

Yes, Chef

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/76570456) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/76570456>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Fandom:	Heated Rivalry (TV)
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Chefs , Getting Together , Implied Sexual Content , Dialouge Heavy
Language:	English
Collections:	Fanfic Anonymous
Stats:	Published: 2025-12-28 Words: 7,853 Chapters: 1/1

Yes, Chef

by Anonymous

Summary

Shane is the head chef with one Michelin star under his belt. Ilya is a 3-times James Beard award recipient.

Shane does not like Ilya.

But what happens when they are forced to work together?

one.

Shane Hollander has been the executive chef at Constellation for exactly four years, two months, and sixteen days when Marcus tells him about Ilya Rozanov.

"It's just for six weeks," Marcus says, like that makes it better. Like six weeks isn't an eternity when you're talking about sharing a kitchen with someone who has very publicly called your cooking "technically perfect but soulless."

Shane's hands are steady as he continues breaking down the duck—breast, legs, wings—with the precision that's earned him a Michelin star and the kind of reputation that has servers whispering when he enters the dining room. "No."

"Shane—"

"No." He sets down his knife with controlled care. "You're telling me that Ilya Rozanov, who spent an entire episode of *Chef's Table* explaining why classical French technique is 'the death of innovation,' is going to come into *my* kitchen—"

"Our kitchen," Marcus corrects, which is technically true since he owns the restaurant, but Shane's been running it since the doors opened.

"—and what? Critique my mise en place? Reorganize my walk-in? Tell me that my sauce work is bourgeois?"

Marcus has the grace to look uncomfortable. "The publicity would be incredible. Two of the most talked-about chefs under forty, working together for the first time. The Times would eat it up. We could finally get that second star."

Shane's jaw tightens. He doesn't need Ilya Rozanov's chaos to get a second star. He needs consistency, precision, and a dining room full of people who appreciate the kind of cooking that makes grown men cry—not because it's weird or boundary-pushing, but because it's *perfect*.

"He's opening his own place in the city next year," Marcus continues. "Some experimental concept. Farm-to-table meets molecular gastronomy meets—I don't know, interpretive dance probably. But he wants to spend time in different kitchens first. Learning, he says."

"Learning," Shane repeats flatly. "Ilya Rozanov, winner of three James Beard awards before he turned thirty, wants to *learn* from me?"

"He specifically requested you."

That stops Shane cold. "What?"

Marcus shifts his weight, suddenly very interested in the copper pots hanging from the rack above the prep station. "He said—and I quote—'Hollander's one of the few chefs in North

America who actually respects his ingredients enough to let them speak.' Which, coming from him, is high praise."

Shane feels heat crawl up his neck. He's read every interview Ilya's ever given, watched every episode of every show he's been on, even hate-read his cookbook cover to cover. Not because he's obsessed—he tells himself it's professional research. Know your competition. Except Ilya isn't really his competition, not in any traditional sense. They operate in completely different spheres.

Ilya's the kind of chef who serves deconstructed everything, who treats a plate like a canvas, who once made a dessert that was just three perfect berries, some edible flowers, and what he called "the memory of cream." It was pretentious as hell. Shane had thought about it for a week.

"When?" Shane asks finally.

"He arrives Sunday."

Shane closes his eyes. "That's in three days."

"I know."

"We have the Marchand private dinner Saturday."

"I know."

"And you're just telling me now?"

Marcus has the decency to look apologetic. "I was hoping to find the right moment."

"There is no right moment for this." Shane returns to his duck, his cuts perhaps slightly more aggressive than necessary. "Fine. Six weeks. But he follows *my* rules. My kitchen, my systems, my standards."

"Of course," Marcus says, already backing toward the door like he's afraid Shane might change his mind. "I'll send you his requirements."

"Requirements?"

But Marcus is already gone.

Shane looks down at the perfectly butchered duck in front of him and has the distinct feeling he's just agreed to something that's going to change everything.

The email arrives at 11:04 PM.

Shane's in his apartment—a studio in Queens that's closer to the restaurant than anything in Manhattan would be, decorated with nothing but a mattress, a espresso machine, and about thirty cookbooks—when his phone buzzes.

From: Ilya Rozanov
Subject: Looking forward

He shouldn't open it. He should go to bed, get his seven hours, wake up at 4:30 AM like always and go to the market while everything is still fresh and possible.

He opens it.

Hollander;

Six weeks. I promise not to reorganize your walk-in (unless it really needs it).

Some things to know: I don't eat anything with truffle oil. It's not pretentious—I just think it tastes like gasoline and regret. I'm allergic to shellfish but I can work with it fine, just can't taste anything. I'll need station space for some experiments. Nothing crazy. Maybe a little crazy. You'll see.

Also, I work better with music. Your kitchen seems quiet in the photos. We should fix that.

Don't worry so much. It's going to be fun.

-IR

Shane reads it three times. The casual arrogance of it, the presumption that he's worried, the suggestion that his kitchen needs *fixing*—

He types out five different responses, deletes them all, and finally settles on:

Received. See you Sunday. Station 3 will be yours. We start prep at 5 AM.

He's not going to mention the music thing. His kitchen runs like a surgical theater—clean, focused, precise. The only sounds should be knives on cutting boards, the hiss of deglazing, the quiet confirmation of "Yes, chef."

His phone buzzes again immediately.

5 AM. Jesus. Okay. I'll bring the coffee.

Shane stares at the message. Then he does something he hasn't done in months: he opens Instagram.

Ilya's feed is exactly what he expected—artfully lit photos of impossible dishes, snapshots from farmers markets with produce that looks almost pornographic in its ripeness, candid shots from his travels. There's one from a street food stall in Bangkok, Ilya grinning at the camera with sweat on his forehead and grease on his hands. Another from a Michelin three-star in Copenhagen, looking serious and focused as he works a tweezers-precise garnish.

And then, buried in the feed from three months ago: a photo of Shane.

It's from the Beard Awards. Shane hadn't realized anyone was taking his picture—he'd been alone at his table, waiting for the ceremony to start, reading over the menu for Monday's service on his phone. In the photo, his brow is furrowed in concentration, his suit jacket slightly rumpled, his hair falling forward in that way it does when he forgets to push it back.

The caption reads: *Hollander doing homework. Some chefs never stop working. I respect the hell out of that.*

The photo has 47,000 likes.

Shane closes Instagram, puts his phone face-down on the counter, and stares at the ceiling of his small apartment.

"Six weeks," he says to no one. "I can do six weeks."

two.

Ilya Rozanov arrives at 4:49 AM with three different types of coffee, a crate of something that smells like fennel and earth, and an energy that makes Shane's carefully ordered prep list feel suddenly inadequate.

"You're early," Shane says, because he doesn't know what else to say. Ilya's taller than he expected, or maybe Shane just forgot. They've met exactly twice before—once at a charity dinner where they barely spoke, once at the Beards where they shook hands and made the kind of small talk that means nothing.

In person, in Shane's kitchen, Ilya is almost overwhelming. Dark hair that's too long and slightly chaotic, sharp cheekbones, a dusting of stubble that suggests he either woke up at 3 AM or never went to bed. He's wearing black jeans, a black t-shirt, and a leather jacket that definitely cost more than Shane's rent.

"Early is on time," Ilya says, shrugging out of the jacket to reveal tattooed forearms—Shane catches a glimpse of what might be a Russian phrase, a bear, something that looks like wheat. "On time is late. You taught me that."

"I never taught you anything."

"No?" Ilya's smile is crooked, dangerous. "I read your interview in *Saveur*. You said a chef who isn't in the kitchen before anyone else doesn't deserve the title. I thought, 'Fuck, he's right.' So here I am."

He sets down the coffee and the crate, then looks around the kitchen with the kind of attention that makes Shane feel exposed. The stainless steel gleams. Every tool is in its place. The prep stations are set up identically, each one a mirror of the others.

"It's exactly like I imagined," Ilya says quietly.

"Good or bad?"

"Both." Ilya picks up one of the coffee cups and holds it out. "Drink this. Then show me where everything is. Then tell me what I'm doing wrong."

"I haven't decided what you're doing wrong yet."

"You will." Ilya's grin widens. "You've been thinking about it for three days."

Shane accepts the coffee—it's perfect, naturally, some single-origin Ethiopian that probably costs fifteen dollars a cup—and tries not to think about how Ilya knew that.

The first service is a disaster.

Not a kitchen-on-fire disaster, not a walk-out-of-fifty-reservations disaster. Worse: a subtle disaster, the kind only Shane and Ilya notice.

Ilya's on garde manger, which should be simple. Salads, cold appetizers, the kind of thing any competent line cook could handle. But Ilya doesn't do anything simply. He tastes everything three times. He rearranges Shane's carefully composed frisée salad, moving the lardons two centimeters to the left. He asks questions about the vinaigrette's acidity that make Shane's jaw clench.

"It's a 3:1 ratio," Shane says tightly, plating his fish course with the precision of a surgeon. "Grapeseed oil, champagne vinegar, Dijon, shallot, salt, pepper."

"I know the ratio." Ilya doesn't look up from the radishes he's slicing paper-thin. "But the shallot—you blanched it first?"

"No."

"You should blanch it."

"I don't blanch my shallots."

"The raw bite is too aggressive. It overwhelms the lettuce."

Shane sets down his tweezers very carefully. Around them, the kitchen is its usual controlled chaos—the sauté station searing scallops, the grill smoking ribeyes, the pasta station calling out times. Everyone's pretending not to listen to Shane and Ilya's exchange, but Shane can feel their attention like heat.

"The raw bite," Shane says slowly, "is intentional. It provides contrast to the fattiness of the lardons."

"It provides aggression."

"It provides *balance*."

"It provides—"

"Guys," says Sophie from the fish station, her voice careful. "Picking up two halibut."

"Behind!" calls someone else.

The kitchen machine keeps moving, but something has shifted. Shane can feel it in the way his sous chef glances between him and Ilya, in the way the air feels tighter.

"Blanch your shallots if you want," Shane says finally. "On your station. For your dishes. Don't touch mine."

Ilya's jaw tightens, but he nods once. "Yes, chef."

The service continues. The plates go out. The kitchen finds its rhythm again.

But when Shane tastes the salad that night after service—the one Ilya made his way, with the blanched shallots—he doesn't say anything about how it's good. How it's actually better.

He just adds it to the list of things that are going to make the next six weeks impossible.

three.

They make it eleven days before the real fight.

Eleven days of tense mornings and careful choreography, of Ilya slowly integrating into the rhythm of Constellation while Shane watches like a hawk, waiting for him to disrupt something fundamental. Eleven days of Ilya bringing coffee that's too good, asking questions that are too smart, tasting everything with an attention that makes Shane's teeth ache.

The fight happens over rabbit.

"You can't serve it like this," Ilya says, and his voice isn't loud but it cuts through the pre-service quiet like a knife.

Shane looks up from the menu he's annotating. They're alone in the kitchen—service doesn't start for two hours, and the line cooks won't arrive for another thirty minutes. It's Shane's favorite time of day, when the kitchen is still his and only his.

Except now Ilya's here, holding the plate of Shane's new special—braised rabbit leg with turnips, mustard greens, and a cider reduction—and looking at it like it personally offended him.

"I can't serve it like this," Shane repeats slowly.

"The rabbit is perfect. The technique is flawless. But it's—" Ilya hesitates, and Shane recognizes that pause. It's the same pause he uses when he's trying to tell someone their baby is ugly without actually saying the words. "It's safe."

"Safe."

"Boring."

The word lands like a slap. Shane sets down his pen with exaggerated care.

"Boring," he says. "That's your professional opinion? That a dish I've spent three weeks perfecting, using rabbit from a farm I've partnered with for four years, prepared with a technique that most chefs couldn't execute if their lives depended on it—is *boring*?"

"Yes."

Ilya sets the plate down and crosses his arms. He's wearing his chef's whites now—they all are, during service hours, even though Ilya's rolled his sleeves up to his elbows and somehow made the traditional uniform look like a fashion statement.

"It's comfort food," Shane says, defensive now. "It's meant to be approachable. Warm. The kind of thing that reminds people of their grandmother's kitchen."

"Your diners aren't paying three hundred dollars a person to remember their grandmother's kitchen."

"You don't know what my diners want."

"I know what I'd want if I was spending three hundred dollars." Ilya moves closer, and Shane can smell his cologne—something woody and expensive that probably has a French name. "I'd want to be surprised. Challenged. I'd want to taste something I couldn't make at home."

"This is a Michelin-starred restaurant, not a carnival."

"No, this is a Michelin-starred restaurant that's afraid to take risks."

The words hit harder than they should. Shane's spent four years building Constellation's reputation on precision, on the kind of technical excellence that critics respect and diners trust. Every dish is carefully calibrated, extensively tested, refined until it's perfect.

"I take risks," Shane says.

"You take calculated risks. You take risks that have been pre-approved by your spreadsheet." Ilya gestures at the plate. "This rabbit—it's beautiful. But it's predictable. I could tell you every flavor before I tasted it. There's no discovery. No surprise. No—"

"No what?"

"No *you*." Ilya's eyes are intense, almost black in the kitchen's bright lights. "Where's the passion? Where's the thing that made you want to cook this in the first place? Because I know it wasn't to make a technically perfect representation of a French bistro classic."

Shane feels his hands curl into fists. "Get out of my kitchen."

"It's not your kitchen for six weeks. It's *our* kitchen."

"Then stay on your station and stop critiquing mine."

"I'm not critiquing your station. I'm critiquing your fear."

"I'm not afraid."

"Bullshit." Ilya's voice rises for the first time, and Shane sees something crack in his carefully maintained cool. "You're the most afraid chef I've ever worked with. Every dish is perfect because you won't let it be anything else. You won't let it be messy or strange or personal. You won't—"

"I won't what? Serve unripe tomatoes and call it avant-garde? Put foam on everything and pretend it's revolutionary? Make food that looks pretty on Instagram but tastes like nothing?"

"Now who's critiquing?"

"You started this."

"No, you started this four years ago when you stopped cooking like you gave a shit about anything except your Michelin stars."

The words hang in the air between them. Shane's breathing hard, his face hot. He can't remember the last time someone spoke to him like this in his own kitchen. Can't remember the last time someone *saw* him like this.

"How would you know?" Shane asks quietly. "How would you know what I cooked like four years ago?"

Ilya's expression shifts—something vulnerable flashing across his face before he locks it down. "I ate here. Opening week. You probably don't remember."

"I remember every customer from opening week."

"Yeah?" Ilya's smile is sharp, wounded. "What did I order?"

Shane closes his eyes. He does remember. A Friday night, late seating. Ilya had come alone, which was unusual for a chef of his caliber. He'd ordered the tasting menu—all eight courses—and he'd lingered over every plate. Shane had watched from the kitchen, unable to look away.

"The duck," Shane says. "You started with the duck terrine, then the scallops, the halibut, the short rib. For dessert, you had the chocolate soufflé and the cheese plate."

Ilya's face softens. "You remember."

"You sent back a note with the server. Said the short rib was the best thing you'd eaten in New York."

"It was." Ilya takes a step closer. "It was aggressive and perfect and you could taste everything you were feeling in every bite. The joy, the fear, the desperation to prove yourself. It was—" He stops. "It was the most honest plate of food I've ever had."

Shane's throat feels tight. "I don't cook like that anymore."

"I know." Ilya picks up the rabbit plate again. "That's the problem."

They stare at each other across the gleaming expanse of the prep station. Outside, Shane can hear the city waking up—delivery trucks, early morning traffic—the clash and rush of New York finding its rhythm.

"Fix it then," Shane says finally. "The rabbit. Show me what you'd do."

"Are you serious?"

"You're here to collaborate, right? To learn?" Shane's jaw tightens. "Teach me something."

Ilya sets down the plate and rolls his shoulders like a boxer preparing for a fight. "Okay. Yes. But you have to promise not to murder me."

"I promise nothing."

"Good enough." Ilya moves to the walk-in, and Shane follows, curious despite himself.

Inside the refrigerator, Ilya moves with the confidence of someone who's spent the last eleven days memorizing every ingredient's location. He pulls out: preserved lemon, harissa, fresh mint, pistachios, dried apricots.

"What are you doing?" Shane asks.

"The rabbit is French," Ilya says, already carrying everything back to the prep station. "Fine. But you know what makes French technique better? When you stop being so fucking reverent about it. When you let other flavors in."

He starts moving—mincing the preserved lemon, crushing the pistachios, tearing mint leaves with his hands instead of cutting them. There's something almost violent about how he works, like he's attacking the ingredients. But there's also something beautiful, Shane realizes. Something free.

"The cider reduction is good," Ilya says, tasting it. "But it needs acid. It needs heat. It needs —" He adds the harissa, just a touch, and a splash of sherry vinegar. "This."

He tastes again, nods, then starts plating. The rabbit goes down first—Shane's perfect braise—but then Ilya adds the preserved lemon-pistachio mixture, scatters torn mint leaves, arranges the mustard greens differently. Less structured. More wild.

"Try it," Ilya says, stepping back.

Shane picks up a fork. He can feel Ilya watching him, can feel the weight of this moment. This isn't just about rabbit. It's about everything—about pride and control and the question of whether Shane is as good as he thinks he is, or whether he's been coasting on technical perfection for years.

He takes a bite.

The flavors hit him like a train. The rabbit is still tender, still perfect, but now it's surrounded by brightness and heat and something almost floral from the mint. The preserved lemon cuts through the richness. The harissa-spiked reduction makes his tongue buzz. It's—

"It's good," Shane admits.

"It's better than good." Ilya sounds defensive, like he expected more of a fight.

"It's unexpected." Shane takes another bite, and another. He's trying to understand what Ilya's done, trying to reverse-engineer the impulse. "The preserved lemon—that's North African."

"Moroccan."

"And the harissa—"

"Also North African. They colonized each other, France and Morocco. The flavors know each other. They want to be together."

Shane sets down his fork and looks at Ilya—really looks at him. "You think about food like it's alive."

"Food *is* alive. Or it was. We're just—we're translating. We're telling the story of what the ingredients wanted to become." Ilya's hands move as he talks, painting pictures in the air. "That's what you used to do. Four years ago. You told stories with food."

"What story did I tell?"

Ilya's quiet for a moment. Then: "You told me that someone could be homesick for a place they've never been. That short rib—it tasted like winter in the countryside. Like a farmhouse I've never visited. Like my grandmother's hands, even though I barely remember her." He looks away. "That's what you used to do. You made people *feel* things."

Shane's chest aches. He doesn't know what to say. Doesn't know how to explain that somewhere along the way, between the Beard nomination and the Michelin star and the constant pressure to be perfect, he forgot how to do anything except execute. Forgot how to take risks. Forgot how to *feel*.

"I want to serve this," he says finally. "Tonight. The rabbit. Your way."

"Our way," Ilya corrects.

"Our way," Shane agrees.

They're standing very close now. Shane can see the flecks of gold in Ilya's dark eyes, can count the individual curls falling across his forehead. Can smell garlic and mint on his hands, coffee on his breath.

"I should—" Shane starts.

"Yeah," Ilya says.

Neither of them moves.

The kitchen door slams open. "Chef?" It's Sophie, early as always. "Oh. Sorry. I didn't realize —"

"We're testing a new dish," Shane says quickly, stepping back. His face is burning. "For tonight's special."

Sophie looks between them, her expression carefully neutral. "Smells good."

"It is good," Ilya says, but he's looking at Shane when he says it.

four.

The rabbit is a hit.

Not just a hit—a revelation. Three critics come in that first week and all of them mention it. "A departure for Hollander," writes the Times reviewer. "Bold, unexpected, alive with flavor while maintaining his trademark technical precision."

"See?" Ilya says, reading the review over Shane's shoulder at the prep station. "You care more than you admit."

Shane doesn't answer. He's too busy trying not to think about how close Ilya is standing, how he can feel his breath against the back of his neck, how the past two weeks have been a strange kind of torture.

Because here's the thing Shane hasn't admitted to himself: working with Ilya is exhilarating.

Every day is a controlled argument. Every service is a negotiation. They fight about plating, about sourcing, about whether garnish should be edible (Ilya: always) or merely beautiful (Shane: depends). They fight about how hot the kitchen should be, about whether music helps or distracts, about the correct ratio of salt to acid in a vinaigrette.

But they also *cook* together. Really cook, not just execute menu items but create them. Ilya will suggest something wild and Shane will rein it in. Shane will propose something classical and Ilya will break it open. Somewhere in the middle, they find something neither of them could make alone.

"We should do a collaboration menu," Ilya says, still reading over Shane's shoulder. "A whole tasting experience. Your technique, my creativity."

"That's very arrogant."

"I know." Ilya grins. "You love it."

He's not wrong.

"Marcus would never approve," Shane says, but he's already thinking about it. Already imagining the kind of menu they could build together. Already wanting it with an intensity that scares him.

"Marcus would approve anything that gets this kind of press." Ilya moves away, finally, and Shane can breathe again. "Besides, we only have three more weeks. Might as well make them count."

Three more weeks. Shane's been trying not to think about that. Trying not to wonder what happens when Ilya leaves, when the kitchen goes back to being his alone, when everything returns to the careful order he used to crave.

"I'll think about it," Shane says.

That night, after service, after everyone's gone home, Shane stays late to work on prep for tomorrow. He's breaking down chickens when Ilya appears in the kitchen doorway, still in his whites, his hair damp like he just showered.

"You're still here," Ilya says.

"So are you."

"Couldn't sleep." Ilya moves into the kitchen, his bare feet silent on the tile. "Keep thinking about that beef we're serving tomorrow. The short rib. It needs something."

"It's fine as it is."

"It's good as it is." Ilya picks up a knife and starts breaking down a chicken beside him, their movements falling into easy sync. "But it could be great."

They work in silence for a while. Outside, the city is quiet—that rare 3 AM New York silence when even Manhattan holds its breath. Inside the kitchen, there's just the sound of their knives, their breathing, the comfortable rhythm they've developed.

"Why did you really come here?" Shane asks. "The truth."

Ilya doesn't answer immediately. His hands keep moving, precise and sure.

"Because I was jealous," he says finally. "Of your restaurant. Your star. Your... consistency."

"Jealous? You have three Beard awards."

"Awards don't mean shit if you can't sleep at night wondering if you're good enough." Ilya sets down his knife. "My food is good. Sometimes it's great. But it's also—it's chaos. It's me throwing things at a wall to see what sticks. You have *discipline*. You have *control*. I wanted to understand that."

"And do you? Understand it?"

"I understand that it's lonely." Ilya looks at him, and there's something raw in his expression. "All that control. All that perfection. Where do you let yourself be messy?"

Shane's throat is tight. "I don't."

"I know." Ilya reaches out, and Shane thinks he's going to touch him, but instead he just gestures at the chickens. "That's why this is the only place you're honest. In the kitchen. With the food."

"And you?" Shane's voice comes out rougher than he intended. "Where are you honest?"

"Everywhere. It's exhausting." Ilya's smile is crooked. "That's why I need someone like you. To keep me from burning everything down."

They're standing very close again. It keeps happening—this gravitational pull that Shane can't explain. Ilya's eyes are dark and intense, and Shane can see his pulse beating in his throat.

"We should finish this," Shane says, but he doesn't move.

"Yeah," Ilya agrees, also not moving.

The kiss happens so naturally that later, Shane won't be able to say who moved first. One moment they're staring at each other across the prep station, and the next Ilya's hand is in his hair and Shane's fingers are twisted in Ilya's shirt and they're kissing like they're starving for it.

And maybe they are. Maybe Shane's been starving for months, for years, for his entire careful life. Starving for something uncontrolled and messy and real.

Ilya tastes like coffee and mint. He kisses like he cooks—aggressive and passionate and a little bit wild. Shane meets him with equal intensity, letting himself be messy for once, letting himself want without calculating the cost.

They break apart gasping. Shane's back is against the stainless steel counter, and Ilya's pressed against him, and everything is hot and bright and terrifying.

"We should—" Shane starts.

"Don't," Ilya says. "Don't think. Don't calculate. Just feel it."

"I don't know how."

"Liar." Ilya kisses him again, softer this time. "You know exactly how. You just forgot."

Shane's hands find Ilya's waist, pulling him closer. "This is a terrible idea."

"The best ones usually are."

They kiss again, and again, until Shane's head is spinning and his careful control is in pieces on the kitchen floor. Until he's forgotten why this is impossible, forgotten everything except the taste of Ilya's mouth and the sound of his breathing and the way his hands feel tangled in Shane's hair.

When they finally pull apart, Shane's lips are swollen and his hair is a mess and Ilya's looking at him like he's something precious.

"Three more weeks," Ilya says softly.

"Three more weeks," Shane echoes.

Neither of them says what happens after that.

five.

They tell Marcus about the collaboration menu the next morning.

Marcus's face goes through several expressions—surprise, calculation, and finally, naked greed. "How many courses?"

"Twelve," Shane says.

"Fifteen," Ilya says at the same time.

They look at each other. Shane raises an eyebrow. Ilya grins.

"Fourteen," they say together.

"When?" Marcus asks, already pulling out his phone to text his publicist.

"Two weeks." Shane ignores Ilya's sharp glance. "We need time to develop it properly."

"One week," Ilya argues. "If we overthink it, we'll lose the spontaneity."

"If we underthink it, we'll serve garbage."

"Has anything I've made here been garbage?"

"Has anything I've made here been spontaneous?"

Marcus clears his throat. "Gentlemen. Can you decide without murdering each other?"

They're standing close again, that magnetic pull working its magic. Shane can see the golden flecks in Ilya's eyes, can remember exactly how his mouth tastes.

"Ten days," Shane says.

"Deal," Ilya agrees.

Marcus looks between them, his expression knowing. "You two worked this out beforehand, didn't you?"

"No," they say in unison, which is completely true. But there's something happening between them that goes beyond verbal communication now. Something in the way they move around each other in the kitchen, the way they finish each other's thoughts, the way Shane knows what Ilya needs before he asks for it.

They haven't talked about the kiss. Haven't acknowledged it beyond the way Ilya's hand sometimes brushes Shane's lower back when he passes behind him during service, or the way Shane's fingers linger on Ilya's wrist when he's showing him a technique.

The kitchen knows, though. Sophie caught them standing too close over a sauce pan yesterday and her smile was so knowing that Shane wanted to melt into the floor. The line cooks have started taking bets on when they'll finally acknowledge it.

But the menu—the menu is something they can work on together without having to define what this is. The menu is safe, in its own dangerous way.

They start developing it that afternoon, after the market run and before the evening prep begins. Shane clears the chef's table in the private dining room and they spread out—notebooks, tablets, ingredient lists, photographs.

"We need a narrative arc," Shane says, uncapping his pen. "A journey."

"I hate the word journey when it comes to food," Ilya says, but he's pulling out his own notebook, the pages already covered in sketches and notes in a mix of English and Russian.

"Call it something else then. A conversation. A debate."

"A fight."

"We do that anyway."

Ilya grins. "True. Okay. So what do we start with? What's the opening argument?"

Shane thinks. "Something raw. Something that shows off the ingredients with minimal intervention."

"Something mine," Ilya says, not unkindly. "Okay. I can work with that. Crudo, maybe? But not traditional. Maybe..." His pencil moves rapidly across the page. "Fluke, compressed watermelon, jalapeño oil, mint."

"Sounds like a ceviche."

"Sounds like summer."

Shane writes it down. "And then I come in. Something more structured. More classical."

"A soup," Ilya suggests. "I fucking love your soup."

Shane blinks. "You've never mentioned my soup."

"Your corn soup makes me want to cry. But it's too precious how you do it. You strain it seventeen times."

"Eleven times."

"Still too much." Ilya leans back in his chair. "What if we did it together? I'll start it—rough, rustic, sweet corn cut straight off the cob, charred until it's almost burned. Then you finish it—blend it smooth, add cream, refine it. Raw becoming refined."

Shane's heart does something complicated in his chest. "That's... actually brilliant."

"I have my moments."

They keep going. Course after course, each one a negotiation, each one pushing them both further than they'd go alone. Ilya suggests a dessert that's just perfect peaches, torn burrata, and aged balsamic. Shane adds pistachio tuile and edible flowers. Ilya proposes they serve handmade pasta with nothing but brown butter, sage, and black pepper. Shane insists on adding a parmesan foam that Ilya initially objects to but eventually admits is "annoyingly goo."

Hours pass. The afternoon light moves across the dining room. At some point, someone (Shane thinks it was Sophie) brings them coffee and sandwiches, which they eat without stopping work, sauce staining Shane's notebook and Ilya getting crumbs all over his sketches.

"Okay," Shane says finally, sitting back and surveying what they've built. "Fourteen courses. Start to finish. What's the throughline?"

Ilya's quiet for a long moment, studying the menu. Then: "Honesty."

"What?"

"That's the throughline." Ilya looks up, and his expression is serious. "Every dish—it's about being honest. About the ingredients, about ourselves, about what happens when you stop hiding behind technique or innovation and just make what you *feel*."

Shane's chest tightens. He looks at the menu and sees it: a path from raw to refined and back again, from simple to complex and back to simple. A conversation between their two philosophies, yes, but also something deeper.

A confession.

"The final course," Shane says slowly. "What should it be?"

"You tell me."

"I don't know. Something that brings it all together. Something that shows we're better together than apart." Shane's hands are shaking slightly. "Something that scares me."

Ilya reaches across the table and takes Shane's hand. His fingers are warm, callused from years of knife work. "Good," he says softly. "Scared means you care."

Shane looks at their joined hands, then at Ilya's face. "When did this stop being just about food?"

"I don't think it was ever just about food."

The door to the dining room swings open and they pull apart quickly. It's Sophie again, looking apologetic. "Sorry, chefs. But the dinner service—"

"Shit." Shane glances at his watch. "We're late for prep."

They gather their notes and head to the kitchen, moving from the quiet creativity of the afternoon into the controlled chaos of service. But something's shifted. Shane can feel it in the way they move around each other now, in the way Ilya's hand finds the small of his back when he's passing with a hot pan, in the way Shane tastes Ilya's dishes with an attention that goes beyond professional critique.

That night, after service, they stay late again. Ostensibly to work on the menu, but Shane knows the truth: he doesn't want to go home to his empty apartment. Doesn't want to be anywhere that Ilya isn't.

They're testing a sauce—Ilya wants it brighter, Shane wants it deeper—when Ilya says, "What happens after?"

Shane doesn't pretend not to understand. "I don't know."

"I'm opening my restaurant in February. The space is in Brooklyn. Twenty-four seats." Ilya's hands are steady as he adjusts the seasoning, but Shane can hear the tension in his voice. "I need a partner. Someone who can keep me from burning everything down."

Shane's heart stops. "Ilya—"

"Don't answer now. Just think about it." Ilya sets down the spoon and turns to face him. "I know it's crazy. I know you have Constellation and your star and your life here. But Shane—what we're building with this menu, we could build that every day. We could—"

Shane kisses him. Hard. Because he doesn't have words for what he's feeling, doesn't have a way to explain that somewhere in the past three weeks, Ilya Rozanov has taken everything Shane thought he knew about cooking and himself and turned it inside out.

When they pull apart, Ilya's breathing hard. "Is that a yes?"

"It's a 'let me survive the next two weeks first.'"

"I'll take it."

They kiss again, slower this time. Shane lets himself feel it—the want, the fear, the possibility. Lets himself imagine a future where he and Ilya share more than just a kitchen.

"The final course," Ilya murmurs against his lips. "I have an idea."

"Tell me."

"Chocolate soufflé." Ilya pulls back just enough to meet Shane's eyes. "But we make it together. You do the base—perfect, classical, exactly by the book. I do the finish—something wild on top. Maybe miso caramel. Maybe black sesame ice cream. Something that shouldn't work but does."

"That's—" Shane starts to object, to say it's too risky, too unpredictable. But then he catches himself. "That's perfect."

Ilya's smile is blinding. "You're learning."

"Don't let it go to your head."

"Too late."

They work until 4 AM, testing and tasting and arguing and laughing. By the time Shane finally heads home, the sun is starting to rise and his feet are killing him and he's pretty sure he's never been happier in his entire life.

It terrifies him.

six.

The night of the collaboration menu, Shane wakes up at 3 AM in a cold sweat.

He's having a nightmare where every dish fails simultaneously—the soufflés collapse, the pasta turns to mush, the crudo somehow catches fire even though fire isn't involved. In the dream, Ilya watches with disappointed eyes and says, "I knew you'd ruin it."

Shane lies in bed staring at the ceiling, his heart racing, his hands clenched in the sheets. They've spent the past ten days perfecting this menu. Every component has been tested, tasted, refined. Nothing should go wrong.

Everything could go wrong.

At 3:30, he gives up on sleep and heads to the restaurant. He's not surprised to find Ilya already there, sitting at the bar in the dark with a cup of coffee.

"Couldn't sleep either?" Ilya asks.

"Had a nightmare where everything caught fire."

"That's improbable. We're only using fire for four courses."

Shane sits beside him, and Ilya passes him the coffee without asking. It's the good stuff—the Ethiopian single-origin that Shane has gotten addicted to over the past weeks.

"Are you nervous?" Shane asks.

"Terrified," Ilya admits. "The Times is coming. Three bloggers with a combined reach of five million. Also, Scott Hunter."

"The Scott Hunter? Michelin three-star Hunter?"

"He requested a table specifically for tonight. Apparently he heard rumors." Ilya's hand is shaking slightly around his cup. "This menu—it's the most honest I've ever been in my cooking. If he hates it—"

"He won't hate it."

"You don't know that."

"I know you." Shane sets down his cup and takes Ilya's hand. "I know what you're capable of. This menu is going to be brilliant."

"*Our* menu."

"Our menu," Shane agrees.

They sit in the dark for a moment, hands clasped, both of them terrified and exhilarated in equal measure. Through the window, Shane can see the city starting to wake up. In eight hours, they'll serve the most important meal of their lives.

"Whatever happens," Ilya says quietly, "I'm glad we did this."

"Me too."

At 5 AM, the kitchen comes alive. The line cooks arrive, then the servers, then Marcus looking almost manic with excitement. The prep work begins—mountains of it, hours of it. Shane moves through the familiar choreography while also keeping track of the new elements, the way each dish builds on the one before it.

Ilya's energy is different today. Usually he's a whirlwind—moving fast, talking faster, bouncing between stations. But today he's focused, centered. Shane catches him tasting a sauce three times before he's satisfied, watches him adjust a garnish with microscopic precision.

"You're thinking like me," Shane observes.

"Scary, isn't it?" But Ilya's grinning. "I'm trying to channel my inner Hollander. Precision. Control. Not setting things on fire."

"Very noble of you."

At 4 PM, they plate the first course—Ilya's fluke crudo. Shane watches as Ilya arranges the fish with the care of a watchmaker, watches as he adds the compressed watermelon in perfect cubes, watches as he drizzles the jalapeño oil with a hand that's finally steady.

"Taste," Ilya says, holding out a fork.

Shane tastes. The flavors are bright and clean, the fish sweet and yielding, the heat from the jalapeño building slowly. It's perfect. He tells Ilya so.

"Your turn," Ilya says.

They move through the courses one by one. Shane's amuse-bouche—a single oyster with champagne foam and caviar. Ilya's compressed tomato salad that tastes like summer distilled. Their corn soup, started started rough and finished refined. On and on, building and building.

At 6 PM, the first guests arrive.

At 6:15, they send out the first course.

And then they're in it—the controlled chaos of service, the rhythm of the kitchen, the dance they've perfected over the past three weeks. Shane calls times, Ilya plates, and the rest of the kitchen moves around them like a symphony.

Between courses, Shane catches glimpses of the dining room. Scott Hunter is there at table seven, his expression unreadable. The Times critic is at table three, taking notes between

bites. And at table twelve, Marcus is sitting with the other investors, his face glowing with pride and dollar signs.

"Picking up pasta," Shane calls.

"Pasta up," Ilya confirms.

They're in sync now, completely. Shane knows what Ilya needs before he asks for it. Ilya can read Shane's micro-expressions—the tiny frown that means the temperature's not quite right, the way his shoulders relax when a dish is perfect.

The night blurs together. Course after course goes out, comes back clean. The energy in the kitchen builds until it feels like they're all vibrating at the same frequency.

And then it's time for the final course.

The soufflés go in the oven at exactly 9:47 PM. Shane's hands are steady as he prepares them—the classical base that's as reliable as gravity, whisked egg whites folded in with precision, ramekins prepared with butter and sugar. Beside him, Ilya's making the miso caramel, the black sesame ice cream, building the wild elements that will crown Shane's perfect base.

The timer goes off. Shane pulls the soufflés out, and they're perfect—risen high, golden on top, still trembling with heat.

"Now," he says, and Ilya moves in.

For a moment, Shane thinks about his nightmare—everything going wrong, everything collapsing. But then he watches Ilya work—the confidence in his hands, the sureness of his movements—and he realizes: they're going to nail this.

Ilya plates with the care of a surgeon. The soufflé goes down first, Shane's perfect base. Then the miso caramel in a delicate drizzle. The black sesame ice cream on the side, along with candied sesame seeds. A dusting of matcha powder. A single shiso leaf for color.

It's chaotic and classical at once. It's them.

"Send it," Shane says.

The soufflés go out to every table simultaneously. Shane and Ilya stand at the pass, watching the servers disappear into the dining room. Around them, the kitchen has gone quiet. Everyone's watching, waiting.

Then, from the dining room, applause.

Not polite applause—real applause, the kind that means something. Shane and Ilya look at each other, and Ilya's grin is so bright it could power the whole city.

"We did it," Shane says.

"We did it," Ilya confirms.

And then he kisses Shane, right there at the pass, in front of the entire kitchen staff.

For a moment, Shane's brain shorts out. He's kissing Ilya Rozanov in his restaurant, in his kitchen, in front of everyone. This is unprofessional. This is inappropriate. This is—

This is perfect.

Shane kisses back, letting himself feel the joy and relief and something deeper that he's been trying not to name. When they pull apart, the entire kitchen is cheering.

"About fucking time," Sophie says, grinning.

end.

The restaurant is called "Constellation & Ash" and it's in a converted warehouse in Brooklyn with exposed brick and industrial lighting and twenty-four seats total.

Shane spent three months agonizing over whether to leave Constellation. Marcus sweetened the offer twice, promised him creative freedom, practically begged him to stay. But in the end, the decision was easier than Shane expected.

Because here's what he'd learned from Ilya: perfection is boring. Safety is death. And the best food comes from taking risks with someone who scares you in the best possible way.

The menu at Constellation & Ash changes every week. Half the dishes are Shane's—technically precise, classically grounded. Half are Ilya's—wild and unexpected. And some, the best ones, are both of theirs together.

The critics don't know what to make of it. "Schizophrenic," one writes. "Brilliant chaos," says another. "The most exciting restaurant in New York," declares a third.

They sell out every service three months in advance.

Tonight, they're testing new dishes for spring. Shane's working on a strawberry gastrique while Ilya deconstructs rhubarb beside him. The kitchen is smaller than Constellation's, more intimate. Shane can reach across the pass and brush Ilya's wrist without stepping away from his station.

"Taste this," Ilya says, holding out a spoonful of his rhubarb preparation.

Shane tastes. His face screws up. "That's—"

"Terrible, I know." Ilya doesn't look discouraged. "But the idea is sound. Maybe if I—" He reaches for the sugar.

"Wait." Shane stops him. "What if instead of sugar, we used honey? Local honey. And then—" He's already moving, pulling ingredients. "We char it. Make it bitter and sweet at once."

Ilya watches him work, and there's something in his expression that makes Shane's chest tight. "That's it," he says softly. "That's what I was missing."

They work together, building the dish, arguing about garnish, tasting and adjusting until it's perfect. When they're done, they stand back and look at what they've made.

"You know," Shane says, "a year ago, I would have served this without the charred element. It would have been good. Safe. Predictable."

"And now?"

"Now I'd rather make something great with you than something good by myself."

Ilya sets down his spoon and pulls Shane close, kissing him slow and deep. They taste like rhubarb and honey and smoke.

"For the record," Ilya murmurs against his lips, "that strawberry gastrique is going to change lives."

"For the record," Shane replies, "your rhubarb idea was brilliant even before I fixed it."

"That's the most romantic thing you've ever said to me."

"I know."

They kiss again, and somewhere in the dining room, they can hear the servers setting up for tonight's service. In an hour, the kitchen will fill with staff and energy and the controlled chaos they've both come to crave. But for now, it's just the two of them, creating something neither of them could make alone.

"Should we test that soufflé idea?" Shane asks. "The one with the miso and the passion fruit?"

"The one you said was impossible?"

"The one I said would be hard. There's a difference."

Ilya grins. "You've changed, Hollander."

"I had a good teacher."

"The best teacher."

"Don't push it."

But Shane's smiling as he says it, and when they move to opposite sides of the kitchen to start prep, there's no distance between them at all.

In the window, the Brooklyn sunset paints everything gold. Outside, the city pulses with life. And inside Constellation & Ash, two chefs who were supposed to be rivals are making something beautiful.

Something honest.

Something that tastes *exactly* like love.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!