

Show Me How my Body Works

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/77298431) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/77298431>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov , Svetlana Vetrova , Cliff Marlow
Additional Tags:	Lush Employee Ilya , Hurt/Comfort , Emotional Hurt/Comfort , The bath bomb wall should be its own character , Autistic Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander , Disabled Shane Hollander , Hurt Shane Hollander , POV Ilya Rozanov , Soft Ilya Rozanov , References to Depression , Implied/Referenced Self-Harm , Fluff and Angst , Alternate Universe , Romance
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-01-08 Words: 11,859 Chapters: 1/1

Show Me How my Body Works

by [Infinitely_Odd](#)

Summary

It's the festive season, and university student Ilya needs a job.

Lush is hiring.

Also Known As: Ilya: Worlds Worst Lush Employee

Notes

this was meant to be 1k words.

this was meant to be a quick drabble i shat out because im writing something longer.

how did we get here, friends?

-

this came to me in a vision while i was at work. i though having grumpy ilya in the worlds most overstimulating workplace would be funn. this is meant to be a love letter to lush workers who i have now been a part of. boy its fun, but ive never been so busy. this is less funny than i wanted but im happy with how it turned out. you can tell where i shifted tracks to be more, like, serious? anyway, if youre a lushie then you'll appreciate this. if not then you'll like connor storrie covered in glitter.

also on a personal note working at lush is so good for my autism my RSD is CURED /hj

-

This work is dedicated to two people.

Renee, who actually named this fic. Thank you so much!!

and to Falterfeundin who's title suggestion made me laugh so I promised I'd dedicate this to them.

and for a secret third dedication: to you dear readers. thank you for being crazy with me <3 and also to the HR discord you guys are cool.

I've listed all the alt titles in the end note if you're interested

Also disclaimer: I am not affiliated with lush and this is not an advertisement. I just think the products and community are neat <3

comment or I'll chase shane with a shower jelly

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

December 1st

Ilya doesn't know why he applied for this job. Ilya doesn't know how the hell he got this job. But what he does know is this- university isn't going to pay for itself.

It's a chilly December afternoon three weeks into working at Popular Fragrance and Cosmetics Company: Lush (ltd), and Ilya is trying to decide whether he's made the best or worst decision of his life. He ponders while restocking the bath bomb wall. On one hand the company is very chill. His learning buddy and fellow sales assistant, Svetlana, is always around to help when he needs her. His manager doesn't care if he takes five minutes to grab some water in the back- in fact she checks in regularly to make sure Ilya is doing it. And the staff discount isn't so bad. Ilya has never used a Lush product in his life, but the opportunity is there.

The bath bomb wall spans the entire width of the shop at the far end and is exactly as described: a wall of bath bombs. They're arranged in rainbow order for maximum satisfaction and instagrammability. As he places the last bath bomb on the display, Goddess (purple and glittery), Ilya realises that his fingers are covered in thick purple glitter. He wipes his fingers on his black apron (as encouraged by management) trying to clean them as best he can. It doesn't work. Instead his finger tips are a nauseating shade of blue-black, like someone has punched only his fingers, someone has broken them at the last joint, or he's in the late stages of a very strange, glittery version of frostbite.

No matter how hard he scrubs, Ilya's right hand looks like he's been tortured relentlessly. And that's when he decides.

He fucking hates Lush.

Ilya also fucking hates people.

The store is packed for being so close to closing time, yet here they all are.

“Is so near closing- why are they all in here?” Ilya asks Svetlana, quietly, because he has tact. “Do they not have homes to go to?”

Svetlana rolls her eyes. This is her third Christmas at the company. “Ilya, we’re still open. A thousand more people could come in here if they wanted to.”

Ridiculous. Ilya blows a raspberry in annoyance but doesn’t say anything more. He’d rather not be fired, they can’t right now because they’re in a busy period, but he wants to attempt to stay on management’s good side.

Svetlana nudges his shoulder. “Do you want to check in with him?” She asks, referring to a new customer who has walked in.

It’s a policy to welcome every guest who comes in, followed by questions to gauge whether they want assistance, need assistance, or should be left well alone. Ilya turns back ready to decline when he notices the look on her face. She’s asking if he wants to talk to this guy the same way someone would “ask” him if he wanted to be punched. There’s only one answer.

Straightening, Ilya attempts to casually float his way towards the new, unfortunate soul who has found his way in here.

“Hello welcome to Lush how are you who are you buying for today?” The phrase comes out as one big word vomit.

The man jumps, he clearly hadn’t heard Ilya coming over, and stares at him like he’s going to bite. Ilya smiles as wide as he can, which unfortunately comes across as a grimace. The customer looks confused. He drops the expression.

“Who are you buying for?” He asks again, enunciating every word.

“Uh, me.” The customer replies. Ilya looks at him closely while waiting for him to elaborate. The man is Asian, in his early twenties, with dark hair and even darker eyes. A smattering of

freckles cover the bridge of his nose, he has a cane and favours his left leg.

They stare at each other until it gets embarrassing. “Okay. What are you looking for?” Ilya asks, trying to get something of use out of this situation.

The man looks around, eyes scanning uselessly, Ilya forces his mouth to stay in a neutral, flat line.

“I don’t really know...” he trails off, “maybe a shower gel?”

Okay. That, Ilya can work with. “Come with. I give you product recommendations.”

He walks slowly so as to not have the man trailing after him - Ilya isn’t a total prick - and leads the customer to the shower section. He spends a good few minutes recommending a variety of products depending on smell. Posh Chocolate is popular even though Ilya hates it, he likes the Honey shower gel the best. But if he’s more of a subtle scent kinda-guy, he can’t go wrong with Sticky Dates. They have a couple of Christmas specific scents - citrus, bubble gum, and cinnamon. Each product Ilya mentions he brings a tester to the man’s nose for him to smell, gauging his reaction, which to Ilya’s annoyance is very little. So he continues, may as well go the whole way. He looks over and notices his manager is watching him intently.

He recommends products for a whole routine. Co-mingle if he wants a gentle, unscented exfoliator, or Rub-Rub-Rub if he’s looking for something with a little more power. The names make him want to curl in a hole and die, but the customer is being so attentive. Despite his beautiful face not moving, his eyes have never left Ilya’s and he nods along to everything Ilya says. He’s paying attention which is a courtesy Ilya isn’t often given. It's cute, how intently this stranger is listening to Ilya prattle on about scent families and layering, yet he keeps his eyes fixed firmly, not wavering for even a second.

Once he’s finished his spiel, Ilya places the tub of bright blue body exfoliator back on the shelf.

“They are what I recommend.” He says, “has anything caught your attention?”

The man looks at him, then back at the shower gels, then back at him. “Um,” he starts, “do you have a men’s section?”

“- then he fucking asked if we have men’s section!” Ilya is mopping the floors and ranting to Svetlana. He stops to brandish his lanyard at her, it jingles from being covered in pins, so even though she has her back turned to him wiping down the tills, she knows what he’s doing. “We have pronoun badges for God’s sake. Lush is progressive, no scent has gender, is stupid marketing from Palaeolithic companies.”

Svetlana snorts. “Palaeolithic- good word!” Ilya sticks his tongue out at her, she's still not looking at him. “That’s a good speech though. Sounds like you’re a Lushie already...”

Ilya frowns. “No, I am not Lushie, I just do not think that scent is for only men or women. Is just a philosophy I happen to agree with. When festive period ends I will move on.”

“Sure, sure.” She replies, non-committally.

December 7th

A week later the customer shows up again. Ilya recognises him straight away despite the shop being packed to the brim with other people. Ilya has been working from 8.30am, greeted by a small queue of people waiting to get in at 9, he’s been on his feet talking to people non-stop.

English isn’t his first language, so speaking it all day is exhausting. Good for practice though. He avoids looking at the customer, instead focusing very intently on tidying behind the till. He glances up, just once, and sees that one of his other temporary colleagues Cliff Marlow is checking him in. Good, Ilya doesn’t feel like talking to a brick wall. No matter how cute the wall is.

He's organised the paper bags and restocked the tester stickers when Marlow appears in front of him.

"Some guy is asking for you," when Ilya asks why, Marlow responds, "He was in recently. Said you were super helpful, good job man." Marlow pats him on the shoulder and ushers him onto the shop floor, calling the next customer and effectively banishing Ilya from the tills. Great.

He ambles over to the man, hoping that some other guy will interrupt him, someone else that Ilya has helped. But no one does. The stranger stands idly gazing over the skincare.

"Hello." Ilya begins, trying not to startle him again. "You were looking for me?"

The stranger's whole face relaxes once he sees Ilya, a gentleness softening his eyes.

"Yes. Yes, I uh, I wanted to thank you." He scratches the back of his head with his free hand. "I ordered the honey shower gel you recommended, it's really good. I like the, uh...smell."

So he was listening. Ilya just stands, unsure of what to say next. The stranger clears his throat. "Um, so, I was looking for some more recommendations? I think we have similar tastes so...I thought you'd be the best person to ask..." he glances at the crowd of people in the store, "but if you're busy I can just browse."

Not happening. His managers hate when people who ask for help are left alone, as a good employee Ilya can't let that happen - is the reasoning he gives himself as he leads the customer to a less busy area at the back of the shop.

"What are you looking for? More shower gel?"

The man laughs slightly. "No, I got the honey gel and the co-thingy you recommended, so I'm nice and buff-" Ilya holds in a snort. The man blushes but doesn't pause. "So I'm looking for, like, a moisturiser for after my shower?"

Ilya raises an eyebrow. “You don’t seem sure.”

The man grins sheepishly, “I’m a little out of my depth. A friend recommended I come here. Practicing self care or something.”

He’s so honest it hurts a little. The corners of Ilya’s mouth twitch up. “Do not worry. I am best employee, I will find you best moisturiser.”

The skincare is located right where Ilya led them so it’s easy to move the conversation over. It's a little quieter, so the man doesn't have to worry about his cane or being knocked by some inconsiderate bastard. He tells Ilya that he likes the subtle scents, and that he's got eczema in the crook of his arm, and that he works in a romance bookstore about thirty minutes away by bus. The last point isn't relevant to the consultation but Ilya digs for information anyway.

“To be honest, there is no unsuitable product for you,” Ilya says, “but I like two. This-” he picks up one black pot. “Dream cream, good moisture, dermatologically tested.” He points to the thin white band at the bottom which verifies his claim.

The man nods, so Ilya continues. “Or this. Is lavender, same thing different smell. He dabs one product on each of his wrist and lifts it to the man's face for him to smell- it's common knowledge that scents change based on skin Ph, so it wouldn't be accurate for Ilya to just offer him the tub. The man sniffs each one, Ilya pretends there’s not something strangely intimate about the experience.

“I like the lavender,” he says eventually. Ilya nods, it is a good choice.

Then, his brain zings, an idea. “Is good, also there is accompanying product I like.” He smears a larger dollop of the cream on his wrist and massages it in. The man's eyes never leave his arm. When Ilya removes his hand his skin is sticky, he pokes the patch to emphasise this. “See? Is sticky, gross. This is best before bed but you cannot ruin pyjamas or bedsheets, so-” he picks up the Sleepy dusting powder and tips a little into his hand, patting it onto the skin until the powder is gone and his skin is miraculously dry.

“Look,” he offers his arm, “Is not sticky anymore but retains moisturising properties. Feel.”

Eyes quickly flit between Ilya's face and arm before the stranger takes a trembling finger and trails it down Ilya's forearm, elbow to wrist. A jolt of electricity shoots from Ilya's arm all the way down his spine, settling in his stomach sweetly. The man is either teasing the fuck out of him or blissfully unaware of what he's just done, because all suggestiveness is gone from the man's face replaced with genuine joy at the goddamn dusting powder.

“That's amazing!” He says, glancing at the range of testers, “I had no idea this existed. I hate the feeling of moisturiser on my skin after a while.”

His eyes are bright with genuine astonishment, it's very cute. Ilya tries not to smile. “Yes, well, I did tell you. I am best employee.” He winks, and that beautiful blush returns to the man's face.

Then Ilya makes the mistake of looking over at the counter. Marlow is currently drowning in customers, a line is forming quickly, and the other sales assistants are busy. His manager catches his eye and nods towards the tills. Ilya gets the hint.

“I have to-”

“No it's okay thanks for-”

“I will leave you to browse.” Ilya says finally, then quickly makes his way to the tills. Marlow mouths ‘thanks’ at him and the two of them begin to get the queue down to a manageable level. Ilya likes the tills, it's monotonous and he can use his prepared script for basically every person he interacts with. He's just getting the register screen back on the tablet when he looks up.

“Hello, how ar-” It's the man, he has a tub of the medium Sleepy moisturiser and the same dusting powder. “Ah, you have gone with my recommendations. Good choice.” Ilya says, typing the codes into the till.

“I was very impressed, you have good product knowledge.”

Ilya snorts. “Thanks. But tell that to my manager, not me.”

“Okay,” the man replies, weirdly serious. “I will.”

Ilya blinks, then continues with his script. Does he need a bag? Yes. Cash or card? Card. Does he need a receipt? Yes.

“I’m sorry, I never asked your name.” The man says as Ilya prints the receipt (who wants a receipt anymore? Like everything this man does, it’s weirdly endearing).

It’s not unusual for customers to ask for his name, sometimes out of politeness, sometimes out of romantic interest, so Ilya gives it without hesitation. “Ilya Rozanov.”

“I’m Shane Hollander, but you can just call me Hollander. It’s my nickname,” The man - Shane- tells him, sticking out his hand and staring Ilya right in the eyes. “Nice to meet you.”

Ilya glances at his outstretched hand and then to Shane with his doe eyes and thick eyelashes. With all the gracefulness of a bulldozer, Ilya gives him the receipt and wishes him a good day. Shane has a strange look, like Ilya’s fucked up slightly, but he nods and wishes Ilya the same before wandering off.

Marlow comes over, the queue depleted. “Dude, what was with that guy? Was he trying to shake your hand?”

“What are you talking about?” Ilya snaps, crumpling a ripped piece of paper in his fist. “He was reaching for receipt.”

Then Ilya thinks a little harder about the slightly expectant look on Shane’s face. The slight drop in his features when Ilya gave him that stupid fucking receipt. Oh. Oh. Ilya realises with

great horror and mortification that Shane - cute, silly, endearing, strange, Shane Hollander - had been waiting for Ilya to shake his hand.

Ilya's gaze trails over the shop floor, only to find that Shane is talking with his manager. They make eye contact briefly, but Shane is too far away for Ilya to read him properly. Fuck. Ilya is so getting fired.

He does not get fired.

Instead his manager emails him later, well after his shift has ended, to congratulate him. Apparently a very satisfied customer named Shane wanted to make sure that Ilya's manager knew how good he was at his job. Seaked him out, in fact. Attached to the email is a picture of a google review.

ShaneHollander24:

Really lovely service. Employees are knowledgeable and kind. Ilya in particular is very helpful. I will be back again soon.

Ilya replies to his manager with a thanks, and goes into his tiny kitchen to fix himself some food, desperately ignoring how badly he wants Shane to come back quick.

December 8th

“You play ice hockey?” Shane asks him, while he's in the middle of binning the tester lip scrubs. Some absolute heathen had been eating them. Scooping out fingerfuls of the product and, honest to god, eating them. It was gross, and Ilya had taken it upon himself to refresh them. Shane comes up to him during a quiet moment, a rare lull.

Ilya's about to ask how he knows when Shane points to his lanyard. There's two pins, one is the centaurs - his team, the other is one that says 'straight outta the penalty box'.

He nods, "You're familiar with it?"

Shane smiles tightly. "I'm from a hockey family. My parents both played. I have a momager." Ilya has no fucking idea what that is. "It's a mom, who's a manager? A mom-ager." Oh. Ilya gets it now, it's just not funny. He stays deadpan. Shane sighs. "Anyway. My moms the best. She and my dad put me through hockey camps and junior teams. That's why everyone calls me Hollander, it was the name people called me on the team. I even got scouted."

Ilya keeps his expression carefully cool. He knows how this ends. Shane's face is wistful. "Then I got this, during a game. A legal move, technically, dirty though. I landed badly and the rest is history."

"I'm sorry." Ilya says, truthfully.

"It's whatever. I'm...dealing." He says, and Ilya doesn't believe him one bit. He wants to push, just a little, but every time they talk about themselves Shane keeps a little bit back to himself. Ilya doesn't know why. Ilya isn't the most open, but he can't hide, it's impossible to not be, totally and irrevocably himself. It's why he can't go home. But every interaction they have, Ilya can't help but feeling like Shane is holding part of his heart back. It just makes Ilya curious. He wants to snake in there, to unravel every part of Shane, to worm his way into the mans soul and never leave.

Instead, he tells Shane about the serial lip-scrub eater and relishes in the way the man smiles. It will do for now.

December 13th

Ilya is on his fourth consecutive day of working when Shane reappears. It's getting close to Christmas deadlines, for Ilya and customers. When he isn't at work he's at the library desperately trying to get the word count for his dissertation to where it should be. He stops by

the rink whenever he can, letting his mind wander as he does laps around the ice. Normally his thoughts would drift to his dissertation topic, but now there's always a pair of bright brown eyes at the back of his mind.

Ilya is no stranger to his feelings for men, it's partly why he moved out of Russia in the first place, bisexuality is a label that frees him rather than confines him. Svetlana is unlabelled, but whereas she feels labels as a vice, bisexuality is like a comfy blanket that envelops Ilya in its safety. He's comfortable in himself, and he knows that he's lucky to have found a workplace with people that aren't judgy.

His coworkers aren't at least. The customers are a different story. Two different people complain when they see the He/Him badge plastered on his lanyard and that just puts Ilya in a sour mood. Thankfully, his managers let him hide behind the tills and in the stock room. As he restocks the Snow Fairy bath bombs he lets himself stew. Whenever he comes across assholes like that, no matter where he is, it just reminds him of home, of what he left behind, of everything he ran from. Ran is the wrong word, running makes Ilya feel like he's a coward and he knows he is anything but. The fact that he can never return home is proof of this.

He places bath bombs on the iron racks and tries to work at learning the names. Snow Fairy is the one he knows best, and is the winter bestseller, once they're out on display he opens the drawer underneath the display which holds the overflow. Ilya places a bath bomb mindlessly, then looks down. His hands are stained with rainbow bath bomb dust from a product called Diversity. Nausea rises in Ilya's stomach and he excuses himself from the floor.

The stock room, which doubles as the staff room, is blissfully empty so Ilya can rant in Russian to himself peacefully. He's in there for all of five minutes when Svetlana enters ready to go on her break. She smiles at Ilya but leaves him be, which is why he likes her so much. He's on the floor sitting between the shelves piled to the ceiling with boxes, almost totally hidden. She gathers her bag and headphones, slinging on her fluffy winter jacket and flinging her tight curls over the collar.

“By the way,” She says in Russian on her way out, “I know you're sulking, but Marlow is flirting with your man.” The door slams behind her.

Ilya shoots to his feet, even more pissed than he was before, before the rational thought enters his head: he's not my man. Ilya pauses. Is it weird to be excited for one customer to come in? No, maybe not. But it is weird to feel jealous over the conversation that Marlow may be

having with said customer. For a brief second, Ilya contemplates staying where he is, safe and alone tidying the stock room. But Shane did leave Ilya a good review and it would be bad customer service to not at the least thank him. And maybe apologise for the handshake-receipt incident.

Ilya enters the floor again, eyes searching for Shane, he is indeed talking to Marlow with his back to Ilya. Ilya ignores the surge of jealousy that burns in his chest. Marlow catches his eye and waves, gesturing for him to come over. Ilya walks so quickly he doesn't have time to be embarrassed by how quickly his anger towards Marlow turns to gratitude.

“Ilya!” Marlow greets him, “the lovely Shane here-” okay, maybe Ilya isn't that grateful, “is looking for a demo of the massage bars. Would you mind? I would love to but I'm super busy.”

All three look at the counter. A single person is standing, idling at the sliding display case that has their fresh face masks in it.

Marlow points a thumb at the customer. “See? Packed.” He leaves, and Ilya decides he is grateful and pissed. A beautiful combination of both. He turns back to Shane.

“Hollander, you would like demonstration of massage bars?” He asks, mainly because he doesn't know what else to say.

Shane nods. “If you're not busy.” He says, glancing at the counter. Marlow makes one line of small talk before he's shot down by the one person browsing. Yeah, packed. Ilya snorts, and to his delight Shane does the same.

Instead of taking Shane to the wooden seats he offers him one of the plush chairs, yellow with actual padding. “For your leg,” Ilya says, “Is more comfortable, no?”

When Shane sits he lets out a sigh that shoots straight to Ilya's dick. He's all over the place today. “Thanks,” Shane responds, leaning his cane against the back of his chair, “the cold makes me achy.”

“Mm, is definitely cold today,” Ilya responds.

Shane looks like he wants to say something, but he quickly closes his mouth. Instead, he says, “Did you get my review? I spoke to your manager and did an online one because I wanted there to be a paper trail-” the words come out fast, so quick that Ilya almost doesn't catch them.

Surprising himself, he smiles, genuinely and softly. “I did, thank you Shane. I am glad I could help you.” The smile he gets in return is blinding and makes Ilya's heart ache. “So what can I do for you?”

Shane is looking for a massage bar, for personal use, something to use after his physiotherapy sessions. There is a seed there, planted for potential further conversations, but as Ilya watches Shane there's something off about him. He's more reserved, he won't meet Ilya's eyes, yet when Ilya goes to fetch the tester bars for Shane to see he won't take his eyes off of Ilya. It almost makes him uncomfortable how intently Shane stares, like he's seeing right through Ilya to his soft centre. It's been a while since anyone made him feel this naked, this vulnerable.

“I have these,” Ilya says when he returns, holding three potential products. “This is the Deep Sleep bar, is like the moisturiser. This one is regular Sleep bar- not as strong.” He holds the last one between his palms, warming it up with his body heat. “I think this is best one for you. Your knee is hurt, yes?” Shane nods. “This is called Joints, is pun, has weed in it.”

That makes Shane crack a smile, “Am I going to get high off of it?”

Ilya rolls his eyes, “Only if you eat it, do not recommend by the way. Even then will just taste bad, not give the good effects.” The bar has softened in his hands, Ilya raises his palm for Shane to smell, which he does, eyes fixed firmly on Ilya. “Is good for aches and pains. CBD soaks into skin, softening and pain relieving.”

Shane's mouth presses into a straight line and his hand squeezes his bad knee. For a moment Ilya panics, thinking he's crossed a line, but as quick as it came Shane's expression smoothes over and he nods. “I'd like to try that one.”

“I have to touch you- your arm. Is okay?” Ilya asks, his breath hitching. Shane nods wordlessly, offering his right forearm. Ilya rubs the bar between his palms a few more times before placing it down on the table next to them. Shane has lifted his head to look at him, and fuck, his expression is-

Ilya has seen this expression many times. Eyes lidded, framed by those beautiful lashes, gazing up at him shyly. Shane's freckles glow against the blush that dusts his cheeks, constellations that Ilya wants to map, learning the location of every little sunshine kiss.

“I am beginning now.” Ilya says, mostly for his own benefit, to give him time to steel his nerves and focus on not getting too excited at work.

He remembers his training day, trying this on Svetlana and the feedback she had given him. He begins by smoothing his hands over the length of Shane's bare forearm. He starts with his left, following the path with his right until Shane's arm is coated in a thin layer of oil. Ilya continues this motion for a few more strokes, effleurage he thinks it's called, every stroke he adds a little more pressure, lightly pushing into the sinewy muscle of Shane's arm. The aim is to relax Shane, to pleasure him, to take him apart and put him back together in a matter of minutes. For the most part, he thinks it's working. Shane's eyes are glassy, mouth slightly parted, his breathing just slightly laboured. Ilya then begins to push his thumbs into the soft skin of Shane's arm, he begins light, pushing in circling motions to loosen the muscles and relieve tension. God, he's tense.

“Is pressure okay?” Ilya asks, breaking the fragile silence between them.

Shane gulps, “Yeah.” Fuck. His voice is thready. They're so close that Ilya can see the slight hitch of his breath every time Ilya adds more pressure. “You can go a little harder...if you want.”

Jesus Christ, he's going to kill Ilya. He obliges, pushing a little harder than he would demonstrating this on anyone else. He massages the tendons in Shane's wrist, presses his thumb and forefinger on either side of Shane's arm and pulls, feeling the tension vanish under his skilled hands. Ilya has a little more confidence when he gets to the wrist joint. He has an idea, it's out-there and not something Ilya would do for anyone else, but Ilya loves the feeling afterwards. He places his thumb and forefinger on either side and looks up at Shane, it's a

weird sensation, he thinks, trying to ask for his permission through expression alone. Shane seems to understand, and nods.

Ilya pushes his thumb searching until he finds the gap where his bones meet. He applies pressure and gently stretches the joint. It's a technique he learned from his hockey days, it's an indescribable feeling, simultaneously stomach turning and relaxing. The idea is to relax the joint, to make his hand feel weightless. He gently moves Shane's hand, forward and back, pushing into the joint and rolling his thumb. Shane's pulse beats like a drum against the pad of Ilya's finger. Shane's hands are soft, like the rest of him.

Once happy, Ilya trails his fingers from Shane's wrist to the back of his hand, tracing the paths to Shane's fingers. Ilya takes each one in his hand, paying equal attention to them all. Shane's fingers are long and broad, delicate yet strong. Ilya massages the tension out of them too. The pads are calloused, as is the meaty part of his palm where the thumb connects, and the stretch of flesh that connects all his fingers. Ilya pays extra attention to those, picking up the bar and pressing the bar into each callous, following it by a swipe of his thumb to really make sure Shane is taken care of.

In that moment, no one else existed except for Ilya and Shane. Not Marlow, or Svetlana, or any customers. There is just Ilya and Shane in their bubble. Ilya looks up, realising that he's spent most of his time tracing Shane's body, subconsciously committing every freckle, every mole, every vein and muscle to memory. Shane is still gazing at him, but his expression isn't seductive, it's soft, Ilya burns under the tenderness, unable to escape. His heart leaps in his chest, so hard he worries that Shane will notice, will see every part of him that Ilya tries to keep hidden. So he stops, he gives Shane one last once over then places his arm back on his knee.

Ilya clears his throat, "How was that?"

Shane's lips quirk up, eyes impossibly kind. "It was incredible," he replies, and Ilya sees the truth dripping from his words. Shane averts his gaze, offering his other arm. "Would you mind doing this one too?"

And Ilya melts. He does the same to Shane's left arm, working exactly the way he did on the right. But something is different, the spell is broken. The air between the pair isn't as charged, instead they fall into a comfortable silence, and Shane lets himself be taken care of.

Ilya suppresses a jolt when Shane talks. “Are you okay?”

His hands falter, just for a second, but enough for Shane to notice and for his smile to fall.

“Why?” Ilya asks. Why do you ask? Why do you care? Why does it matter?

“I was in here earlier and you looked upset. You went into the back so I wanted to make sure you were okay.” He pauses, “Did something happen?”

Ilya wonders. Wonders what would change for him if he told Shane everything. He's only seen the man three times before, the desperation to open himself up to this almost stranger scares Ilya to his very core. He looks up. Shane is looking back at him. Not expectantly, not waiting, simply looking.

Ilya looks back down to where his hands are working over the callouses on Shane's other hand. “Just in bad mood,” he says, “hard day, Hard customers. Was thinking of home, of Russia.”

“Do you miss Russia?”

It's a question Ilya doesn't like to think about. “Yes,” he says, truthfully, “I miss it a lot. I miss the food, I miss the air, the streets, everything. I miss my family.”

Shane makes a wounded noise. “Can you not go back often?” he asks, gently.

“I cannot go back at all.” Saying the words out loud hurts Ilya more than he ever thought was possible. “I miss what my family was. I miss what I thought it was. Nuclear, is English term. Two children, one happy mother, one happy father. But it was not true. My mother died, and my father died, and I am the one thing I cannot be in Russia.”

Ilya places Shane's arm back on his lap, but Shane moves his hand to cover Ilya's where it's lying prone, as lifeless and boneless as Ilya feels. When he looks up, Shane's face is shattered. Ilya is shocked by how devastated Shane looks for him. The pity makes him angry, but the cold water of relief extinguishes any remaining flames. It's nice to say it out loud, it's nice for someone to care.

“I'm sorry.” Shane tells him, and Ilya knows this is not pity. It's nothing as pathetic as that. It's warm and bright and hopeful.

Hope. It's strange how Shane fills him with hope, even though they know very little about each other. But Ilya wants to grab that feeling and never let go. Shane moves his fingers to brush over the back of Ilya's hand.

Ilya wants to cry, to hug him, to give him the key to his flat and his heart. But he can't.

So instead, he replies, “Thank you.”

Shane's bright smile is a promise of a better future.

December 17th

Christmas looms like a monster above the heads of everyone Ilya meets. Shitty boyfriends buy expensive gifts, hoping to hide the fact it's last minute and they don't even know what scents their girlfriends like. Office workers buy secret santas for people they hate. Lost girlfriends ask him where the men's section is. It reminds Ilya of Shane.

Shane has been coming in every day, sometimes for a while, sometimes only for a few minutes. Ilya's rota is released weekly so he doesn't have set days, to him it seems like Shane is just coming in when he can hoping to get a glimpse of Ilya, and that makes him giddy. Marlow and Svetlana have cottoned on to their little courting ritual, to the point that when they see Shane they find Ilya, regardless of whatever he's doing, just so he can talk to the man. Occasionally, when it's busy, Ilya pretends to give product recommendations so he can talk to Shane.

Ilya holds a shampoo bar to Shane's nose while he asks about university (he's studying sports medicine). Ilya ties a knot-wrap around Shane's hair and holds a mirror up to show him how he looks while asking about his family (two parents, an only child). Ilya shows off the shop's collection of shower jellies, to Shane's disgust and Ilya's delight, while asking about his hobbies (Shane reads, mostly non-fiction despite working in a romance bookshop, he exercises when he can, he enjoys cooking, his favourite food is the katsu curry his mom makes and his favourite drink is ginger ale).

Unfortunately, as the shop gets busier, Ilya starts feeling guilty about leaving his colleagues alone to deal with the rabble. So, over the next few days he sees less and less of Shane, until their interactions are limited to waving at each other over the shop floor, over a sea of people. Two souls caught on different shores.

December 20th

Ilya is having a good day, all things considered, when Marlow finds him restocking the gift section. His eyebrows are knitted tight on his brow and he's biting his lip hard.

“Is something wrong?” Ilya asks, no hint of sarcasm because he genuinely does like Marlow.

“Your guy's looking a bit lost.” Marlow replies, and Ilya stands next to him following his line of sight to Shane Hollander.

Even from far away Ilya can tell something is seriously wrong. Shane is just standing, staring at a shelf of hair products he doesn't use. His hand is gripping his cane so tight that his knuckles are snow white. Ilya's stomach drops.

“Go see him,” Marlow says, nudging his shoulder gently. “I'll restock.”

Ilya doesn't have the time or patience to thank him right now. He blinks and he's in front of Shane, so absorbed in his own world that he doesn't realise Ilya is there.

“Shane?” Ilya says softly. Shane turns slowly, the wobbly smile he offers falls immediately, replaced with an emptiness that Ilya can't stomach looking at. “Shane, come sit.”

He leads a despondent Shane to the chair, their chairs, and keeps one of his hands firmly in his own, grounding Shane as best he can. Shane looks broken, his skin is pale and sallow, his eyes are hollow, Ilya thinks if he pushed Shane over that he'd just lie there until Ilya picked him back up again.

“Shane, *solynshko*, talk to me. What happened?”

“My- my knee.” Shane grits the words out like they cause him physical pain. Maybe they do. “I injured it.”

“Yes, I see that.” Ilya replies, “Why is it bothering you now?”

“I thought I would be healed enough to get back on the ice, I thought it was just a hill, something I could get over with hard work.” He grinds his teeth, his hand massaging his right knee. “But it's not. It's permanent and I don't know what to do. I can't get back on the ice - *ever*.”

For once in his life Ilya is lost for words. Shane looks devastated. Ilya would be too if he couldn't go on the ice again. Ilya watches his mind race, every time Shane thinks a little too hard his face crumples.

“When did you find out?” Ilya asks him.

“Today.” And Ilya's heart breaks in two.

Ilya crumbles. A million questions in his mind, a million more ideas generating. He wants to hold Shane, wants to press the man's face into his chest and keep him there, next to his heart. He sees it vividly. He sits Shane down on the edge of his bed, careful to not jostle his bad leg. He smooths Shane's hair down and presses soothing kisses to his forehead. He sits next to Shane and holds him together as he breaks. He soaks up Shane's tears with his t-shirt and lets him cry and cry and cry. It's a privilege to see him so vulnerable.

Ilya blinks, and he's back at his shitty job, staring at the most beautiful man in the world who is breaking apart in front of him.

“How did you get here?”

Shane huffs a laugh, even though nothing about this is funny. “I walked.”

He's clutching his knee so tight his knuckles crack. Jesus Christ. “Fucking hell, Hollander what is wrong with you?” Shane flinches because Ilya is terrible at being sympathetic when people are stupid. “You are hurt, but walking here anyway, probably making knee worse.”

To his surprise, Shane bares his teeth at him. “You think I don't know that?”

“Oh so you are self-sacrificing idiot instead. You come all this way when you could have been resting at home. Let me guess your leg hurts even more now,” Shane grimaces, and Ilya knows he's hit the mark. “Do you do this to feel better? Has it worked?”

“Fuck off.” Shane growls, his hand tightening on his knee. “I didn't come here for a fucking lecture.”

“Then why did you come? Hm? Why would you come, at busiest time of year in the cold which makes your leg hurt, walking all this way to a fucking Lush? Are you so committed to torturing yourself-”

“I came to see you!” The words are louder than Shane expects, his face is red, probably with pain with how hard he's clutching his leg. Then, he quietly repeats, “I came to see you.”

Any words currently sitting on Ilya's tongue dissolve bitterly. His face twists, trying to sort out the feelings currently knotted in his chest, anger and hurt and confusion.

“You should go, Hollander,” Ilya says, unable to think of anything else.

Shane's expression completely shutters. “Yeah. I should.”

“Do not walk home.” Ilya's voice is softer, trying to hide his frustration. “Call someone to pick you up. Do you have someone-?”

“Don't, Rozanov.” Shane snaps, “just- I'll sort it.” He goes to stand, but Ilya beats him to it.

“Stay in your seat, Hollander. Don't make your injury worse.”

He leaves Shane sitting in the shitty chair. Ilya knows he's been too harsh, but the words had come out of his mouth before he could reel them back in. He's frustrated, not angry, never angry. He knows self destruction too well, and it makes him uneasy when he sees it in other people.

Marlow finds him before he can hide. “That went well.”

“I am Russian, we do not do coddling like you Canadians.” He bites. It isn't remotely true. But the one gentle Russian he knew was killed by softness.

Sensing he's not going to get a nice word out of Ilya, Marlow backs off with his hands raised in surrender. No one bothers Ilya where he's standing behind the till. It gets busy, and so Ilya is kept there anyway. It's good, the repetitions take his mind off of Shane Hollander and his self pity. Ilya tells himself it's pathetic, that's why he's so mad, not anything else.

Customers come slow and steady, keeping Ilya's idle hands busy and his busy mind occupied. Over the top of customers' heads he watches as a man, a man Ilya immediately hates, walks in. Ilya hates his baby face, his stupid backwards cap, and the way his eyes immediately hone in on a still despondent Shane.

He scans face wash and toner and bubble bars while watching the pair talk. He's too far away to hear, and he's not good enough at English to lip read, but he's still desperate to know what they're saying. Ilya's gaze burns, his jaw tight. He abandons his script, asking customers the essential questions only. Nothing more, nothing less. He watches as Shane and his friend converse quietly. The dialogue looks terse, if either of their faces are any indication. Ilya's stomach clenches every time either of them look his way.

He wants to keep his head down and ignore them, but his curiosity has always been stronger than his self control.

Eventually his friend goes outside and Shane makes his way to the till, placing a tube of unscented lip balm in front of Ilya.

"Did you find everything you wanted?"

Shane frowns, not looking Ilya in the eye. "It's a gift. For Hayden. For coming to get me." He points to the idiot in the backwards cap who is loitering outside, trying to look nonchalant and failing so badly it makes Ilya want to laugh.

Ilya scans the product. Shane is still staring at the floor, but all fight has been sapped out of him. His bottom lip trembles and his eyes well up, but he doesn't let anything spill.

"Give me minute," Ilya tells him before shooting off. He goes to the bath bomb wall and picks out three items he knows will help.

At the till he bags them and puts them in a carrier bag for Shane.

“I’m not buying those,” he says, wearily.

Ilya sighs loudly. “You are correct, Hollander. Is random act of kindness. Is free. I can do this sometimes.” He points to items in the bag, even though Shane can’t see them. “This is CBD oil, this is lavender, this is just magnesium. They are all salt cubes. Good for aching muscles and pain.”

Shane’s face shatters further, “Ilya...”

“Is \$9 for the lip balm.”

Shane places his card on the reader. It beeps. Ilya puts the receipt in the bag.

“Ilya-“ Shane looks like he has more to say, but Ilya is tired. His brain hurts and he just wants his mama.

His lips quirk up, then back down. “Thank you, have good day.”

Ilya leaves Hollander behind on the floor. He's due to take his break about now anyway. He hides in the staff room despite the fact he didn't bring any food with him. He needs to leave but the thought of seeing Shane fills him with dread. So he eats pot noodles from the communal noodle pile, puts his headphones in and doesn't think of anything at all.

When his break is finished, Hollander is no longer there. Marlow keeps a polite distance, letting Ilya approach him like befriending a feral cat. The rest of his shift passes like sludge. Ilya's good day effectively ruined.

It's Christmas eve.

Ilya is rarely in a festive mood even in Russia, they don't celebrate it on the 25th, and he hasn't really celebrated it in general since his mother died anyway, thus he feels no sadness over doing an 8 hour shift on Christmas eve. It is nice to get a mandatory day off afterwards though. Sveta insisted on giving him a tiny tree with tiny baubles and an even tinier star. She's invited herself over on Christmas day so he isn't alone which he secretly appreciates. He's got a plan to hit the grocery store after his shift and prays that there will at least be shitty put-in-the-microwave meals that he can drown himself in. And alcohol, plenty of that too.

The last few days have been agony. Between busy shifts and watching cute families at Christmas markets and in store, Ilya has been in his own personal hell. Not to mention that he hasn't seen or heard from Shane since their argument. Ilya's lips press into a thin line. If that's what it takes to get him out of his hole of self pity then so be it, but he can't lie, it would have been nice to see where their thing went.

Their sales goal is weirdly low and not many people come in, so Ilya spends the day helping organise the gift boxes and showing little kids how the bath bombs work.

"If you pick one together we can put it in water, hm? Does this sound good?" The pair, a brother and sister, nod giddily. "Do you promise to behave? Santa is watching, yes?" They nod again, smiles splitting their faces. "Okay then. Go choose one together and I will be right back."

Ilya empties the large metal bowl that has the remnants of his last demonstration (it's bright blue with seaweed strips floating in it) down the sink and starts filling it up with warm water, testing the temperature with his fingers. He's vaguely aware of a customer standing next to him, just hovering, which Ilya hates. When he turns to ask if he can help, he realises it's the guy in the backwards cap from the other day. Hayward, or something.

Ilya scowls, "Welcome to Lush. What do you want?"

"Wow, that's some customer service," The man scoffs, "Is that how you treat all your customers in here?"

“Only the ones that piss me off.”

“I haven't done anything yet, asshole!”

“Just...what do you Canadians say, vibes?” He smiles innocently, “May I help you find something, sir?”

“I wanted to talk to you about Shane. Hollander,” The man says. “You're Ilya Rozanov, right?”

Ilya turns back to the bowl. He remembers the name Hayden despite trying to push that whole interaction from his brain. The water is a little too cold for his liking. “I am busy, but yes, that is me. What do you want?”

“You were a jerk to him the other day.” Hayden says, face deadly serious.

Ilya stares at him, voice filled with condescension. “Wow, is harsh, that the best you can do? You are being such an asshole to me and you can't even say the word.”

Hayden looks incredulous, like Ilya has just sprouted ten heads. “Seriously? You're trying to fight me at your job?”

Ilya turns off the tap. “You started it. Now I have two children waiting to see how bath bombs work, so what do you want?”

Hayden goes bright red, on the verge of exploding, verbally or literally - Ilya isn't sure. Sure to be entertaining either way. Several different conversation threads cross Hayden's burning face, Ilya sees each one, several of them include him cursing out the sales assistant on the shop floor in front of two very eager children.

Eventually he takes a small gift bag and thrusts it at Ilya. “Aw, you verbally accost me then give me present? Mixed signals from you. Unfortunately you are not my type.”

“Fuck you. It's from Shane.”

That slaps the confidence from Ilya's entire body. Hayden smiles victorious.

“What is Hollander giving me?”

“Fuck if I know, from what he told me you don't deserve shit Rozanov but...” He glances down, trying to decide whether to tell Ilya the information he has. “I can't lie. I've been trying to tell him what you said for months. In a nicer way, but maybe he needed that verbal punch down. I don't know. I don't know how his brain works, and it fucking sucks that you've managed to get him into therapy after knowing him a month and I haven't managed after almost a year but here we are.

“You are a fucking asshole from what I've seen, but Shane wanted me to give you this anyway.” He waves the bag, never once letting the look of pure disdain fall from his features. Ilya takes it. He doesn't thank Hayden.

“By the way, I don't know when he'll next be in.” Hayden says over his shoulder as he leaves. Ilya stiffens. Damn. Caught.

“I wasn't going to ask, asshole.”

A scoff. “Sure, Rozanov, whatever.”

Ilya posits the bowl in front of the kids and promises to be back soon. Then he runs into the staff room and tears open the bag. Inside is a card with ‘merry christmas’ written on it in neat handwriting, resting at the bottom of the bag is a bookmark. A fancy bookmark. Painted on it are flowers. Not just any- chamomile flowers. The national flowers of Russia. His mother's favourite.

Tears well up at the corner of Ilya's eyes. How could Shane have known? He couldn't. But he knows anyway. It's a gift that he bought because it is Russian and he thought Ilya might like it - and he was right. Ilya places it back in the bag reverently, knocks his forehead against the cold wall of the break room to get rid of the tears, then goes to find the kids.

It's important he apologises for the wait, so he does. They've chosen black rose as their bath bomb. They coo and gasp over the bath bomb currently swirling in the water, but Ilya can't get Shane off of his mind. He sees him everywhere. In the honey shower gel, the CBD massage bar, in the swirling, dark, glittery water that reminds him of the depth of Shane's eyes, of the colour of his hair, the aura of his sadness.

Ilya cannot get the stupid fucking Canadian out of his mind, and it terrifies him.

Boxing Day

When Sveta had left his flat late last night wishing him luck for the following day, Ilya hadn't quite known what she meant. Then he'd shown up to the store and immediately wanted to throw something: maybe a tantrum, potentially himself off the nearest cliff.

Boxing Day is the only sale that Lush does, and boy did people make the most of it. Despite Ilya getting there three hours after the shop opened there was still a long queue that ran down the street. The floor is packed from the back wall to the glass doors.

Good on them, Ilya thinks, this shit is expensive. The constant barrage of people never let up, ranging from a gentle stream to the pounding intensity of a waterfall. By the time his allotted break time came around Ilya was sore and too out of it to be grumpy.

No one made small talk. There wasn't the time or the energy. If there was a gap in customers they would be restocking gifts, if gifts were restocked they would be offering assistance, helping to carry baskets, recommending items.

The day passed quicker than Ilya could think, and then it was closing time, and the day was over.

From the stock room his manager whoops, followed by a trail of less enthusiastic cheers from those still on the floor. Ilya offers his team a tired smile. He won't have a shift like this again until next year- and that's only if they want to keep him, which given that he's had two public arguments and a public erotic massage demonstration is very unlikely, but there's something sweet about his time here.

Regardless, he'll walk out of this job totally changed, which makes him weirdly melancholic considering he's thinking about Lush. But feelings are made to be felt.

He's sweeping the bath bomb wall when one of his colleagues mutters something that Ilya can't hear.

“DUDE! We are *cloooooosed!*”

Ilya spins around. Standing outside, ignoring his colleague, eyes wide and fixated on Ilya, is Shane. Ilya runs to the front of the store, practically throwing the other guy out of the way. He pulls the glass doors as wide open as he can get them, which is only about two inches, but it's enough. The tips of Shane's ears and his nose are red from the cold, his breath comes out in thick clouds of white. His eyes are wide and filled with tears and Ilya has never been more happy to see someone.

“Hi.” He says.

Shane smiles softly, “Hi. Sorry I was trying to get here before you closed but...” he trails off, looking past Ilya. “I, uh, was a little later than I thought I would be.”

“Hollander. How did you get here?” Ilya asks, partly to be an infuriating asshole, partly to tell himself that Hayden wasn't lying. That Shane is trying to get better.

To his relief, Shane laughs, “Hayden - the guy who dropped off your gift - he gave me a lift. I uh, about that-”

Behind Ilya, someone coughs and he realises he’s in the middle of cleaning a very dirty shop. He turns back to Shane who looks like he's going to run.

“Oh, sorry, I should-”

“I finish in 20 minutes. There is a coffee shop around the corner on the right. I will see you there?”

A small smile graces Shane's face, revealing two dimples that Ilya hadn't seen before. Shane steps back and Ilya slides the door shut. He then proceeds to do the best job of his life. The floors are cleaner of dust than they ever have been before, and in record time. He doesn't bitch about mopping the floors either. He's quick and efficient, watching the time like a hawk. If they get out on time, great, but if Ilya can squeeze away a little earlier...

He does. It's by two minutes, but it's two more minutes he has to get to Shane as soon as he can. Ilya sprints to the front of the shop, opening and closing the doors behind him. He speedwalks to the cafe and prays to God and Mama and everyone he can think of that Shane is in there. He is, sitting alone at a table, on his phone. Ilya takes a second to smooth back his hair and check his reflection in a shop window. He looks tired, but he looks good. He fixes his scarf and decides that ruffling his hair is the best choice of action.

Shane brightens immediately when he sees Ilya come in. Ilya nods in acknowledgement and sits in the empty chair in front of Shane, who has bought him a beverage.

“What is it?” He asks, bringing the paper cup to his lips.

“Hot chocolate,” Shane replies, sipping his own cup.

“I am more of a coffee guy, but thank you.”

Shane frowns, "It's too late for caffeine, you'll never sleep." When he notices Ilya staring pointedly at his cup, Shane sips it haughtily. "Decaf tea."

Ilya makes a show of looking annoyed. "Fine, fine." The hot chocolate is delicious though. And a small, fuzzy feeling grows when Ilya realises that Shane was thinking about his wellbeing. "But I will have no problem sleeping tonight, I promise."

Shane's eyebrows raise. "Busy day?"

"Boxing day is only sale we do. Most popular products are half price, everyone and their mother has Christmas money. So, yes, Hollander, we were busy." He shows off his hands, still covered in gold glitter despite scrubbing them whenever he could.

"Bet it makes your day go quicker though."

"It does," Ilya agrees, "monotonous work gives me time to think."

Shane nervously raises his cup to his lips. "About?"

"What do you think, Hollander?" Ilya places his now empty cup down on the table. "The last time I saw you."

"Oh, yeah," Shane's fingers tightened around his cup, his gaze cast down. Ilya stares, trying to work out isn't emotion currently etched on Hollander's face. It wasn't sadness, nor was it anger, to Ilya's surprise it is shame. Embarrassment colours his cheeks, keeps his eyes towards the table.

"I'm not gonna apologise for the argument, because you were a dick to me, but you were right. I was being an idiot. The...the pain felt good. Everything is so out of control for me right now and it was the only thing I could think of that made sense which," Shane huffed out

a laugh, the same one he had that day, “-now I think about it, is the opposite of sensible. It was fucking stupid.”

Ilya nods. “It was. I am not sorry for what I said, but maybe for how I said it. I worry. I recognise your behaviour from other people in my life, and that scares me.” The admission strips him bare. “Also you should listen to your friend sometimes.”

“Hayden? He said you cussed him out!”

“Oh my god he is such a baby! I called him asshole because he called me an asshole, it was mutual. There were children present so I could not cuss him out anyway.”

Shane laughs properly, shaking his head. “Well, you're right. I should listen to him. I want to be better this year. New year, new me, right?”

Ilya has never heard the term before, but he nods politely. “Anyway. I want to finish my year as I mean to go on so...”

Shane hesitates for a frustratingly long time, but Ilya doesn't want to rush him, can't put words into his mouth that aren't already there. He needs to hear Shane say them out loud. “Spit it out, Hollander.” He says, softer than he means it.

“I want to go on a date with you,” Shane says finally, “I'm kind of a mess, I'm only just in therapy, and I can't promise anything solid but-” He chokes off, eyes glassy, his hand lying prone on the table. “God, I want to try.”

And Ilya smiles, fully, uncontrollably. So wide that his face hurts and all of his teeth are on display. It's more open than he's allowed himself to be in years.

“I would like that,” he replies, and he gets another smile from Shane. This one is softer, shyer, cuter than Ilya thought and fuck - he's gone, ruined already.

He grabs Shane by the lapels of his winter jacket, smearing gold glitter all over the waterproof fabric, and hauls him in for a kiss. It's messy, more a clash of teeth and smushing of faces than a kiss, it's less than Shane deserves but god, Ilya needs him now. Shane pushes forward, his cane clattering to the floor and his hands tangling in Ilya's hair. Their lips push and pull, slotting against each other, taking what they can get. It would be a great kiss if either of them could stop smiling enough to get into it. Also, if a table wasn't in the way. Ilya is two seconds from shoving it to the floor when a weary voice perks up from behind them.

The barista, whose name is Scott apparently, is staring at them with the tiredness of someone who has had a long, long day and doesn't need two guys making out over his furniture.

“That's very cute, but we closed ten minutes ago. Could you guys take it outside?”

Ilya can't stop grinning, but Shane at least looks ashamed. He puts a \$20 in the tip jar and follows Ilya out into the cold, pink from more than the cold this time. Ignoring the barista putting up the closed sign (in a, frankly, rude manner and slamming it more than necessary), Ilya and Shane step into the night.

“So, um, what now?”

Ilya pointed a thumb at his bus stop, “My apartment is nearby. There is a good Chinese restaurant there, can you take a bus?”

“I think I can do that Rozanov,” Shane replied, his free hand snaking up to Ilya's scarf and pulling him down into a soft kiss.

December 31st

The staff room has never felt so suffocating. It's been a weirdly quiet day too, and that sets Ilya on edge more. Ilya knows what is coming. Marlow had slipped earlier, badly, revealing that he had been offered a permanent contract. For the first time in a while Ilya was nervous.

Sick-to-his-stomach-nervous. Why? Over a shitty job he didn't even like? Well, that wasn't quite true, he thought while sitting in a swivel chair waiting for his manager to come back. It's been a weirdly quiet day too, and that sets Ilya on edge more.

There was something he liked about the interactions with customers. He enjoyed showing kids the jellies, he liked giving hair and skincare advice, goddamnit he liked smelling good all the time and being covered in glitter. And he was good at his job! When he wasn't yelling at customers for being an idiot, or being yelled at for yelling at a customer's friend, or when he wasn't swearing on the shop floor. But people liked him, and that mattered in this shitty job.

He taps his foot. His hand goes to the crucifix he keeps around his neck. He sighs and leans back in the chair. Then his manager walks in, a placid smile on her face. She's nice and Ilya likes her a lot. Yet, something about her now gives him the shivers. With only half an hour until his shift ended, it could only be bad news, right?

“Hey Ilya, mind if we chat?”

Ooooooooooh god.

Shane watches as Hayden's kids, twin girls Ruby and Jade, dance around one of the workers Ilya had called Svetlana. It was cute to see them so enamoured. She was giving them a spa treatment, similar to the one Shane had received, except Svetlana was going the distance. Body wash, body scrub, moisturiser, and finally a little bit of solid perfume.

Shane watched Hayden pace around the shop from his usual chair, kid no. 3 strapped to Hayden's chest. He'd been kind enough to give Shane a lift to the store, and when Ilya had trapped him there by promising the coolest demonstrations ever to the girls, well he couldn't leave and disappoint them, could he? Shane had bribed him again by promising to buy the girls something. So he was trapped either way. Baby no. 3 is snoozing happily on Hayden's chest.

“You should get something for Jackie,” Shane says. “Y'know, a congratulation gift for her.”

Hayden instead chooses to pace closer to Shane. “I dunno what I would get her, man. I know what scents she likes but I dunno what she uses. She has a whole routine, y'know?”

Shane does know. They compare routines often. “Well, there's this really great employee here who does great recommendations, 10/10.”

“Oh fuck you I'm not asking Rozanov for help.”

Across the store, two small heads turn simultaneously. “Daddy, swear jar!” Ruby shouts.

Hayden swears, quieter this time, before turning back to Shane with a disgusted look. “How are you going to manage kid number 4?” Shane asks, teasingly.

“Maybe uncle Shane will be up for babysitting sometime?”

“Always dude, you know I'll be there. How about uncle Ilya though?”

Hayden's face twists. “Give me some time to try and stomach that.”

Shane's laugh is cut off by Ilya reappearing from the back of the store, where he'd been called to by one of the other assistants. Ilya is impossible to read. His face is chiseled marble, his eyes are hard and cold, and impossibly beautiful. Shane sucks in a breath through his teeth and gets to his feet, ignoring how his knee twinges.

“Hey, how did it go?” He asks.

“They're keeping me on.”

And Ilya bursts into a smile. He hugs Shane tight, still remembering to be mindful of his knee. Shane returns it tenfold, pressing Ilya so hard into himself that they look like one person. When they separate, Ilya is still beaming like the sun.

“I’m so proud of you,” Shane tells him, squeezing his arm, “I knew they would.”

“I am probably world’s worst employee but they are keeping me anyway,” Ilya says, breathless with relief.

Hayden grumbles. “Yeah I can attest to the ‘worst’ part.”

“Hayden...”

“I am sorry Pike I cannot hear you over my new job. Now if you will excuse me, I finish in fifteen minutes and I have to help my favourite customers pick out some bath bombs.”

He makes his way to Sveta and the girls, freshly pampered, and leads them to pick out some items to try. Sveta catches Shane's eye and gives him a thumbs up. He's too awkward to return it, but he hopes she understands that he's thanking her in his head.

“Thank you for recommending I come here,” Shane tells Hayden, as quietly as he can. Being honest with people, and his own feelings, is the first thing his therapist recommended. They said it was like stretching a muscle, that it would be easier every time he did it. So, no better place to start than the easiest admission of thanks.

Hayden looks deeply unimpressed. “I wish I hadn’t now. I might never have been cursed with knowing Rozanov.” He says, without any heat behind the words. Shane knows him better than that. He knows that Hayden is grateful for everything Ilya has done for him, and he knows that he’s stuck with Hayden for life.

Shane sits back down, he's paying with his card and Ilya has one of those handy portable tills that means he can check out anywhere, and he trusts the girls will come to him. Hayden

shouts something about not too much glitter because he'll be the one cleaning it, and although Ilya is hard to read, Shane sees the glint in his eye. He knows Shane's paying, so he knows to keep things to the limits of Shane's measly wallet. If he picks all of the bath bombs with the most glitter in them, well, it's none of Shane's business. He'll scold Ilya about playing nice with his friends later. For now, he's happy to watch Ilya talk to two of the cutest kids Shane has ever seen.

While they're still playing with the shower jellies Ilya brought out for them, Ilya returns with the bag and the card machine. Shane trusts him enough to just tap his card.

"I put in massage bar for Pike's wife, is called Bump, good for pregnancies." He says, "Is \$10 if you want to charge Pike. You should."

Shane won't but it makes him laugh anyway. "Are you still coming over tonight?"

"Of course, unless you are meeting some other handsome Russian for New Years?"

Shane laughs. "Fuck off!"

Two heads swivel. "Uncle Shane! Swear jar!"

Even though he doesn't live with them, and to Ilya's satisfaction, he places a dollar in the bag for Pike to find later.

They spend the evening at Shane's flat, on the ground floor of a sketchy apartment building that Ilya thinks he will definitely get murdered in. He plans to ask Shane to move in with him at the first possible, appropriate moment, to save him from being murdered of course.

Shane's apartment is truly a reflection of his mind. Everything is pristine. There are trinkets, family pictures, souvenirs, the occasional book, but every surface is polished and dust free. His fridge is segmented and filled with meal prep in tupperware. It's disgusting how organised he is, and incredibly endearing.

The last time they'd gotten frisky together Ilya had watched, half hard, as the man took off all of his clothes (except his socks) and folded them over the back of Ilya's desk chair. It had taken everything in him not to haul the man into bed and ravage him. It was just too cute. When Shane had asked to spend New Year's Eve together, well, who was Ilya to say no.

So, at 11:45pm, they were curled up on Shane's plush couch watching two comedians fill the time until the bells rang.

"Hey," Shane says, breaking the silence. Ilya's hand is tangled in his hair, Shane's head resting on his chest just above his heart. "Um. Before we go into the new year I just wanna say something."

Ilya continued petting his hair, hoping it would help if Shane got too into his own head. "It's only been like, a few weeks, but I really like you Ilya. A lot. And I know it's not going to be easy but I'm excited to see where this goes. Where we go."

Ilya's breath catches in his throat. Shane had moved so he could see Ilya better, staring up at him through thick lashes, shy and unintentionally seductive. He presses a kiss to Shane's forehead and lays their foreheads together.

"Me too," He says quietly, "I need you to promise me one thing though."

Shane pulls back, eyebrows furrowed. "What is it?"

"Will you still love me when I'm covered head to toe in glitter? Or when I fill our home with jellies? Or when I eventually leave, or your friend Pike gets me fired, and I can't bring home free stuff anymore?"

Shane taps his chin, thinking heavily. “I don't know. Probably not.”

Fireworks light up the room from outside, people on the TV shout and cheer together. Shane takes Ilya's jaw in his hand and gently leads him forward to his waiting mouth.

“You are a cruel man, Shane Hollander, very cruel indeed.”

End Notes

God im so tired.

anyway this is inspired by my own time working at lush. please be nice to us. and please dont do any of the shit Ilya does he 100% would have gotten fired if not for the swearing on floor for the Improper use of a massage bar.

scott has a cameo bc i have a fic idea where he gets a massage from Lush Masseuse Kip (go to your local lush spa y'all shits amazing) but whether I'll write it or not is to be seen.

have the slightly more chill spiritual successor to scott getting chirped by the cutest kitten then immediatelly shooting him point blank

anyway, unused titles are as follows:

This isnt bath and body works

Personal Customer Service

Lush Life

Love in the Time of Snow Fairy

Ilya: Worlds Worst Lush Employee

and:

Butterballs seeks sticky dates to let the good times roll (thanks falterfreundin!!!)

also i lost my note but it was super funny and now im sad

something along the lines of "this happens bit idk how. i dont fucking care this fic is like a long overdue pregnancy of a baby that i now hate"

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