

Salt, Sun, and Skin

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Salt, Sun, and Skin

by [orphan_account](#)

Summary

Away from the rink and under a different kind of heat.

The island felt like a dare.

Palm fronds leaned low over white sand, the air thick with salt and sweetness, the ocean breathing in slow, blue laps. It was the kind of place that looked fake until you stepped barefoot into it and realized it was real—and that made it worse, somehow. Shane had always done better with things that hurt a little. Cold rinks. Sharp edges. Rivalries that burned hot enough to keep him upright.

Ilya, apparently, did not have that problem.

He was already sprawled on a lounge chair like he'd been born to tropical vacations instead of raised on ice and spite, sunglasses pushed up into his curls, skin gleaming with sweat and sun. He tipped his head when Shane came closer, smile lazy and dangerous.

"Relax," Ilya said. "Your shoulders are up by your ears."

Shane snorted and dropped his bag onto the sand. "You're the one who booked this place."

"Together," Ilya corrected. "We agreed. A truce."

Shane looked at him. Really looked. No gear, no boards between them, no roar of a crowd. Just Ilya, bare-chested, smug, and devastatingly at ease. Out in the open, like they'd promised. Like they'd both been terrified of.

"A truce," Shane echoed. "For one week."

Ilya grinned. "Plenty of time."

That should have been a warning.

They didn't last an hour before the rivalry crept back in, curling around their ankles like a cat that pretended not to care but absolutely did. It lived in the way Shane challenged Ilya to swim farther out. In the way Ilya beat him back to shore and laughed, breathless, water slicking down his torso.

"You cheated," Shane said.

"You're just slow," Ilya shot back. "Age."

"I'm the same age as you."

"Details."

They lay on their towels afterward, sun beating down, the sound of waves filling the space where trash talk usually lived. Shane closed his eyes, letting the heat sink in. His skin prickled, already pinkening.

"You're going to burn," Ilya said.

“I’ll live.”

Ilya propped himself up on one elbow. Shane could feel his gaze like a physical thing, dragging slow and unapologetic. “I have sunscreen.”

“So do I.”

“Yes,” Ilya said, “but I offered.”

Shane opened one eye. “You offering now?”

Ilya’s smile shifted. Less lazy. More intent. “I am a generous man.”

Something in Shane’s chest tightened. He sat up, grabbed his own bottle from his bag, and held it up. “I’m good.”

Ilya made a little tsk sound. “Stubborn.”

“Competitive.”

“Sexy flaw,” Ilya said lightly, then reached out and plucked the bottle from Shane’s hand.

Shane sputtered. “Hey—”

“Already touching,” Ilya pointed out. He flicked the cap open with his thumb. “Too late.”

Shane could have taken it back. He didn’t. He let Ilya pour a cool line of lotion into his palm instead, watched his eyes track the motion. The air shifted, thickened.

“Front or back?” Ilya asked.

Shane swallowed. “Back.”

Ilya’s hands were warm. The contrast made Shane hiss as sunscreen spread across his shoulders, firm palms working it in. Not clinical. Not rushed. Fingers dragging, thumbs pressing into muscle like Ilya was memorizing him. Like he’d earned the right.

“You’re tense,” Ilya murmured, close enough now that Shane could feel his breath. “Still think I’m going to stab you in the back?”

Shane laughed, a rough sound. “You would.”

“Only if you deserved it.”

Ilya leaned in, just a fraction. His hands slid lower, down Shane’s spine, stopping at the small of his back. He lingered there, deliberate. Testing.

Shane’s pulse kicked. “You done?”

“No,” Ilya said softly. “Sides.”

His fingers skimmed Shane's ribs, slow and teasing, leaving goosebumps in their wake. Shane bit down on a grin. "You're enjoying this."

"Very much."

"You're supposed to be neutral."

Ilya hummed. "I don't know how."

Neither of them did. That was the problem. Always had been.

When Shane turned the tables, it felt inevitable. He grabbed the bottle back, slicked his hands, and nudged Ilya onto his stomach with a knee to the thigh.

"My turn," Shane said.

Ilya made a pleased noise and went easily, cheek pressed to his towel. "Be gentle."

"No promises."

Shane spread sunscreen across Ilya's back, palms broad and sure. Ilya's skin was warm and smooth.

"You're terrible at this," Ilya said faintly.

"Liar."

"You're pressing too hard."

"Sensitive?"

Ilya laughed into his towel. "Maybe."

Shane leaned down, mouth close to Ilya's ear. "You never were."

The silence that followed was electric. Ilya turned his head, eyes dark behind his lashes. "Careful," he said. "You keep talking like that, I'll forget about the sunscreen."

Shane smirked. "Threat or promise?"

Ilya rolled onto his back, sunscreen half-applied, chest gleaming. "Both."

They stared at each other, the sun a heavy witness. Shane could feel the edge of the truce fraying, desire threading through old anger and competition until it was impossible to tell them apart.

"You started this," Shane said.

Ilya's smile was wicked. "I finished it."

They didn't cross the line—not really. Not all the way. But they danced on it, toes curling over the edge. A brush of fingers that lingered too long. A knee pressed between thighs. Words that could be taken back later if they had to be.

By the time the sun dipped low, painting the sky in molten gold, they were flushed and laughing and a little wrecked. Sand clung to their skin. The rivalry felt different now—less sharp, more intimate. Like a shared language.

Back in their bungalow, the air was cooler, shadows stretching across the floor. Shane kicked off his sandals and collapsed onto the couch.

“Best idea you ever had,” he admitted.

Ilya leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed, smug. “I know.”

Shane glanced at him. “Don't let it go to your head.”

“Too late.”

They stood there, the weight of the day settling between them. The island hummed outside, alive and unconcerned.

“So,” Shane said. “Same time tomorrow?”

Ilya's grin was slow and full of promise. “I'll bring more sunscreen.”

Shane laughed, warmth blooming in his chest. The rivalry wasn't gone. It never would be. But out here, under the sun, it had learned a new game—and they were both very good at it.

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The next morning arrived soft and bright, like the island had decided to show off.

Sunlight slipped through the slatted windows of the bungalow, warm stripes across tangled sheets and bare skin. Shane woke first, as usual. Habit, he told himself. Nothing to do with the way Ilya slept—loose-limbed, mouth slightly open, lashes dark against his cheeks like he had no enemies in the world. Shane watched him for a moment longer than necessary, chest doing something annoyingly gentle.

Ilya stirred as if summoned by the thought, blinking awake and squinting against the light. “Why are you staring,” he mumbled, accent thick with sleep, “like you're planning my murder?”

“Considering it,” Shane said automatically.

Ilya smiled. Not smug. Fond. It caught Shane off guard every time. “Good morning to you too.”

They didn't rush. That was new. No alarms, no schedules, no pressure to perform or win. They moved through the morning in bare feet and quiet sarcasm, sharing coffee that was too

strong and fruit that dripped down their wrists.

“You have juice on your chin,” Ilya said, reaching out.

Shane swatted his hand away. “Mind your business.”

Ilya laughed and leaned back in his chair, studying him over the rim of his mug. “Beach again today?”

“Thought you’d want to rest after yesterday.”

“Oh, I recovered,” Ilya said lightly. “Did you?”

Shane rolled his eyes but grabbed the sunscreen before Ilya could. They headed down to the beach, sand already warm, the sea a bright, endless blue. The same stretch of shore as the day before—but it felt different. Like the island was watching them now, aware of what they were becoming.

They set up near the water, towels spread out, a shared umbrella stuck crookedly into the sand. Shane kicked off his sandals and tilted his face toward the sun, closing his eyes.

“Don’t fall asleep yet,” Ilya said.

“Why?”

“Because you forgot your face yesterday.”

Shane cracked one eye open. “I did not.”

“You are red,” Ilya said solemnly. “Like an angry lobster.”

“Rude.”

“Accurate.”

Ilya shook the bottle and squeezed a small amount onto his fingers. Shane stiffened without meaning to. “I can do it myself.”

Ilya paused, fingers hovering. “Let me,” he said, quieter. Not teasing. Just... asking.

Shane hesitated, then leaned back against the towel. “Fine. But don’t get it in my eyes.”

“No promises,” Ilya said, immediately grinning again.

He straddled Shane’s legs loosely, careful not to put his full weight down, knees bracketing Shane’s hips. The closeness sent a familiar jolt through Shane’s system—competition turned something warmer, sharper. Ilya’s fingers touched his temple, cool with lotion.

“Hold still,” Ilya murmured.

Shane snorted. “You’re the one hovering.”

“Shh.”

Ilya spread the sunscreen gently, thumbs brushing along Shane’s cheekbones. His touch was careful in a way that surprised Shane, like he understood this was different territory. Intimate in a quieter way. He worked slowly, circling Shane’s temples, smoothing across his forehead.

“Your freckles,” Ilya said suddenly.

Shane opened his eyes. “What about them?”

Ilya didn’t answer right away. His thumb traced a familiar path along Shane’s cheek, following the scatter of freckles like they were stars only he could see. “I like them,” he said finally. “They’re everywhere, but you only notice them when you look close.”

Shane’s throat went tight. “You’ve been looking close?”

Ilya’s gaze flicked up, met his. No deflection. No joke. “Yes.”

The air between them thickened, the sounds of the beach fading into something distant and unimportant. Ilya brushed sunscreen down the bridge of Shane’s nose, careful, reverent.

“You’re very still,” Ilya said softly.

“Because if I move,” Shane said, voice rougher than he meant it to be, “this stops.”

Ilya smiled, small and pleased. “Smart.”

He leaned in a little more, forearms braced on either side of Shane’s head now. His fingers traced the freckles again, slower this time, like he was memorizing them. Adoring them a little, even if he’d never use that word out loud.

“You look different out here,” Ilya said. “Not angry all the time.”

Shane huffed. “You bring it out of me.”

“I bring out many things.”

“Ego, mostly.”

Ilya laughed, warm and genuine. “Maybe. But not today.”

His thumb brushed just beneath Shane’s eye, gentle. Shane swallowed, pulse loud in his ears. “You’re staring.”

“I know.”

“You’re doing it again.”

“I am allowed,” Ilya said. “You said yes.”

Shane didn't argue. He couldn't. The closeness felt inevitable now, like the last note of a song you knew by heart. Ilya's hand slid down to Shane's jaw, fingers curling there, sunscreen forgotten.

"You're very handsome," Ilya said, like it was a fact he'd just discovered.

Shane scoffed weakly. "Don't get weird."

"Too late."

Their foreheads nearly touched. Shane could feel Ilya's breath, warm and familiar, smelled sunscreen and salt and something unmistakably Ilya. The rivalry hummed between them, not sharp now, but charged. Alive.

"You going to kiss me," Shane asked quietly, "or just keep staring?"

Ilya's grin was slow, dangerous. "Impatient."

"Competitive."

"That too."

Ilya leaned in, closing the last inch between them. The kiss wasn't soft. It couldn't be—not with everything that sat between them. It was heated, hungry, mouths colliding like they'd been arguing their way here all along. Shane's hands came up without thinking, fingers tangling in Ilya's curls, pulling him closer.

Ilya kissed him like he meant it, like he'd been waiting. Like the freckles and the rivalry and the truce all led here. The sun beat down on them, uncaring, the island holding its breath.

When they finally broke apart, both a little breathless, Ilya rested his forehead against Shane's and smiled.

"See?" he murmured. "Much better than sunscreen."

Shane laughed, dazed and warm. "You're impossible."

"Yes," Ilya said happily. "But you keep coming back."

And, against all his better judgment, Shane knew he always would.

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