. “TMZ probably has your iCloud bookmarked.”

Hollander was so ridiculous, Ilya thought, disgustingly fond. He petted Hollander’s hair. His feet were falling asleep from sitting on his ankles. God, his shoes were still on. He’d done it again. He checked his watch behind Hollander’s head. He’d been here barely fifteen minutes.

Oh well! No matter. He was still here, and Hollander was still in his arms.

“Let’s go to bed,” Ilya said. They stood up slowly, leaning on each other. Not, he thought happily, that they particularly needed to.

“Yeah,” Hollander said, a little grumpily. “You’re not getting out of here without ass-fucking me.”

Ilya burst out laughing. Hollander was always a little looser (ha!) after they’d fucked once, but he was being particularly free with his words tonight.

“You are very sexy when you lose,” Ilya said, ducking his head down to kiss Hollander’s neck.

Hollander shoved him, hard, which made his shoulder sing. “Asshole,” he said. “Go hang your jacket up.”

“Why do that,” Ilya said, coming back to him and hoping he’d shove him again. “You just tell me I have to ass-fuck you. Now I go start putting clothes away?”

“And shoes off,” Hollander added. “I just spent a lot of money on a jute rug.”

“A *what*?”

“Go!”

Ilya put away the jacket and took off his shoes. He was back in all of eight seconds, but to his horror, Hollander’s attention had already been displaced. To a ringing cell phone. Of all things.

“Ignore,” Ilya demanded.

“I can’t,” Hollander said. “It’s my mom. She already called once while I was—” He made a vague gesture which Ilya was quite certain was *not* universal sign language for getting throat fucked. “Hey, Mom? Everything okay?”

Ilya started taking his clothes off, which would at least save him a couple seconds when he had Hollander back. Hollander was sitting down on the edge of the bed and sighing. “Yeah, I’m a little busy. The guys took it hard.”

Ilya snickered. “You will take it hard,” he whispered.

Hollander flipped him off. “Yeah. No, I know it—yeah. Well, morale is—uh huh. Yeah, I know. He’s having a hard time fitting right on the line. I don’t know. We might swap him out. It’s only his first season, Mom.”

Ilya paused. He couldn’t hear Hollander’s mother’s voice, but he could see Hollander’s face. Every feature was starting to take on a gentle downward slope. His eyebrows, his lashes, the corners of his pink mouth, the line of his big shoulders were all curving down, curving in, a dense collapsing weight of shame.

Ilya, naked, inched forward. He’d never suspected that this was something they might have in common. Maybe Hollander knew what this was like, flinching every time the phone rang after a game lost. Ilya sat on the floor next to Hollander’s socked feet and grasped his strong calf. Hollander’s fingers sank into his hair, almost absently, and started massaging his scalp. Ilya leaned into the touch, pressed the side of his face against Hollander’s knee.

But then Hollander laughed, a real laugh, bright and genuine. Ilya looked up and saw the corners of Hollander’s eyes crinkle. Hollander’s fingers stopped moving. “Jesus, Mom! How do you have the time? I’m lucky you’re on my side.” Hollander shook his head, a sweet little smile on his face. Ilya felt foolish. What had he been thinking? Everyone knew Hollander was best friends with his mother and liked it that way. “Okay, you know what? Never mind. We’ll debrief tomorrow, promise. Gotta go.”

Ilya squeezed Hollander’s calf, thrilled. But Hollander hadn’t hung up yet.

“*What?*” Now Hollander removed his hand from Ilya’s hair entirely. “Mom, why didn’t you lead with that? Hold on, let me get my laptop.”

Hollander got up and walked to his desk, not seeming to spare a thought for how unceremoniously his ankle had left Ilya’s hand. Ilya sat on the floor naked, back against the bed, watching Hollander bend over his computer and fuss. “Everything is okay?” he asked. Hollander threw a thumbs-up his way.

“No, yeah, it’s in my inbox.” Hollander didn’t sound upset, just extremely annoyed. “No, a *verbal* contract is not—look, I’ll call Fred and—okay, well, what are the provisions for alternative dispute resolution? Yeah, I’m looking at it now. Wait, let me add Fred. One second.”

Ilya stared at Hollander, who was now speaking rapidly with words that Ilya had never bothered to learn in either language. Ilya had teams of people to take care of this garbage.

Hollander clearly had a lot to say, though, and a strategy regarding whatever the fuck it was they were talking about. Ilya felt silly and warm with admiration. Probably, Ilya thought, there wasn't a single player in the league who was sharper. Certainly there wasn't a single human being on the planet who looked sexier talking about—whatever the fuck it was they were talking about.

Ilya came up to kneeling. "Hollander," he whispered. He was getting hard again.

Hollander looked over his shoulder, as though he'd forgotten Ilya was there. "Guys, one second," he said. He put the phone against his chest. "Roz, I'm so sorry."

"No," Ilya said, outraged. "No!"

"Shh," Hollander said, laughing a little. "I'm sorry, but I really do have to take care of this and it's going to take a while."

"Now?" Ilya asked, genuinely nonplussed. "How can something so boring be so emergency?"

"It's important," Hollander said. "I'm sorry."

Nothing was that important. "I wait weeks," Ilya said, mostly to himself. "I am promised."

"Sorry to inconvenience you," Hollander said. His voice had taken on a little edge, the one that made Ilya feel like he was a thousand meters up, cold and free.

Ilya considered him. "You keep saying sorry," he said. "But you're not sorry."

Hollander looked kind of mad now. He raised his phone to his ear. "I'm sorry, Mom. Fred. One minute, the guys are drunk."

Ilya got to his feet and put his face close to Hollander's, like they were about to kiss. He could feel the heat from Hollander's cheek.

Putting on his best American accent, he said loudly, "The guys are not drunk." His stomach fluttered when Hollander jerked away from him, his entire body taut with rage.

"I'm going to call you back in one minute," Hollander bit out, and set his phone down on the desk. "What is your problem?"

"No problem," Ilya said, giddy. "No problem now. Let me blow you."

"I told you," Hollander said, his voice rising. "I have to take care of something. And you're, what, trying to tip off my mom? My fucking lawyer?"

Ilya had never heard this expression, *tip off*. It sounded dirty. "I don't want to tip off your mom," Ilya said. "I only want to tip off you."

"Oh, this is a joke to you?" Hollander demanded. Ilya had only sort of been joking, but Hollander's fury was a good reward anyway, gooseflesh rising all over his body. "You think

it's funny, that my mom might find out?"

"No joke." He was being sleazy, reckless, touching himself as Hollander got angrier and angrier. "Are you not excited?" Ilya asked, leaning forward. How could the need never get any more bearable? "Gets me hot when someone almost finds out. Fuck, Hollander, come *here*."

But he'd said the wrong thing. The hot pulsing rage that was always so sexy on Hollander froze over. Hollander crossed his arms and stared at Ilya like he'd just been shot.

"It is a fucking joke to you," he said, quietly. "It is *important* that this is a secret."

"I know," Ilya said, baffled. He stopped touching himself and leaned back, out of Hollander's personal space, trying to be nonthreatening. He made his voice sweeter, something Hollander could never resist. "Just game, baby, come here."

Hollander's mouth thinned out. His eyes got bigger. For once Ilya couldn't tell exactly what was going through his head. Hollander was easy, usually. But he'd never looked quite like this, scared and cold. "It's *not* a game," Hollander said. "It's not a game. You—you could fuck up everything. Forever. Every time."

"I know," Ilya repeated. Fuck. He was doing this wrong. "This is sexy part, no?"

But that was the wrong thing to say, too. Hollander buried his face in his hands for several long seconds. "You don't get it," he said finally when he emerged. "This matters to me. You can't just come in here and fuck this up."

And by the way he said it, Ilya knew that when Hollander said *this* what he meant wasn't this thing that they had between them. Their special way of belonging to each other. He meant his mother, his brand. His life.

Ilya stepped back again. He'd gone soft and he didn't feel like staying anymore. "Doesn't matter to me," Ilya said. "Yes. You are right. I do not have life I care about."

Hollander seemed to realize what he'd said. "I didn't mean that," he said quickly. "No, I know it's not easy on you either. I just wish you'd be more careful. It's not fun for me when you mess around like that."

"Not fun for me either," Ilya said flatly. "Go do your fucking contract."

"I'm sorry," Hollander said. If Ilya had to hear him say that one more time he was going to do something horrible. Hollander hovered as Ilya started putting his clothes on. He had a look—hurt, pretty eyes, hands hanging stupid and empty—that Ilya knew very well. It would hurt him worse if Ilya ignored him, so Ilya ignored him. Maybe he'd cry again.

"I'll see you on the ninth?" Hollander said, shakier than he had any right to be.

"Call your mother," Ilya said, trying hard to sound disaffected. It worked, he thought, because Hollander was biting his lip like he did when he was trying not to cry.

Hollander did as Ilya told him. “Hi. Mom. I’m sorry.”

Ilya was hit with a wave of hatred for Hollander’s mother so overwhelming and unexpected he actually stopped moving for a moment, one sock on. His vision sparked red for a second. He blinked, put his foot down, and pulled on his other sock. Hollander was carrying on his conversation like Ilya wasn’t even there. His voice sounded so miserable Ilya could not believe his mother wouldn’t notice.

Maybe she did. Ilya worked up some phlegm in the back of his throat and considered spitting it on the new rug. Instead he left, Hollander’s voice thin with false composure behind him: “I’m sorry, but there’s absolutely no way they’ll get away with that. No, because precedent in the province of Quebec—” The door closed. Ilya stood there for a long minute. He wondered if, now that he was gone, Hollander was going to cry to his mother. What would his mother do? Would she soothe him? Or would she stiffen his spine? He tried to listen through the door, but he could no longer hear Hollander’s voice at all. He spat on the hallway carpeting and called an Uber.

Ilya’s own mother had never been that type. When he cried she’d kiss and hug and comfort until he was so saturated with love that he couldn’t cry anymore. Sometimes his tears made *her* cry, and then Ilya would stay in her arms for maybe an hour, his head under her chin and his hair getting damp because she could never stop crying once she’d started. Sometimes Ilya thought he must be remembering her wrong, the way he always felt awash and overfed around her, fat with love.

By the time he got in the cab—it was a Chevrolet Malibu, who the fuck drove a Chevy in Canada?—Ilya had to admit to himself that he was being insane. Hollander was a freak, a neurotic fucking mama’s boy who thought he was better than everyone. Ilya knew all that. He’d known all that since the very beginning. He’d lashed out—why? Because Hollander liked his mother better than he liked Ilya? Ilya dug the heels of his hands into his eyes. There was something wrong with him.

His anger at Hollander had been an impulsive cracking thing in his chest, which had felt not just right to indulge but necessary. He didn’t know what to call the heavy, black feeling he had towards himself now. He had so few precious occasions with Hollander, and he had wasted it. He should’ve gone slow. He should’ve spent a few minutes teasing, slapping his cock on Hollander’s face, rubbing it against his tongue, making fun of him when he chased it. He should’ve made him beg, really beg. He should’ve held off on coming and made Hollander call Ilya all kinds of nasty names with that enchanting ruined voice. He should have fucked Hollander, slapped him, choked him, destroyed him for ever.

Ilya slid across the backseat of the cab, so that his left shoulder was pressed against the door. The driver’s eyes flicked up to look at him in the mirror. Ilya couldn’t tell if he was being recognized or not. He didn’t care. He leaned his left shoulder against the door, as hard as he could, and closed his eyes against the thudding pain. It throbbed deeper and deeper, grinding into bone, and Ilya never let up the pressure.

He was very tired now.

He dreamed, that night, that he was in Hollander's bedroom. He was reclined on the pillows, looking at Hollander standing at the foot of the bed. He looked tall, built, imposing and powerful, his face presser-neutral. He was naked, but his dick was soft. On the nightstand was a pill bottle; not the American orange one but a white one with an easy-open top and Cyrillic text on the label. As in all the dreams, there was no ceiling but open sky, huge and blue.

"My new rug," Hollander said with a slight frown. His lovely head was tilted back to look up. "It can't be exposed to this much moisture."

"It never rains," Ilya said, with certainty. He crawled forward on the bed. The Egyptian cotton was slippery and soft, the warm light brown color Hollander favored. Ilya wasn't crawling. He was skating, on hands and knees.

He pressed his face into Hollander's stomach. It was all so real. The soft skin, the fine hair, the strong, solid weight of him. He reached around and gripped Hollander's ass. The flesh there was soft: a well-hydrated, functional muscle, stretched and conditioned and foam-rollered into peak performance. Hollander's large hand settled on his head without force, entirely neutral.

He'd never seen Hollander's body in beaming daylight. He tried to pull back so he could look at it. But Hollander forced his face back into his belly.

Ilya opened his mouth, meaning to kiss and lick and maybe work his way down, suck like Hollander liked. But an entirely different impulse grabbed him. He bit down into Hollander's skin, through the fat and the fascia down to the muscle. Blood ran into his mouth and down Hollander's body. He chewed. The meat was soft as velvet. Like a steak seared blue.

Ilya swallowed and dug his teeth in again for another bite, starved for more. It occurred to him then Hollander wasn't making any noise. That made him sad. Mouth full, Ilya pulled back to see Hollander's face, and woke up.

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