

Still The One

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Still The One

by [LunarMoonstone](#)

Summary

"Shane has boyfriend?"

"Mom thinks so. He's dodging my texts, but it definitely seems like he's seeing someone."

Ilya's whispered "No" was drowned out by a loud snort from another teammate, who said something like, "Good for lil' bro."

Ilya shouldn't feel like dying. Should have expected this to happen at some point. Deserved it, even. He had been ghosting Shane for months, after all.

After taking his virginity.

In which Ilya knows he's not good enough to be with his best friend's little brother. He spirals over Shane possibly dating someone else nonetheless.

Alternatively, Ilya thinks he doesn't deserve the love the Hollanders so freely give to him. They are ready to prove him wrong.

Notes

i try to name my fics after the songs that either inspire them or best encapsulate them so i want to add that this one is specifically dedicated to the bbc radio 1 boygenius cover of Shania Twains - "You're Still The One", thank you very much

Another disclaimer: I keep getting great ao3 recommendations off social media, and recently come across several "Older Brother's Best Friend" Au's. Anyone who has read my college AU kows I adore a good 2000s romcom trope so I instantly had to write a one shot before I went ahead and read all the great recommendations I have bookmarked! If anything overlaps with those, however, it is only bc it is a popular trope, I have not yet ready any other stories.

Hope you'll enjoy this!

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

“You guys have little sisters, right?”

Ilya immediately perks up upon his best friend's inquiry.

Jake had this habit of starting conversations with questions, oftentimes hypothetical ones. It was difficult to adjust to at first, especially given Ilya's limited English. But now, nearly three years into their friendship, he had not only grown accustomed to it but was usually able to quickly discern what laid beneath his questions.

As their teammates respond to his question with either shakes of their heads or grunts of confirmation, Ilya keeps his head down and silently makes his way from the shower room to his stall, his anticipation rising.

“Ok, so, say your little sister brings home a boyfriend, you're supposed to kind of intimidate him, right? Give him *a talk*, or something, no?” Jake continues to speak to the room as he puts on his gear.

“What, is this the 50s?”

“I thought that was the dad's job?”

“I don't know, man, my dad wouldn't care.”

“The only ‘talk’ I'd give a guy dating my sister would be ‘Run, she's a bitch.’”

Jake groans at the responses from their teammates, and Ilya chuckles fondly at his reaction, though something feels *off* inside of him. That heavy feeling in his gut, like he ate something bad that was suddenly announcing itself. He had a feeling about where Jake was going with this, and he didn't want his suspicions confirmed.

“Ok but imagine you actually *liked* your little sister, and you two have always been close. What would yo-”

That at least confirmed the first part of Ilya's suspicion. This was undoubtedly about Jake's younger brother.

Shane.

Ilya had been haunted by the name long before he had even met him those two fateful summers ago.

When Ilya had first gotten to know Jake, the guy couldn't stop talking about his sweet, kind, adorable younger brother, to the point where Ilya had hesitated to even be his friend for the majority of their first semester together. He felt like the universe was playing a cruel joke on him by sending him this guy as a roommate who wouldn't stop rubbing his perfect happy family under his nose, while Ilya was only just starting to taste freedom from his own fucked-up family thanks to his American athletic scholarship.

Of course, that didn't hold on for long. Jake, much like the rest of his family, had this indescribable charm that even Ilya, with all these walls around him, wasn't immune to. Entirely the opposite, in fact.

Jake had quickly gotten past his defenses, especially after the first semester, when Ilya returned home from winter break with his family, sporting a black eye from Alexei's fist, and Jake had all but declared himself Ilya's older brother now.

And so, when summer had rolled around, Jake had been persistent in taking him to his family to make him a part of it, as if it were that easy.

As if Ilya could ever belong.

But he hadn't argued, not when he already owed Jake for all the assistance he had given him with homework and dealing with their coach and professors whenever Ilya struggled with the new language or culture. Ilya's family hadn't completely let him go, and he feared they never would, but he'd managed to at least get to spend a few weeks with the Hollanders.

That's when he had met him. The perfect child of that perfect family, the one Ilya had wished so hard he could despise after hearing about their perfect lives for an entire semester. After all, it took a lot less work to condemn something than to want to be a part of it.

He will always remember the first time he saw Shane. It is etched in his memory, not fading with time but becoming increasingly vivid, as if his mind were adding sparkles, slow motion, and romantic music to it.

Jake was much like Ilya, a dutiful son. The only difference was that he was actually appreciated for it. So, of course, he hadn't had his parents pick them up from the airport, instead arranging for a high school friend to pick them up with freshly picked flowers for their mother. Ilya didn't often admit to being second best, but when Jake pressed the bouquet into Ilya's hands to give to his mother for her hospitality (although Ilya had already gotten presents for the couple - he was a *party boy*, a *fuck boy*, a *screw-up*, but he wasn't a *savage*, all right?), he could admit that Jake was the better guy between the two of them.

The Hollanders, "*Yuna and David, please, son,*" were simply *warm*. Ilya couldn't think of another way to describe them. If he had seen them on the street, he would have called them boring, and in the back of his mind, he still did, but it was boredom - a stability - he has always secretly craved.

Their home was so bright and filled with pictures of such a lovely family, following two beautiful young boys as they grew up.

"We didn't expect you for another two hours. Shane's still outside. Go say hi, he's been *dying* to see you," Yuna had called over her shoulder as she walked into the kitchen to put the flowers in a vase, Ilya's cheek still tingling from the easy kiss she had pressed to it at the gesture.

Jake had clapped his hand on his shoulder and dragged them outside to their garden, while David muttered something about hoping Ilya liked barbecue, despite the fact that Jake had

already asked him about his dietary preferences weeks before to relay to his parents. They appeared to be a family of planners and worriers.

The house, the backyard, and everything else were so *nice*. Cozy, middle-class, with a touch of nature around them. Nothing like the opulence Ilya was used to, most of which was slowly crumbling; the hopes and future of his family resting on his shoulders after the majority of their wealth had dwindled over the years as a result of his father's slipping mind and his brother's carelessness.

There was a barbecue, a small shed, some flower beds, and a pool in the Hollander's backyard, and while Ilya had already learned a lot about Jake's perfectly normal upbringing, this confirmed every assumption he had about the other. Only someone who had experienced this kind of upbringing could be as ineffably content and laid-back as Jake always appeared to be.

A boy was doing strokes in the pool with an efficiency that didn't seem for leisure. That must be the little superstar athlete brother. It was clear before Ilya had ever even stepped foot into the Hollander's home that Shane was not only the baby of that family but also the golden child.

It had almost been a shock to Ilya, the golden child of his own family, how Jake had shown no jealousy for his brother. No thinly veiled envy, no contempt for the way Shane seemed to naturally demand more attention from their parents, according to Jake's stories. No, instead, Jake was much more of a proprietor of his little brother's standing, full of endless praise and protectiveness for him. If Shane's parents put a crown on his head, Jake made sure it stayed put.

"You training for the Olympics?" Jake had called out, loud enough for the boy in the water to hear, even if his stroke didn't falter, and David, inside the house, let out a laugh.

Ilya watched, intrigued, as Shane finished the lane, his muscled body rippling and glistening in the sun, before slapping a hand on the wall that felt more obligatory than victorious, not craning his head around to give them any attention before turning to swim the lane back to where they were standing just a few feet away from the pool. He recalled something in that moment Jake had told him about his brother's "borderline neurotic focus and tendencies."

Shane finished the line, tapping his hand against the wall again before finally looking up, throwing his head back. His eyes seemed to find Jake first, but the sun blinded Ilya in that moment and obscured his vision as Shane called out to his brother, "Took you long enough, asshole."

A cloud passed over the sun then, and Ilya squinted his eyes open to the moment that would probably never escape him, even if he were to inherit his father's disease.

Shane's hands were flat on the pool's edge as he raised himself, powerful arms supporting him while water droplets traced the contours of a flawlessly sculpted torso with smooth, tan skin.

Ilya was attracted to men, but he was rarely affected by the ripped bodies he frequently saw. That is, his mind didn't allow them to affect him; a locker room or gym a very different setting than a sunny backyard in a home filled with a kind of love that Ilya had never experienced.

Shane finally exited the pool and straightened himself up, his hands coming up to run through his wet hair to push it back, biceps flexing, and finally giving sight to *that face* and -

Oh god. I'm fucked.

He doesn't remember much else beyond thinking that. Well, that and *Freckles*.

Shane's happy smile had faltered just the tiniest bit after finally landing on Ilya after stepping out from the right embrace his brother had pulled him into. Not to mention the slight intake of breath and dilated pupils, and the nervous hand reached out to shake hands as if he were already an adult.

Such a poorly hidden interest. If his brother, Ilya's friend, hadn't been standing right there, he would have been ready to *pounce* at all the glistening skin right in front of him.

"-And, okay, what if instead of a boyfriend, your *sister* brought home a *girlfriend*? Would you still fuck him- I mean, *her*, up?" Jake asked, sounding genuinely confused.

After a moment of processing, he experienced a sudden twist in his chest. A loud sound echoed through the locker room, startling Jake and the other players, and only Ilya realized after a moment that he had pushed his helmet off the bench when his entire body had whipped toward his best friend.

"Shane has a boyfriend?" he asked, horrified.

Jake blinked at him briefly before his shoulders dropped, as they always did when his hypothetical questioning came to an end.

"Oh, little Hollzy?" Simmons, their goalkeeper, called out, eliciting several "ahhhs" from the other players.

Jake simply sighed, thankfully not registering the terror on Ilya's face.

"Mom thinks so. He's dodging my texts, but it definitely seems like he's seeing someone," Jake replies heavily, shaking his head to the ground.

Ilya's whispered "*No*" was drowned out by a loud snort from another teammate, who said something like, "Good for lil' bro."

Ilya shouldn't feel like dying. Should have expected this to happen at some point. Deserved it, even. He had been ghosting Shane for months, after all.

After taking his virginity.

So really, he had no right to feel like this. His palms getting clammy, bile rising in his throat, his heart thrumming uncomfortably in his chest.

It just that...Shane was *his*.

It was illogical. Entirely and, consequently, stupid. Ilya had no claim whatsoever over him and probably should never have been allowed in his vicinity to begin with.

If only his soul would agree. He had seen Shane for the first time, and something inside of him had clicked into place, claiming this boy in front of him who was glistening in the sun.

Until now, he'd blamed everything else. Jealousy over Jake's perfect family, so his subconscious just saw Shane as a desirable manifestation to be a part of it. Or maybe even Jake himself was to blame, praising his brother so much that he was already half in love with the kid before even meeting him.

He realized in that moment that all those things were simply excuses for what Ilya had known and been running from all along.

How he had first met Shane and his brain had instantly provided the possessive English word, "Mine," and his entire being had simply accepted it as a universal truth. How he had thought it the entire time he was inside Shane for the first time and every time after, until it became too much to bear.

"Who?" Ilya all but breathed at Jake's direction, who was still blissfully unaware of Ilya's source of conflict. Instead, he gave him a sympathetic shrug before going on about how Shane probably just needed time to open up or something, ending with a clap to Ilya's shoulder and a "I know it's crazy man. Our Shane having his first real boyfriend."

Our Shane. Ilya was instantly overcome with guilt and reminded, like almost every other day, of the reasons he had begun to shun Shane.

Though Jake was not the only reason, he played a significant role. At times, Ilya could barely stand how his best friend looked at him when they talked about Shane, and Jake thought Ilya's interest in him was because he shared the same *brotherly* affection for him. Jake had admitted at a party or another, when they were both a little tipsy, how Ilya seemed to complete their family and how happy he was that Shane now "had another brother to look out for him," since Jake had always been the one to watch out for his younger brother.

And if Ilya hadn't already felt bad about taking his feelings for Shane too far after the summer was over, his resolve to stay as far away from Shane as possible had solidified in that moment, lest he squander this one good thing he had even more.

So really, he should be *relieved* that Shane had apparently...*moved on*. That he wasn't spending his evenings sitting in his bedroom, with those ridiculous plaid sheets Ilya had seen in every American movie and those bookshelves full of boring books about algebra, architecture and hockey. That he wasn't thinking about all the times Ilya had snuck into his room after the rest of their family had gone to sleep to fool around for hours, sometimes

falling asleep in each other's arms, which would undoubtedly end in a panicked Shane kicking him out of his room at ass O'clock.

Yet the thought of Shane Hollander, Jake Hollander's boring hockey prodigy little brother... *his Shane*...having a *boyfriend*...just wouldn't let him go.

Which is why, later that day, instead of being anywhere else, he was lying on his bed, uselessly staring up at his ceiling as if it held the answers to his prayers.

Hell, it was the first time in a month he hadn't agreed to go out with Jake, who, between the two of them, was usually the responsible one.

Ilya had firmly disagreed with his friends' Svetlana's assessment that he was "self-destructive," but the whole Shane Hollander just seemed to prove her hypothesis.

Because what had Ilya been thinking? Being invited to his friend's - his first *true* friend that he wasn't sleeping with - home, and immediately wanting to blow it all up upon seeing the most precious person in that house. Flirting with him until he finally cracked, like a game of cat and mouse for his entertainment, that sweetened Ilya's entire summer. Acting like the perfect brother figure in front of Jake whenever they went to the rink near the Hollanders' house and swam together in the pool or lake, all while giving Shane heated looks and allowing his touches to linger whenever Jake's back was turned to them.

Ilya had taken advantage of the opportunity to make his move until they ended that summer in the rink's showers without Jake, who was out with his father. They ended up giving each other blowjobs, which was such a juvenile sexual experience that had left Ilya in such a chokehold that he had texted Shane for an entire year until he could finally see him again for another summer, where he had tricked his way through the Hollanders' hospitality until he was left alone with their precious baby once more. And then taken something from him that he could never give back.

It had all been fun and games to him. And Shane had seemed ever the eager participant, so he never even felt a shred of guilt. That was, until Shane had kissed his fucking forehead after another night of Ilya sneaking into his room, drifting off into his arms with a muttered wish that Ilya didn't have to leave for Russia because he always seemed too sad to go. And then, at the airport the next day, when David and Yuna had dropped him off and hugged him tight, giving him a *packed lunch for God's sake*, like he was their actual son and not just their son's pathetic friend with a shitty family, like he had thought the entire time they saw him as.

All that, paired with Jake's unbridled trust and gratitude in him for caring about his brother, for not treating him like someone weird or off like so many other people had apparently done when they had grown up... Ilya had realized how massively, intensely he had fucked up.

All for his own selfish reasons. Or maybe because deep down, Svetlana was right, and he had felt the need to sabotage something as good as the summer with the Hollanders because he didn't deserve such unyielding, unconditional love from a family when his own had never shown him it was okay to accept it.

So he had nipped it in the bud, ignoring Shane's text until they eventually, painfully stopped. Not that Ilya ever stopped checking his phone for new notifications, reading their messages over and over again when no new ones came, just like he was doing now.

The longer he sat there, stewing in his memories of beautiful freckles beneath glazing brown eyes, of drawn-out moans beneath Ilya's fingers, where he so often had to put a hand over Shane's mouth lest he wake up the entire block, kissing the back of his own hand as if he could reach Shane's lips through the skin and bones, the more difficult it became to remain rational about it all.

Because Shane was supposed to, what, *wait* for Ilya? Wait for him to return to the Hollander cottage every summer - something Ilya wished he could do for the rest of his life, part of why he *had* to end it with Shane before it could start.

The longer he stared at his ceiling, the more he thought...*yes*. That's exactly what he must have hoped for Shane to do, as unfair and conceited as it was.

This was insane. He had good reason not to indulge this thing with Shane anymore. The message had clearly been received. Ilya could go out, live his popular life, and go back to the summer knowing Shane would never, ever initiate something again unless Ilya gave him good reason to. A chapter that maybe one day could be a fun anecdote forever closed.

Apparently, Ilya hated the thought of Shane and him being *over* for good more than any morality he pretended to have.

Last Message. September 23rd.

Shane

Is everything okay?

Today. April 15th.

Me

So, a boyfriend?

His heart thrummed against his ribcage as he spent what felt like an eternity watching the message change from *sent* to *seen*. He bit his lip, partially out of nervousness and partially to stop that involuntary smile that always seemed to stretch across his face whenever Shane Hollander was remotely concerned. He watched the text bubble appear and then disappear several times, his heart sinking when the bubble stopped entirely. He hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath when Shane's typing stopped, only to exhale loudly when it resumed.

Shane

You are fucking unbelievable.

A big smile stretched across his face, his chest sinking with relief.

Me

u mean i fuck unbelievably good? yes ik

It was risky, but Shane had always responded well to Ilya's special kind of assholery. He felt most comfortable sending him innuendos, having done so for almost an entire year when he had tried so desperately to get into Shane's pants. Mostly, though, he had just wanted to keep the others' attention on him, and sex was always the easier way Ilya knew how to.

Shane

Give me one good reason not to block you.

This made Ilya's smile fall. Shane seemed *mad* mad at him, not the faux kind he so often put in, which always amused Ilya to no end. His adorable angry kitten.

He racked his brain for something. Should he apologize to Shane? Explain that he had gotten *scared* of this thing developing between them, how it had started to feel like he was doing wrong by him, using him as a casual hookup when Shane and his lovely family deserved so much *more*, deserved so much *better* than Ilya?

It was too much, too open, too vulnerable. Everything he was trying *not* to be with Shane, a ball he had to stop before it started rolling.

Me

Big Hollander will be confused. Asks me to text you all the time.

It was a low blow to use Jake as an excuse, though it technically wasn't wrong. Jake never questioned why Ilya and Shane didn't communicate outside of the summer, even though he saw Ilya as an extended brother figure for Shane, blaming it primarily on Shane's "lack of social skills." Still, he frequently gave Ilya his phone to text Shane simple questions or send him responses when he was otherwise occupied, such as at the gym. It was almost illicit; Ilya never prefaced those texts with his own name, instead texting him as if he were Jake and getting little dopamine hits from Shane's responses, even if they weren't intended for him.

Shane

I think he would understand if he knew, don't you think so?

Ilya's eyes widened, his thumb hovering over the keyboard. Was Shane threatening to spill-

Shane

Don't worry, I won't tell him.

I don't want him to know either.

Ilya released a sigh of relief, though there was a pang in his chest. Shane didn't want his brother to know about their affair, and for once, it didn't feel like the two of them had a hot, fun little secret, but more like he knew how wrong Ilya was for him. The speck of dirt on Shane Hollander's white vest.

Still, he had to take a win where he could get one. Shane was still replying after all.

Ilya pictured him sitting in his bedroom, frowning endearingly while staring at his phone. He would lock his screen after reading each of Ilya's messages, blink violently, and then unlock it once more to type a snarky response.

Or maybe he's with his boyfriend right now, his brain supplied. His mood immediately soured, and his resolution to keep Shane on the phone, keep him distracted and focused on Ilya, strengthened. Even if that focus was Shane's righteous anger.

Me

yes, lots of things you are not telling him, apparently

like who is new boyfriend

Shane

Fuck off

You don't talk to me for months and this is what you want to know???

Me

yes

Shane

Go fuck one of your puck bunnies, Rozanov, and stop worrying about who i am or am not sleeping with

No. No. This was not good.

Me

are you sleeping with him?

?

??

Shane

None. Of. Your. Fucking. Business.

Fuck. *Fuck*. This was going to drive Ilya fucking insane.

Over the next *hours*, he typed out and then deleted increasingly unhinged replies.

Me

[Draft Message]

Does he fuck you like I do then? I bet he can't.

If this is punishment for me, you can stop now. Message received.

Does he know to kiss spot behind your ear that drives you crazy?

Do you look at him with the same eyes you look at me?

I miss you.

I want to kiss you.

I should be the only one who gets to kiss you. No one else could do it like I do. I know that you know that.

You're mine, Hollander.

Break up. Now.

Be good for me and stop seeing him, yes? I will come back in summer and make you happy.

At last, he sent the only one that really mattered.

Me

Is he good to you then? Are you happy?

He saw Shane type, but the reply never came.

Ilya was truly, completely, utterly fucked.

He had officially disgruntled the sweetest guy on the planet, who belonged to the sweetest fucking family on the planet that would, without a doubt, clock the weird tension between the two of them within seconds. Usually, Ilya loved how the Hollanders always included him in their activities, but now, as he sat in the passenger seat of Jake's Honda, he was still trying to come up with possible excuses for why he had to miss out on dinner with the Hollanders, who had flown into town earlier today for their beloved son's birthday.

When Jake gave his keys to the valet and he still hadn't come up with a good enough excuse, he knew it was time to accept his fate.

They were early, even by Hollander standards, who were always early for anything, so Ilya had 15 minutes to smoke a cigarette and calm his nerves (even though he knew Yuna would frown disapprovingly at him) before the Hollanders arrived, still 10 minutes earlier than their agreed-upon time.

He was just stomping his cigarette out on the curb when a taxi finally rounded a corner, his heart beginning to thrum against his ribcage aggressively.

As usual, Jake took over the greetings, practically jumping into his proud and awaiting parents' arms. It left Ilya to stare at the taxi until Shane finally stepped out behind them.

Would Ilya ever stop feeling like this when he saw him? Would the thrill ever wear off? Would his heart ever cease to stop for a moment before starting up again?

Their eyes met for only a brief moment, where the corners of Ilya's mouth lifted involuntarily, before Shane averted his gaze. The disappointment felt almost physical, like a punch to his chest, cutting through his thrumming excitement.

Squaring his shoulders, Ilya took in a deep breath before taking a step forward, opening his mouth to address him.

But before he could, Jake already pulled his brother into a tight embrace, blocking Ilya's path.

His eyes remained glued to Shane, however, and he noticed how he seemed to stiffen in his brother's embrace. Now, Shane's clamming up when someone touched him was nothing new, but Jake was one of the few people whose embrace Shane would almost always melt into. Ilya wondered if he still was one of those people.

Using the distraction, Ilya greeted Yuna and David with an exaggerated exclamation of delight at receiving their favorite son, which always made them laugh. Jake grumbled something under his breath before shoving Ilya away from David's tight embrace and leading his parents into the restaurant.

Shane stood there, clearly trying and failing not to look at Ilya, eyes glittering over the pavement before moving up and down Ilya's frame, lingering on his face for a brief moment before quickly averting his gaze again.

The rigid posture, the fleeting hungry eyes, and the fiddling hands by his side reminded Ilya so much of the first time he met Shane, something seized in his chest.

With a sigh, he took a step forward, pausing when he noticed Shane's eyes widen. But Shane didn't step away, so Ilya just let out a small huff, Shane's shoulders sagging slightly at the sound.

He took another step forward until he was in his space, the voices of Yuna and David chatting with Jake fading in the background but still relatively close.

He leaned forward like he might hug him, placing a hand on Shane's arm. He stiffened up for a moment, as was to be expected, but he began to relax when Ilya slowly ran his fingers down his arm. He heard the sharp inhale as his finger briefly touched the bare skin on his wrist before rushing back up.

He smiled as he leaned in close to his ear and watched out of the corner of his eye as Shane's worried gaze snapped to his family.

"Hi, sweetheart," he whispered into his ear, staying there for a brief moment to hear Shane inhale sharply before slowly pulling away and letting his lips lightly brush over Shane's cheek.

He anticipated a number of potential outcomes. For Shane to step away from him, as if Ilya might burn him. To slap him or call him an asshole. To scream for his brother and for Ilya to end up in the emergency room tonight.

Yet Shane's beautiful dark lashes only fluttered slightly as he took in a deep breath, undoubtedly filled with Ilya's cologne, an action so familiar between them. Shane wore the same aching expression he always had right before Ilya would quit teasing him and finally kiss him senseless. Ilya was so enthralled by him that he genuinely considered stealing a kiss from him right then and there. From the look on Shane's face, he doubted it would be ill-received.

He snapped himself out of it when the voice of his best friend drifted through again. He stepped back from Shane with a satisfied smile just in time for David to turn around and call after them, "You guys coming?"

Shane blinked his eyes open, looking around for a moment as if snapped back in time. Shane took in Ilya's grin for a moment before his entire face soured and he stalked past him, slamming his shoulder into him.

Ilya followed him like a besotted idiot, grinning from ear to ear, figuring maybe not all hope was lost.

His eyes couldn't stop finding Shane all throughout dinner, and from the way the younger's ears were bright red (which was so fucking endearing Ilya almost cracked his glass in half... god, he had *missed* him), he had definitely noticed.

Shane was not doing much better, always trying to look at Ilya when he thought the other wasn't looking, which he was most of the time, resulting in Shane's beautiful brown eyes snapping back to either his plate or his brother seated next to Ilya, a magnificent blush spreading over his maddening freckles.

Forget his steak, Ilya wanted to *bite* into the flesh of Shane's cheek.

He was aware that the impulse meant he wasn't entirely in control of his desires, but with Shane, so little of him was.

Fortunately, the three other Hollanders were too engrossed in absorbing each other's presence after some time apart to notice. If Ilya hadn't already had several family dinners with them, the stark contrast between this and the silent meals at his own home would send a stab of pain through his chest. By now, it was only an old ache, so often soothed by the way Jake would never fail to include Ilya in his stories, or David insisting on putting more food onto Ilya's plate, or Yuna inquiring about his recent achievements like a shark to then praise him like a champion.

Nothing was ever quite as grounding, though, as the presence of Shane's foot against his own, something he had been bereft of the entire evening, no matter how many times he had "accidentally" reached his leg out to let the tip of his shoe nudge against Shane's.

Something was going on with him, something beyond his complicated feelings toward Ilya. He couldn't just keep Ilya's inquisitive stare but also seemed unable to look at any of his family members.

He was poking around his food more than actually eating it, and by the time Ilya had seen him give his beloved brother one of those fake smiles for the third time, he was properly worried.

He nudged his foot out again, but Shane just stiffened, the glass of water he had placed to his lips pausing for a moment before Ilya felt him pull his foot back and take a sip, causing the growing ball of worry in his stomach to turn over.

"Alright, now, even though it's your birthday, we know you won't mind if someone else gets a present," David said abruptly, drawing Ilya's attention away from Shane.

He blinked when he saw David and Yuna exchange pleased smiles with each other before turning to look at Ilya, who instantly sat up straighter. Jake only laughed, which told Ilya that he was in on whatever they had planned. He quickly glanced at Shane, seated next to his father, but the youngest's eyes remained glued to the piece of tomato he had been pushing around for the past five minutes.

Yuna smiled sweetly, sharing another look with Jake and David as if they were all in on the joke, before reaching across the table for Ilya, who immediately offered his hand.

"Now, sweetie, we know you have to spend more time in Russia this summer, which is totally understandable, even if we were very sorry to hear that we wouldn't have much time with you this weekend," she started.

Ilya's mood instantly sombered. His father's health was deteriorating, and doctors had told him there wasn't much time left, so Ilya felt compelled to spend more time with him over the summer. He had initially wanted to spend the whole summer there, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to, not after another phone call with his stupid brother.

He *needed* those summers with the Hollanders as much as he hadn't wanted to become dependent on anyone or anything when he had first come to the US.

They healed something inside of him, gave him something back that Russia had taken from him a long time ago, and continued to suck out of him whenever he went back.

Those warm nights spent laughing together and sitting by the fire. Fishing with David and his endless patience. Going shopping or out to eat with Yuna, who never shied away from new places and cuisines, broadening his horizons. Practicing with his best friend on his home rink, taking it easier than they would during the semester when they had their coach yelling into their ear about stats and scouts, and simply enjoying the sport together that brought them together.

And Shane.

His sweet, loving, wonderfully kind Shane. The balm to Ilya's heart.

Even if he was a little brat who competed with Ilya on everything, be it who caught the bigger fish, who scored the most goals during soccer, or who was speedier on the ice. Calling him an asshole for his jokes before shoving his tongue down his throat like he had waited all day to taste him. Who *held* him when they slept, like he hadn't been held since he was a child.

He cleared his throat at Yunas' reminder of how little he'd get of the Hollanders this summer, resisting the urge to pull his hand back from her warm touch to keep up his stony facade.

"So we thought..." David began next to her, reaching into his jacket to produce an envelope.

He opened it before pushing the content square onto the table and towards Ilya, who took a moment to realize it was two printed plane tickets.

His mouth opened slightly in question, but Yuna didn't give him a chance.

"We spoke to Jake, had him take a peek at your schedule. Both your last exams are way before the semester officially ends, and you also have no more classes that week. So if you attend your last practice and then take the evening flight, you can have a whole week before summer break officially starts! And you'll be just in time for Shane's graduation! We already called the airline and it should be possible to change your flight to Russia from Boston to Ottawa, you'd just have a layover in..."

The lump in Ilya's throat made it hard for him to properly thank them, but he knew they could see his gratitude all over his face. Jake, the asshole, started teasing him about his misty eyes, though it was good-natured. Everything about the Hollanders was.

After he finally managed to get the words "Thank you...so much," out of his mouth, his eyes finally landed on Shane, who had remained quiet.

"Is that...okay with you?"

David looked between him and Shane, giving Ilya a confused smile.

“What is, son?”

Ilya just kept looking at Shane intently, his chest feeling tight. Thanks to his parents' attention, Shane's eyes flickered up to him, and he did his best to maintain his focus on Ilya. However, rather than looking directly into his eyes, he appeared to look at Ilya's ear.

“Me attending your graduation,” Ilya said softly, keeping his gaze on Shane, willing him to properly look at him.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity but was probably only a beat, Shane took a deep breath before finally looking him in the eye.

“You’re family,” Shane only said quietly.

And if that didn’t break Ilya’s fucking heart.

Before he could properly react, he finally, finally felt Shane’s foot nudge against his own, deliberately resting there. His entire body relaxed, shoulders dropping in relief as a genuine smile overcame his face.

“Okay then,” he simply replied, his voice almost a whisper.

“I mean, of course you have to come watch my little brother graduate,” Jake butted in, throwing an arm over Ilya and pulling him in.

“About fucking time,” Jake then directed laughingly at Shane while Ilya escaped his grasp, making the other give a weak chuckle.

“He’s also set to give the valedictorian speech, as expected,” Yuna said happily as she took a swing from her wine glass.

Ilya’s frown returned to him as he watched the corners of Shane’s mouth turn down at his mother’s words, his gaze directed back down at his plate.

When Yuna finished her sip of wine, she smiled encouragingly at Shane, reaching over David to touch his arm.

“Oh, sweetie, how about you tell them the good news!” she said.

At this, Shane definitely tensed up, pulling his arm away from his mother’s touch as he leaned back in his seat as stiff as a statue.

Good news? God, what if this was about Shane’s boyfriend?

Ilya had almost forgotten about it, with the way he was so elated at finally seeing Shane again, but the fidgetiness, the tension in the other, the clear mix of embarrassment and dread...only Shane would look so ashamed about something as simple as having a boyfriend.

Dread pooled in Ilya's stomach, hot and heavy and threatening to spit his expensive steak right back out.

Fuck. Ilya knew he had fucked up, tormented himself with the fact that Shane had been ignoring him and looking at someone else for days now, but hearing it out of the younger's mouth as some sort of good news announcement would surely kill him.

"Mom, can we maybe not-"

"Oh, come on, sweetie, it's your brother's birthday! I think it's the only thing that could trump Ilya's *generous* gift card to Taco Bell," she giggled.

"It *is* my favorite restaurant," Jake chuckled, his parents joining in. Ilya's eyes remained glued to Shane, who looked like he might pass out any second now.

He tapped his foot against Shane's once, a small smile coming to his face when the other instantly took a deep breath in.

"Come on, kid. I'm sure he expects it anyway," David chimed in, clapping a hand to Shane's shoulder.

Even though he might have imagined it, Shane appeared to wince just a little at the word "expect."

"Go on," Yuna encouraged, looking between her sons excitedly.

"I-"

"Wait, is this about that guy you're seeing? Have you made things official yet? Oh god," Jake interrupted his baby brother, successfully stealing the breath from Ilya.

Yuna chastised him across the table for his clearly terrified voice, but before Jake could open his mouth to defend himself (saying that he wasn't homophobic, just worried about his little brother having his first serious boyfriend and having to go all 'big brother' on him because guys are such pigs, a debate Ilya has had to painstakingly listen to for a while now), Shane let out an indignant huff, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, I don't have a fucking boyfriend, okay?" he bitched.

Fucking music to Ilya's ears.

Ilya probably would have grinned like a shark if Shane's outburst hadn't caused the entire table to become eerily silent and tense. Still, he could have reached across the table to kiss his sweetheart silly, his parents sitting next to him be damned, with his joy.

But Shane was scowling down at his plate as if it had personally offended him, and his family bore into him with their stares, quickly overshadowing Ilya's glee with his growing concern for the other boy.

“Okay, so what is i-”

“Can we please just *not*. Not here, at least?”

“Shane, come on, what is going on?”

“*Mom*, I just *don’t* want to get into all this right now!”

“But it’s your brother’s birthday, I just thought-”

“Seriously, who pissed in your cereal this morning?”

“Jake!”

“I mean, look at him!”

“I’m confused, Shane. I thought this was a good thing? Are we not happy you got accepted?”

“Dad, I-”

“Hold on, accepted? You mean here, for Boston? *Holy shit*, that’s great!”

“Oops.”

“Seriously, David. Well, I guess the cat is out of the bag now. See, Shane. I told you he’d be thrilled. I thought you were, too, sweetie? I mean, this has been your and your brother’s dream since you were little, I don’t-”

“I didn’t want to say anything because I don’t think I want to go to Boston! *Fuck!*”

Stunned silence, again.

Even Ilya was entirely surprised by the statement, even though he had noticed something was up with Shane all night.

Shane going to their college was something inevitable in the Hollander household. Jake had talked about it their entire first semester together, only promising Ilya he wouldn’t kick him out for his younger brother after they had become friends.

It was another reason why it had been so stupid of Ilya to pursue this thing with Shane in the first place. He hadn’t thought about it then. It had never even really crossed his mind until that second summer, when things had started to feel too hot and heavy between them, and he knew there was no way he could be in the same vicinity as Shane all year and not fall totally head over heels in love with him if he didn’t stop this thing between them right there and then.

Though recently he had realized it might have already been too late by then.

Shane's confession sat on the table like an unwelcome guest, and Ilya turned his head to catch a glimpse of his best friend, who appeared so genuinely perplexed that a wave of guilt and shame hit him like a fucking bullet train.

Because what reason could there be for Shane not to want to go to Boston if not for the fact that Ilya had fucked him up with his carelessness?

God. He was the worst friend alive. As useless and selfish as his father had always said.

"But-" Yuna started helplessly, her mouth opening and closing like a fish.

David was quicker to gather himself, ducking his head to try and catch Shane's gaze, which was still very much focused on his plate of half-eaten food.

"You are, of course, free to make your own decision, Shane. You have multiple offers from excellent universities, and we are proud of you for every single one and will support you no matter what," he started, and the words seemed to make Shane relax at least a little, his tight shoulders relaxing slightly.

"But I think we are just wondering where this is coming from? Your mother is right, you two have always wanted to attend the same college. Not to mention how much more *comfortable* your mother and I would be if we knew your brother was there to look out for yo-"

David cut himself off with the uncharacteristic scoff Shane let out, though to Ilya, it sounded more choked up than bitter. At last, his head snapped towards his parents, his anger visible from his furrowed brows and shining eyes.

"I know you all don't believe I can handle myself on my own, but I'm not completely incompetent, so I hoped you'd at least let me be for once in my life," he hissed. David and Yuna were about to speak when Shane leaped from his chair as if he had been electrocuted.

"I am sorry. I just need some air."

He was quick to leave the restaurant, disappearing behind a waiter and suddenly gone from their view.

"What the fuck?" Jake called out, already lifting himself out of his chair to follow him. Ilya quickly put a hand on his shoulder, pushing him down to make him sit.

"Let me follow," he said, looking between Jake and the disbelieving faces of David and Yuna, the latter of whom looked close to tears.

"No, I'm gonna-"

"Might be better if it's not someone who is related, no? Seems like a family thing," Ilya prodded gently, maintaining his hand on Jake's shoulder to keep him in place.

Jake looked ready to protest, but Yuna finally shook herself out of her stupor, whispering a small "He might be right" under her breath.

And so, with all three Hollanders' heartbroken expressions fresh in his mind, of which he was fairly certain he was to blame, Ilya made his way out of the restaurant, bracing himself to face his mistakes of the previous two years.

He found him in the alley behind the restaurant, near the dumpsters, with both hands flat against the wall and his head hung low. The fact that he willingly entered the filthy alley must reveal a lot about his mental state. Like the good boy he was, Ilya knew he probably just didn't want to go too far from the restaurant and worry his family.

Ilya came to a stop a few feet away from him and kicked an empty can away to signal his arrival.

Shane was startled, snapping to Ilya before he groaned deeply and leaned forward again, pressing his head against the brick wall of the opposing restaurant.

He deserved that reaction, even if it made him feel off-kilter and even more awful about himself.

With a heavy sigh, he took another step forward, not missing the way Shane's hands clenched into fists.

And well, what did Ilya have to lose at this point?

He lifted his arms to his side ceremoniously, waiting until Shane turned his head towards him amidst his silence.

"Come here, sweetheart," he simply sighed, keeping his gaze steady on those glistening brown eyes.

Shane, like so often, managed to surprise Ilya with his endless devotion, barely hesitating before practically jumping into Ilya's arms, sending him stumbling back slightly from the impact before he found his balance with Shane in his arms, beginning to sway them slightly right there.

"*Fuck*," Shane muttered, his grip around Ilya tightening as he nuzzled his face into his neck.

Ilya sighed in content, even if his eyes were stinging at the bitter sweetness of the moment. Shane was finally back in his arms, obviously wasn't as mad at Ilya as he had thought, as he *should* be, and it felt so fucking *right*.

And yet Ilya knew he had to let him go for good.

Could he really be blamed for the way he lingered, then, with this inevitable end between them right in front of him? For the way he didn't speak nor urged Shane to speak, instead pressing his face into Shane's glossy hair to fill his lungs with his scent?

After a while, he could feel Shane fully relax against him, his breaths getting deep and even, which Ilya could feel against his chest.

“Better?” he eventually asked, hand coming up from where he had been rubbing up and down Shane’s back to dig into his hair.

Shane mumbled something against his neck that sounded close to a defeated yes. Ilya just hummed, not able to let go of him just yet. And, well, Shane seemed just as adamant about letting him go, so Ilya gave himself a little more time standing in this piss-covered alley, swaying this beautiful boy he couldn't stop thinking about and keeping close to his heart.

But after a while, he realized he needed to speak up. He knew Yuna well enough to know that her window of tolerance was quickly closing, and he was also aware of Shane and his constant fear of being "suspicious" whenever he and Ilya spent extended periods of time together in his family's proximity.

Perhaps he should just get it done and over with. Tell him that he was making a mistake by refusing to attend college with his brother simply because Ilya would be present and he had caused him pain. Tell him that Ilya will stop at nothing to put him at ease, grovel, and ask for forgiveness if necessary in order to fix this mess and make amends with Shane and the other Hollanders.

Instead, what came out when he opened his mouth was, “So, no boyfriend, yes?”

It was, decisively, the wrong thing to say.

Shane pushed him away like Ilya had expected him to all evening, calling him an asshole so loudly any waiter motivated to take his cigarette break just now would certainly be scared off.

“You’re so *fucking* annoying, do you know that?” Shane seethed, his hands balled into adorable fists.

“Oh my god, you are so dramatic, Hollander,” Ilya sighed. Better to make himself out to be the asshole. Maybe it’d hurt Shane less then, when Ilya would have to push him away for good.

“Why the fuck do you even care if I-... You know what, *no*. I’m done breaking my fucking head thinking about you. I have enough shit going on as is,” he grumbled, stomping across the alley while running his hands through his hair.

“Hm, yes. Where to go college. Big decision,” Ilya said casually, stopping Shane dead in his tracks.

“Fuck off. It *is* a big decision,” Shane replied with tears in his eyes.

“I know, very important. Decides future and everything,” Ilya shrugged. Then he sighed, taking a step forward while trying to catch Shane’s eye.

“Is not very like you to make big decisions based off feelings.”

“I’m just-“

“I will not bother you, Shane.”

Ilya finally sighed, stuffing his hands into his pockets to stop himself from reaching out for him.

Shane just blinked at him, eyes wide and angry and confused.

“What?”

Ilya shrugged, pretending to be indifferent while avoiding his stare.

“I will not mess with you if you go here. If it is so bad to see me, I can...transfer, or something, if you want. But you should not punish your brother because you are mad at me.”

Shane was quiet for a beat before he scoffed loudly, making Ilya’s gaze snap back to him.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re incredibly fucking conceited?” he demanded.

“No...well, maybe. I do not know that word,” Ilya said quietly, hating in that moment having to admit it. Usually he wouldn’t; he’d wait to get home to Google it, but it felt important, coming from Shane with such pain and anger.

Something in Shane’s defiant posture ebbed away as he quietly said, “It means you’re arrogant,” with much less venom than before.

“Ah yes. Then all my life.”

Shane scoffed again, though it sounded more bemused than anything else. Then he looked down at the ground and inhaled deeply, counting down in his head before exhaling again.

“It’s not because of you,” he eventually confessed quietly, Ilya having to strain to hear him.

“What?” Ilya asked dumbly.

“Why I don’t want to go to college here...It’s not because of you,” Shane repeated, lifting his head to meet Ilya’s gaze. He looked and sounded so...defeated. Ilya raised a disbelieving eyebrow at him, Shane rolling his eyes at the action before resting his hands on his hips.

“Well, alright, *you*, this whole... *thing* between isn’t exactly a pro point for Boston, but I always knew that *we’re not*...I mean yes, you made me feel like fucking *shit* for a minute there but I know I shouldn’t have any fucking expectations of you, so don’t...fucking flatter yourself, or whatever.”

At this, Ilya was slightly dumbstruck. And maybe even a bit hurt in his ego.

“Then what? What is such big fucking deal about going to Boston?” he huffed, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

Shane looked about three seconds away from murdering him in this shitty alley. And also from busting out into tears.

Something gave way in Ilya's chest at the distraught sight of him and he took another step forward, raising his eyebrow when Shane took a step back with the action.

A blush spread on the youngers cheek but he was just so stubborn, which Ilya had always found as endearing as annoying.

He took another step towards Shane with outstretched hands, the two of them playing that game where Shane would take a step back while glaring at him until they got too close to the dumpsters and Shane's nose crinkled in disgust at the smell.

Ilya huffed a laugh, using the distraction to finally bridge the gap between them and hold onto his shoulders, his expression softening for him.

"What is going on?" he asked softly, for once without a tease or quip.

Shane met his eyes, the tears threatening to spill over before he averted his gaze to the ground. And that just wouldn't do, so Ilya took his chin in his finger and forced him to look back up at him, running his thumb gently under Shane's bottom lip to make his resolve slip away.

Shane's always lost their battle of wills when it was fought out via eye contact and so after a moment he pouted slightly, Ilya's eyes drawn to his lips like a moth to a flame.

"I don't want to be known as Jake Hollander's little brother at school again," he confessed achingly.

Ilya frowned, confused by the statement. But he remained silent, only nodding in understanding and encouraging Shane to go on, who let his eyes flutter shut as Ilya moved his hand from under his chin to cup his cheek, his thumb reverently stroking his cheek.

"It's just...Jake's so great. At everything. People like him. They fucking *love* him, actually. He's outgoing and charming and fun and...then they meet *me*. And I can see them slowly start to realize that I'm nothing like him."

He inhaled steadily and then opened his eyes once more, his grief striking Ilya hard in the chest.

"I just don't know if I can do another 4 years of looking into disappointed faces when they realize that I'm not like him...that there's just something...*off-putting* about me, I guess. It fucking sucks," he confessed, ending with a wet, self-deprecating chuckle.

A reality where Shane Hollander ever felt inferior to someone was something Ilya would have to get used to, despite the fact that it was staring him right back in the face.

"I understand," he said quickly, feeling like it was the least he could do.

"Yeah right," Shane muttered unconvincingly. Ilya's heart tightened at Shane's elevation of him, despite the fact that he truly didn't deserve it.

“No, I do. You forget I am the youngest child in my family as well. And while I am so much sexier and smarter and funnier than my stupid brother-“

This caused a wet chuckle from Shane, making Ilya instantly smile and the knot of worry in his chest loosen a bit.

“...-he has always been exact copy of my father. So he always liked him more. I was always too-“

Мягкая. Как твоя мама.

“Different, too,” he landed on, catching Shane’s eyes, which widened in realization before softening slightly.

He nodded, more to himself than for Ilya, before his hands came up to circle Ilya’s wrist.

“Mom and Dad expect me to be just like him. Or maybe even better, I don’t know. I know they don’t actively measure us up, but it feels like-“

“Yes, I know.”

Shane sighed, perhaps in relief or just exhaustion, Ilya wasn’t too sure. What he did know, however, was that much of what Shane was feeling was inside his head, even if he had to admit that an entire family talking him up as their superstar from so young probably added to this pressure he was feeling.

He leaned forward, pulling Shane back into his space effortlessly. With a whine, his forehead hit Ilya’s shoulder, Ilya securing him in place with a possessive hand to his nape, which massaged the place.

“You know they will be proud of you no matter what,” Ilya said, surprising himself with the missing jealousy he felt at the statement.

It had been a difficult pill to swallow to learn that there were families who truly felt that way, but in this moment, he realized that even if he had not been given that gift, Shane had been fortunate enough to receive it.

Another whine of confirmation. God, Ilya wanted to hold and shield him forever.

How was he supposed to ever distance himself from Shane? He had been oh so determined to end this thing for good, to fucking transfer schools for him just mere moments ago, hadn’t he?

He loathed to admit it, but his father had always been right about one thing: he really was fucking selfish. He wanted to keep Shane Hollander as close to him as possible for as long as possible.

“They do not think you are incompetent,” he stated softly, his grasp on Shane’s nape tightening slightly.

"No, just '*sensitive*' or '*anti-social*' or--"

"They want Jake to be around you so you are not alone and have someone to lean on. Is not such bad thing, believe me."

Ilya had achieved most of the things in his life alone after his mother had passed, his father's expectations little guidance, often overtaken by criticism.

He had busted his ass off to make captain of his team on his own, without anyone's help. To keep his grades up and earn an American scholarship after winning the junior Champions League.

"I know..." Shane mumbled against his shoulder.

"They know you can handle yourself, Shane. They sent you off to expensive hockey camps alone. They know you became captain of your team all on your own, without your brother on the ice with you. And they accidentally left you home alone when you were 7 to go to David's papa's birthday 3 hours away and you were fine when they came back," he shrugged.

Shane groaned deeply, muttering, "God, did they have to tell you about my *whole* childhood?" and Ilya was helpless to laugh fondly at him.

He turned his head to press a kiss into Shane's hair, followed by another, before digging his nose in again to inhale his sweet fucking scent in the middle of this stinking alley.

"So here is what is going to happen," he finally said, pulling back from Shane, who chased after him, having to put his face in his hands to keep him in place and make him look at him.

God, Ilya was so helpless against that face, it scared him shitless.

Taking in a deep breath to steady himself, he lifted his hands from Shane's cheeks for a moment before putting them back on, slapping him slightly to shake him out of his wallowing.

"We are going to go back in there. You will tell your parents that you are very stressed about big decisions and did not mean to snap at them. Look at them with your sweet puppy eyes and they'll forgive you--"

"*Fuck you*, I do not have puppy eye--"

"Then, when we leave restaurant, you tell your parents you want to go home with me and Jake to talk things out. You will be honest with your brother and tell him what is bothering you. Then you will listen to him say '*No, Shane, all I want to do is keep you close because you are my little brother and I have dreamt of us being attached by hip all my life and we will be first Asian brothers who will play for the NHL, and million little kids will look up to us and have us sign their jerseys*,' he said in his best Jake impression.

His heart soared when Shane laughed, bright and sweetly.

“Wow, that’s actually really close to him,” he laughed. Ilya caught a tear that had slipped from his eye with his thumb, smiling at him.

“I know. Kills at parties,” he winked, making Shane snort.

“And then, when Jake leaves because he has sexy birthday plans with his girlfriend, which he will want to cancel, you will say, ‘*No, no. I am fine with big brother Ilya. We can have talk about our feelings and then fuck each others brains out-*’”

“Oh my god, shut up, I do *not* sound like that.”

“We will talk,” Ilya said then decisively, his expression becoming somber. He meant it. He hadn’t forgotten how Shane had said how he had “made him feel like fucking shit,” and it was not something he could live with, even if he didn’t have any clue on how this thing between them could possibly work. He just knew he wanted to salvage what he had and make Shane never, ever again run into the arms of someone else because Ilya had driven him to.

Shane's smile faltered as well, and he appeared unsure, but something in Ilya's determination must reassure him, as he simply nods once.

Ilya returned the nod and then, because he truly had no self-control whenever he had Shane fucking Hollander in his reach, he pulled him in to do what he had been wanting to for the entire evening - for the entire past 6 months, in fact - which was kiss him senseless.

“Let’s go, my brave boy,” he finally whispered against his lips after they had pulled apart, both of them panting and aching for more. He pressed one more kiss to Shane’s lips, promising him “Later” in Russian under his breath when Shane chased him with his mouth before finally pulling back for good.

They walked into the restaurant hand in hand, and Ilya's heart did a funny little thing when Shane didn’t let go of him as they turned the corner to see the three Hollanders back at their table.

He knew for sure then how he was truly, utterly fucked.

“And you’re *sure-*”

Ilya cut Jake off with an exaggerated groan as he walked up next to Shane, casually throwing an arm over the younger's shoulder.

He had to suppress his smile when Shane instantly tensed up, resisting the urge to pull him to his side and press a kiss to his cheek.

“He will be fine. I am here, no? Gives us chance to *catch up*,” Ilya drawled, feeling Shane stiffen even more under his arm before glaring at Ilya through the corner of his eyes.

Ilya was going to pay for this. He couldn’t wait.

Jake looked between them, still seeming unsure. Ilya lightly shook Shane, barely enough to be detectable for Jake but enough for Shane to feel Ilya urging him on.

“I promise it’s fine. I didn’t mean to interfere with your plans. Tell Lisa I’m sorry for getting in the way,” Shane reassured.

Jake’s shoulders relaxed slightly but he was still fiddling with the keys in his hands, his foot thrumming against the hardwood floor.

“Only if you’re totally *sure* you two wanna-“

“Oh my god, Hollander, just go fuck your hot girlfriend,” he groaned impatiently, earning scandalized looks from both brothers.

“You’re a dick,” Jake said, though with a bemused smile. He sighed, stepping up to Shane to pull him in for yet another lingering hug, like Ilya had seen him do after they were done with their “talk.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll leave you kids to it now. Don’t let him stay up past his bedtime and look out that he doesn’t cheat in Mario Kart,” Jake said, smiling as he put his shoes on.

“What am I, his babysitter?” Ilya asked, affronted.

“I was actually talking to Shane,” Jake winked, earning a laugh from his brother as Ilya gave him the middle finger.

Shane escaped his grasp as soon as the door shut behind him, stalking into the kitchen and leaving Ilya to trail after him with a weary sigh.

He supposed now it was time for their own ‘feelings’ talk. He wondered if he’d also get a hug at the end or if this fiddle thing between them would end for good.

Shane was clearly trying to keep busy in the kitchen to distract himself from freaking out, getting himself a glass of water agonizingly slowly. Ilya simply leaned on the fridge, crossing his arms in front of his chest and watching him.

Finally, when there was nothing more to do for Shane but lean against the corner and hold his glass to his chest like it might shield him, Ilya sighed wearily, thinking of how to start this conversation.

“You are still upset with me?” he asked as an opening line. He didn’t really think so, not from the way Shane had willingly jumped into his arms earlier and how he had agreed to come here, but it was probably a good start.

Predictably, Shane only shook his head and Ilya mourned the distance between them. It was always easier to determine what Shane was thinking when Ilya could look into his eyes while holding him close, feeling his trepidations underneath his hands.

Ilya wondered how to follow up, how to address this clearly unspoken thing that was bothering Shane, but the younger beat him to it.

“I *was*,” he said quietly, stealing a quick glance at Ilya before looking away.

It hit Ilya in the chest, even if he had known it all along. He pulled his arms closer together, standing uncomfortably in the knowledge of what he had done.

“Not at first, though. I just...I don’t know. I know that we’re not anything. And I’m not supposed to have any expectations of you but I just couldn’t figure out...” Shane mumbled, mirroring Ilya's posture of crossing his arms in front of his chest after setting his glass down. He blinked at the ground, struggling with finding the words and it ached Ilya to see him shrink into himself.

“...what I did wrong,” he finally whispered.

“*Nothing*,” Ilya instantly said with steely determination, having to dig his fingers into his biceps to stop them from trembling.

Shane looked up at him from under his bangs, looking entirely unconvinced.

Something like panic clawed its way up Ilya’s throat and he took a step forward, hands already reaching for him.

“No, Малыш. Listen to me. You did nothing wrong. I-“ he stopped himself, still a foot away from Shane.

Fuck, English was always harder when he had to think fast, putting something complicated he was feeling into the correct words with the proper fucking sentence structure. He shut his eyes, rubbing the bridge of his nose before taking a deep breath in and out to ground himself.

At last, he opened his eyes again to find Shane already watching him, bottom lip caught between his teeth. He looked almost *guilty* and Ilya hated himself for running from him for months. He should’ve anticipated this; he knew how easy Shane was to spiral in his thoughts.

He stepped closer to him, their toes almost touching. He resisted the urge to reach out for him him, instead focusing on catching Shane’s gaze.

“Was not good of me, to go after you. Broke not just Jake’s trust but also your parents. Started something I could not finish, and now here we are. You get that?” he said slowly, frustrated how little that expressed the extent of his conflict.

Shane only frowned at him, like he did whenever he didn’t understand someone else’s state of mind.

“I wanted you too,” he said, almost indignant on Ilya’s behalf.

Ilya felt himself soften at the defense. His sweetheart. Always thinking better of Ilya than he deserved.

“I know,” he sighed, the pet name stuck behind his teeth. Shane’s eyes scanned his face, that adorable confused frown still on his face.

“So...because of Jake and my parents? Not because *I*-”

“No, no,” Ilya quickly interrupted him, finally giving in to the urge to touch him and placing Shane's face in his hands.

“Мой идеальный мальчик. The only thing you ever did was be too perfect,” he reassured as he pressed a kiss to each cheek.

“Shut up,” Shane mumbled, though when Ilya moved his hands from his face to his shoulders, he could feel him relax underneath his touch.

He leaned forward to steal a kiss from him, his heart jumping at the ease with which their lips met. That soft familiarity.

“No, I’m serious. Is very annoying thing about you. Always so perfect. Such a pretty boy. Very kind and shy and smart, how could I not try to fuck him?” Ilya said while continuing to press kisses all over Shane’s face, ending it with a nip to that sensitive place behind Shane’s ear. Ilya’s favorite spot to kiss him.

“You’re an idiot,” Shane said, sounding as exasperated by him as fond.

He sighed deeply before wrapping his arms around Ilya's neck, with Ilya pressing a few more kisses against his cheek before circling his arms around Shane's middle. They had never hugged so tightly or for so long as they did today. Ilya enjoyed it more than he should have, given that he would have to let go eventually.

“I didn’t think it was about me, at first. You ignoring me. I thought your family was giving you a hard time and with Russia...I understood why you did not want to talk to me even if I was worried about you. But then the semester started again and...” Shane sighed before leaning back from Ilya, hands coming from his neck to rest against his chest.

“Remember when you said once Jake talks about me constantly?” he asked, looking up at him through his lashes.

“Yes, never stops. He is very obsessed with his boring hockey-genius brother, even though he has such a weak backhand,” Ilya said with a roll of his eyes.

“Fuck you!”

“I understand him though.”

It had slipped out before he had thought it through, quiet and soft like a confession while he looked at Shane like he could never look away.

They stared at each other for a long time before Shane's face changed, looking down at the ground while taking a deep breath in and turning to the side. Ilya followed his gaze, which was on their fridge, which was covered in photos of him and Jake, courtesy of his girlfriend, who always had a camera with her. Most of them were at parties or team gatherings, usually with one of them with an arm around the other, both grinning into the lens.

“He talks about you just as much. To me.” Shane said, his eyes snapping back at Ilya meaningfully.

“When the semester started, first thing I heard was about the parties you two went to, where you-“

“*Ah.*”

There wasn't much to say to defend himself. Ilya had always been a flirt, had always been trying to fill this emptiness inside him with drugs and parties and, most often, sex. As soon as he had come back from summer with the determination to forget all about his beautiful freckled boy across the border, who Ilya could never deserve - not with how rotten he was, which his family was always happy to remind him of - he had been on a quest to fuck Shane Hollander out of his system. It had been with little luck, as he had never stopped thinking about the other for even a single day. He hadn't even been with anyone ever since Jake had dropped that whole boyfriend bomb on him and not for a lack of trying. But the thought of Shane doing what Ilya was doing with someone else had made him feel too sick, too heavy to even get it up for anyone else.

“That's when I realized-...or thought that you just didn't want to have anything to do with me anymore. I'm *boring*, after all...” Shane continued, mumbling into the small space between their bodies like a secret that broke Ilya's heart.

He couldn't take watching the doubt and self-loathing on Shane's face any longer so he wordlessly picked him up, placing him on the counter behind them. Shane's leg opened for him instantly as Ilya stepped between them, his hands settling on Shane's cheeks again, thumbs running over his beautiful freckles.

“No. Is not true. Listen-...hey, *listen* to me very carefully, okay? I like your family very much, Shane. I did not think I could fit, that your parents would ever want to have me back. Is probably because...my own family does not like me. Was hard to accept...anyone else's could. But you did. Your brother is much more to me than my own asshole brother ever was. I wanted to hate him and his stupid perfect family at first, but is very hard to do when all of you are so lovely.”

He let out a sigh and leaned forward until his forehead touched Shane's, causing the latter to inhale sharply and flutter his lashes as Ilya observed him beneath his.

“I was careless when I started thing with you. Should not have done so, but couldn't help myself. Because I like you a lot,” he said before pressing a soft, delicate kiss to Shane's lips.

“You are my favorite Hollander. Is big secret,” he whispered against Shane's mouth.

Shane rushed forward to kiss him again like he might cease to breathe if he couldn't kiss him but Ilya could only indulge him for a moment before pulling back, pressing his thumb to Shane's lip to push him back, knowing from experience that if they continued this, the words between them that needed to be said would never be spoken.

“I think...your family will be very hurt and upset, if thing between us comes out. Jake especially. He keeps saying how glad he was you have new *brother* and that makes me feel... very bad about myself. So I ignore you to put distance between us. But I never, ever wanted you to think you did something wrong. I’m very sorry, *малыш*. Do you understand?”

God, it felt like a stone had been lifted from his chest with the confession, even if the openness made him feel fucking *raw*, exposed, and vulnerable in a way he never let himself be.

The things he’d do for this boy in his arms.

Shane was quiet for a moment before he nodded slowly, Ilya’s thumb squishing his lips with the action, which endeared him before he removed it, giving Shane a moment to collect his thoughts.

“Yeah...I think I do. I also don’t want to hurt or disappoint my family. Even though I probably did, today...” he said, looking down again while pressing his mouth into a thin line.

“They are not mad at you. They said they will support no matter what decision you make, no?”

Shane simply nodded, though he still looked a million miles away. Ilya rubbed his hands up and down his thighs, giving him a moment before Shane’s gaze finally fell back onto him.

“What will happen if I do go to Boston?”

Always so direct.

Ilya took a moment to think because, frankly? He had no fucking clue either.

“I meant it earlier. When I said I would transfer, if you feel uncomfor-”

“I don’t want you to transfer, Ilya.”

He was now the one to inhale sharply. Shane so rarely called him by his first name, especially not to his face. Ilya felt fucking *bound* to him.

“I would not know how to leave you alone if you came here,” he finally admitted, feeling desperate with the weight of his desire and lack of self-control.

“No?” Shane breathed, leaning forward so their lips were only mere inches apart.

“No. Could not watch you walk around campus and see everybody falling in love with you. *Not* because you are Jake Hollander’s little brother but because you are gorgeous...” he said, slowly turning so his lips were hovering over Shane’s ear.

“...and smart...” he breathed before finally connecting his lips with his neck.

“...and kind...”

A kiss to the other side of his neck.

“...and *mine*.”

Finally, he used his grip on Shane's thighs to pull him forward, bringing their bodies together.

Shane was close to undone by the time Ilya carried him to his bedroom, though Ilya was only hanging by a thread himself. He gently laid Shane down on his bed, raising himself to look at him while keeping his knees on the bed. He'd imagined Shane spread out in his own bed countless times, but the reality was even more stunning, with his kiss-bitten lips and black hair fanned out around him.

“Take your clothes off,” he quickly demanded, leaning down to kiss Shane again before helping him with his shirt.

When Shane began undoing his jeans, he leaned back again, his smile spreading, eyes glued to the handsome boy in his bed, and mourning the few milliseconds he lost when his vision was obscured as he pulled the shirt over his head.

“Is good you do not have boyfriend after all, Hollander. He would not like what I’m about to do to you,” Ilya said as he undid his belt buckle while watching Shane finally get out of his pants with a shit-eating grin. He slid out of his own pants and boxers in one go, entirely too eager for him after these months apart.

Yet when his knees touched the bed again and he wanted to lean forward to kiss Shane’s stomach - and maybe let his tongue trace over the lines of his well-defined torso just to taste him again - he was stopped with a foot to his chest. He looked down with furrowed brows before looking back up at Shane, who was propped up on his elbows, looking entirely too bemused.

“That boyfriend thing really pissed you off, huh?” he asked, cocking his head to the side. The little shit.

Ilya rolled his eyes, muttering “Whatever” under his breath as he ran his hands under Shane's calf and wrapped around his ankle, lowering his head to kiss the spot.

When he looked back up, Shane's smile faded as his breathing quickened, and Ilya was ecstatic to see how much his pupils had dilated. He pushed forward to finally press a kiss to Shane’s lower abdomen, the miles of skin stretched out in front of him driving him crazy with the need to kiss and touch and *mark*.

But Shane wasn’t having it, using his foot on Ilya’s chest to press him back again, Ilya complying with a deep groan.

“What was that?” he asked innocently, though the breathiness of his voice betrayed him.

Ilya could only roll his eyes while huffing, feeling heat rush to his face. This was new to them. Usually, Ilya was in charge and Shane was ever so eager to obey him, yet with

everything that happened between them and what was said tonight, Ilya felt more open than ever, with each and every one of his feelings and wants for his beautiful boy, whom he secretly called sweetheart in his heart and couldn't fall asleep without imagining holding him in his arms on display for him to see.

Something of his vulnerability must be visible in his gaze as Shane's gaze softened slightly.

"We were only seeing each other for a bit, but it's nothing official. He's not...what I want," he said softly, finally lifting his foot from Ilya's chest as he spread his legs to make room for Ilya, who instantly took the invitation to kiss his way up Shane's chest.

"And what do you want?" he eventually breathed against his lips, eyes staring into Shane's.

"You. Only you." Shane breathed immediately.

His perfect boy. Ilya rewarded him by capturing his lips with his own.

Shane had set an alarm for an hour before Jake returned to their house, which was an hour before they were all set to eat breakfast together before going to watch the Boston game, which meant it was about three hours before any normal human being would even wake up.

Ilya couldn't complain, however, not when Shane seemed just as eager as him to linger in bed for the time being, exchanging soft kisses. It had been the first morning in months where Ilya had woken up feeling genuinely well rested.

His happiness lasted even after Jake and Ilya had sent off the Hollanders, when Ilya managed to sneak a kiss on Shane's cheek before continuing to hide his smile behind his hand as he watched the other go into security as red as a tomato. They hadn't exactly made a *plan* out how this thing between them would work, but at least they were finally fully aware of each other's feelings, and somehow, the realization that Shane seemed just as in love with him as Ilya had tried to convince himself he wasn't with Shane felt even more healing than those summers at the Hollander's, even if they were a close second.

Ilya had been riding high from the Hollander's visit and his reconciliation with Shane throughout that difficult stretch of exams and those final, crucial games where every point counted.

Even Jake, in his endless contentment, seemed annoyed by Ilya's giddiness, which meant he must truly be walking around campus like a fucking lunatic, clutching his phone with a face-splitting grin as he kept up the ever-flowing conversation he and Shane had started since the Hollander's visit and yet to let die off.

The fact that he'd be seeing Shane soon was an even bigger motivator for Ilya, who worked his tail off to ensure that he'd return to the Hollander home not only as a winner alongside his teammates, but also as a captain and junior who managed to get his team to win while keeping his grades up.

A small, hidden part of his brain told him that maybe then, if he arrived at the Hollander's doorsteps with more to his name than just the label of their eldest son's best friend, maybe, just maybe, the idea of him being deserving of their youngest wouldn't be so ridiculous.

From their texts, it appeared that Shane was just as eager to move this thing between them forward, talking endlessly about things he wanted to show or do with Ilya without making any excuses for why the two wanted to do things together without Jake like in previous summers, which Ilya interpreted as Shane's adorable way of soft-launching a relationship between him and Ilya to his family.

God, if Ilya didn't make a complete fool of himself by the end of the summer, he might be in a relationship with Shane Hollander, who was about to attend the same college as them, which meant he'd be around all the time.

Ilya could not fucking wait to see him.

And then his father died.

Two weeks before he was set to fly to Canada to watch Shane graduate high school. The universe did always seem to have a way of knowing when it came to keeping Ilya in check.

Everything leading up to the funeral was a fucking whirlwind and Ilya found himself swallowed up in the constant despair and demands of his family. The Hollanders kept up contact with him throughout all of it, like a beacon of hope amidst this shit show that was supposed to be his home. He even managed to get a somewhat sexy phone call with Shane, the sight of him in his glorious reading glasses the only thing that had managed to bring a genuine smile to his face all week.

He avoided his brother as best as he could, taking the reins of organizing the funeral with the money he had long set aside for it, out of his greedy brother's grasp. Their family's wealth had deteriorated along with their father over the years, mostly due to Alexei's negligence in caring for him, but before everything had gone downhill, their father had at least had the foresight to set certain things aside. Their inheritance was still substantial but of course for his piece-of-shit brother, it wasn't enough. Ilya had expected Alexei to extort his half from him but even he hadn't expected him to be so brash as to do it on the day of their father's funeral procession.

It's how he ends up in a tunnel, with a busted lip and tears in his eyes while professing his unending love to Shane Hollander in his mother language.

He tells him how he wants to leave Russia and never come back and he means it, but that doesn't mean Russia can let him go so easily. There are appointments upon appointments, dealing with either his father's estate or Ilya's decision to leave for good, navigating it all under his brother's watchful eye, who is just waiting for the next moment to strike again.

When Jake calls him a few days after the funeral, Ilya immediately knows something is off before his best friend even has the chance to say what it is.

“I...fuck, man, I don't want to do this because you definitely have enough shit to deal with... it's just...fuck...it was their last game and he just went down and-...”

Shane is hurt.

The words echo around in Ilya's head, drowning out everything else, just as 'Our father is dead' had done before.

“...And he keeps asking for you...”

Within 48 hours he manages to pack up his entire life in Russia, makes the necessary arrangements to never have to come back and charts a flight to Canada.

He abandons the concept of family he's carried with him for all his life, the thing that kept bringing him back. Frees himself of those imposed obligations and finally, finally hits his brother back, telling him the things he's always meant to tell him.

It's everything coming into one. His father's death, his brother's greed for everything Ilya has and is, and the Hollanders' constant care for him in his toughest times. And most importantly, his unbridled love for Shane. It makes him finally accept it for good. His feelings. The desire of being where he truly belongs.

So he doesn't look back. Only feels relief when he finally lands in Canada with an entire life bundled up into a suitcase, which he hauls into the nearest taxi himself before telling the driver to take him to the hospital.

During the ride, the lack of sleep catches up with him, and he slowly starts to spiral against the steely determination that brought him here. He wonders how the Hollanders will react, if they will see it as an overreaction on his part and figure it out. Him and Shane. If Shane would forgive him if they did.

When he walks into the hospital, their shocked expressions almost choke him up with fear, but when they see his bruised face and tears in his eyes, their expressions change to such bone-deep sympathy, he briefly feels like a little kid again, wanting to be hugged by his mama. Ilya spends several minutes trying not to cry in their embraces.

Jake breaks before he does, pulling him tighter than after any win and Ilya realizes that for as much as he needs them, perhaps they might need him too.

And what a fucking relief that is.

The guilt sneaks up briefly when they finally let him enter Shane's room, but instead of swallowing it down or running from it like before, he settles on something.

He knows he loves Shane. And he knows he loves the Hollanders and that they love him in return. So he'll work hard to become good enough for all of them, and then they'll reveal this secret to them so they never have to hide from them again.

That is, if Shane doesn't beat him to it. He's high as a kite and adorable and unashamedly delighted to see Ilya, whose heart clenches unbearably at seeing him all bruised up and soft in his hospital bed. He lets Shane coax him to his bedside and whine until Ilya takes his hand, even if his family is standing just off to the side and watching the whole thing.

"You came," he breathes dreamily, squeezing Ilya's hand while gazing up at him.

Ilya smiles as best as he can, letting his thumb run over Shane's knuckles.

"I heard you called for me," he replies easily. Shane just hums happily, pulling their conjoined hands to lay over his stomach before promptly falling back asleep, giving Ilya no chance of escape. Not that he would want to.

Jake and David promise to get coffee and from the way they say it while looking at him, it makes him think that he must really look like he went to hell and back. He certainly feels like it.

Then it's just him and Yuna on either side of Shane's bed, both of them silently watching a part of their heart gently sleep on the bed as he's hooked up to several scary machines.

The silence doesn't last for long. His focus has been on Shane, but he could feel her gaze on him, on his busted lip and the bags under his eyes, for a long time. He doesn't lie when she asks him about it, telling her about the funeral and everything after.

She reaches her hand out until it's over where Ilya is still firmly holding onto Shane, and he finally manages to pull his gaze away from him to look into her eyes.

"You'll always have a home with us, I hope you know that," she says sweetly. Shane stirs in his sleep, sighing contently as he grips Ilya's hand tighter as if to confirm the statement, and it's enough to finally make him break.

By the time David and Jake come back, Yuna is standing beside him, gently carding her hand through his curls while he snuffles into her embrace. They don't say anything about it. David simply presses a coffee into his hand before placing a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it once and allowing it to sit there as a reassuring weight, while Jake takes the seat on the opposite side of the bed where Yuna had previously sat.

Ilya thinks that maybe he doesn't prove anything after all. They've already accepted him.

Single dorm beds are the bane of Ilya's existence, simply because they're too hard to make out in. Sleeping in them as two big hockey players isn't ideal either, but that part Ilya doesn't hate, happy to be pressed as close to his boyfriend as possible, even if most nights, one of his legs is dangling off the bed.

"We have to be quiet-" Shane starts but cuts himself off with a gasp that goes straight to Ilya's dick.

He sinks his teeth into the spot behind Shane's ear he's just kissed, just to elicit another one of those beautiful sounds when Shane's phone on the nightstand starts ringing.

"Ignore it," he immediately commands. Shane sighs and Ilya can practically feel him rolling his eyes but he just places a hot, open-mouthed kiss against Shane's neck, which makes him arch underneath him, their erections pressing against each other. He grins against his skin like the Cheshire cat, turning his head to give attention to the other side of his neck.

"Good boy," he praises when the ringtone shuts off, presumably from Shane putting his phone on silent.

Shane chuckles a "Shut up," that has no heat behind it, his hand tugging at Ilya's curls to bring him back to his lips.

Just as he slips a hand under Shane's shirt, his own phone starts going off, the soundtrack to *The Brady Bunch* playing, a ringtone Ilya had only ever set for two people.

With a smirk, he pushes himself away from Shane before taking his phone and accepting the call after checking the screen, delighting in Shane's adorable outrage as he processes what has happened.

"Yuna! Do you miss your favorite son?" he asks.

Yuna chuckles through the phone and Shane huffs, wiggling underneath Ilya to adjust their position. He pouts at the disruption and Ilya just has to lean down to kiss him, which Shane instantly smiles at for a moment before his eyes widen as he realizes who is on the phone, lifting his leg to knee Ilya in the side.

"I was wondering if you know where either of my sons are, neither of them are answering and I'm trying to figure out when to book all your return tickets."

"Have they not texted you back in group chat when their last exams are? Hm, very inconsiderate," Ilya drawls, making Shane roll his eyes.

Yuna just laughs.

"I swear you are the only son who listens to me sometimes," she says fondly.

Ilya's smile brightens at that, and he immediately raises an eyebrow at Shane. He expects him to look put out but instead, his expression just softens terribly, a tender smile directed at Ilya that makes him feel just how loved he is. He leans down again, pressing another kiss to Shane's lips as he just hums.

"Jake is with our teammate, helping him move his girlfriend's couch somewhere. Luckily, I got out of that one," he says while wiggling his eyebrows stupidly at Shane, who barely manages to conceal his laughter by putting a hand over his mouth.

"And Shane is--"

Shane lifts his hand to mouth "Library," which Ilya repeats to Yuna.

She's silent for a moment before sighing heavily, making both of them frown.

"Is something wrong?" he asks.

"Nothing, nothing. I just...worry, you know. Of course it's great that he's taking his studies so seriously but I'm just scared he's not getting out there enough. He barely dated anyone in highschool, except Jessica and then that one guy he still denies was his boyfri-"

"That wasn't his boyfriend."

Shane rolls his eyes at Ilya's unamused interruption, kneeing him in the side again, which Ilya fake winces at.

"Just...I wish he'd try to enjoy campus life a bit more," Yuna sighs.

"I go to library and drag him out there if you want," Ilya offers, smirking down at Shane.

"Oh...honey, I don't know if that would be the best idea."

That careful pause and something in Yuna's tone makes Ilya frown, Shane quickly mirroring the expression as he watches Ilya's face change.

"No?" he asks, confused.

"It's just-...You know I adore you, right, sweetie?"

"Yes, I am favorite son. Finally you admit it."

It makes Yuna laugh, which brings a smile to Ilya's face, especially when it makes Shane scowl so cutely.

"I'm just not too sure that you in particular dragging Shane out there to get to know people would be the most...productive. Just because...ugh, alright, promise me this will stay between us?"

This felt new. Yuna was rarely ever hesitant with her words, usually as direct as Shane, that no-bullshit quality Ilya had always appreciated about the mother-and-son duo.

"Yes, of course," he assures, exchanging apprehensive glances with Shane, who begins to stare at the phone as if he is waiting for something.

"Well, to be frank - and do not tell him I said that, he'd be absolutely mortified - but I think Shane might just have a little crush on you," Yuna sighs heavily.

The words take a moment to sink in, standing there in Shane's tiny single dorm room.

Ilya looks down at his now-official boyfriend, the boy he's chased since he first saw him, who he is currently on top of with flushed cheeks and tousled hair from where Ilya was starting to have his way with him.

He looks absolutely mortified at his mother's words and it takes absolutely everything in Ilya not to burst out in laughter.

"Really? Wh-...What makes you think that?" he asks, barely holding on.

"Well, I first noticed it after he came out to us right after your first summer. I thought it was just a little crush that would go away with time but well...You remember how clingy he was with you during the hospital? ...And after. Don't get me wrong, David and I were so touched to see how well you took care of him, but Shane's still so young and impressionable and I think he might have imprinted on you just a little, you know, like those baby ducklings we saw by the pond once. Gosh, I'm just worried he might be a little too hung up on you to meet anyone new and-"

Ilya had tried, he really had, but the face Shane had made when Yuna compared him to 'a little baby duckling' was just too much. A loud snort had escaped him, interrupting Yuna in her words.

Shane all but grabbed the phone out of his hands to press the mute button before cursing at Ilya, who completely lost all composure. He laughed even harder when Shane kicked him out of the bed at last, not minding the thud with which he fell against the floor as he held his stomach. His angry little duckling.

"Ilya? Honey, are you still there? Hello?"

The rest of the phone call was a masterclass of acting on Ilya's part, if he was being frank. He reassured Yuna he'd keep "a friendly distance" without "making Shane feel rejected" before making up some excuse to hang up.

He got up from the floor as soon as he hung up, laughing at how his boyfriend was lying on his bed with his face buried in the pillow and a low groan.

Ilya attempted to coax him to turn around, but when that failed, he simply climbed back onto the bed, lying flat on his boyfriend and squishing him into the mattress. From experience, he knew Shane wouldn't mind, finding Ilya's weight on top of him reassuring, among other things.

"Sweetheart," he eventually sighs when Shane still doesn't talk to him, starting to get worried.

It works, like it always does, Shane finally turning back around. They twist until they lay on their sides, facing each other. Shane's legs tangled into his, which seemed like an apology as well as reassurance that he wouldn't get kicked out of the bed again tonight.

"We tell them?" Ilya simply asks. Shane sucks in a harsh breath, tensing, and that just wouldn't do. Ilya quickly took his hand and brought it up to his lips, kissing it while whispering "It's okay, whatever you want to do."

Shane and he had made it official last summer after his injury, during a night spent alone when the Hollanders had tickets to a show and Shane hadn't felt like going with his headache,

even though his concussion had long been cleared, and Ilya had, of course promptly offered to stay and watch him. They had made a fire and kissed incessantly in front of it, discussing their plans for the upcoming semester when it had just spilled out of Ilya, those three words he could have never imagined saying to someone in that capacity and meaning it.

Ilya had been ready to tell Shane's family about them right then and there but his sweetheart, in his endless logical overthinking, had made the argument that they should see if they would even work as a couple first.

It was only fair to Jake, he had argued. Since it would be "awkward" for everyone involved if they didn't work out, a thought that made Ilya feel sick in the stomach to even entertain. But he knew Shane was only trying to be practical while trying to navigate his family's expectations of him. Additionally, Shane had naturally joined their hockey team and wanted to make a name for himself, already burned by the fact that his brother was on the team. Sleeping with the captain on top of that could only ruffle some feathers, so really, Ilya *understood* why they had kept it a secret. Sneaking around was hot, after all, especially since they now had a whole campus to do so.

But it had been months now and at least where Ilya was concerned, this thing between him and Shane was set in stone. He couldn't imagine a future where Shane wouldn't be in it, by his side.

"I love you," Shane breathes, his eyes shut as Ilya continues to press kisses to his knuckles.

He smiles against Shane's skin, the words out of his mouth never failing to make him feel breathless for just a second. He let himself bask in the feeling before he reached out to brush a strand of hair away that had fallen over Shane's eye.

"But?" he asks, letting his hand rest against Shane's cheeks.

The younger blinks his eyes open, frowning at Ilya.

"No *but*," he replies, blinking in confusion.

God, months of dating him, three years of knowing him, and Shane still managed to surprise him.

"*I love you too. So much,*" he tells him in Russian before surging forward to capture his lips with his own. Shane leans in close to him, their lips moving in a soft motion that Ilya has learned to appreciate just as much as their rushed and hard kisses.

"I also don't want to keep hiding...especially if Mom worries if I'm lonely. I just..." he sighs, scrunching his face up in that way he does when he's thinking too hard, which always makes Ilya's heart ache.

"Hey, they will understand. They love you. They love me. So they will love us, no?" he asks.

Shane doesn't look convinced, still too into his head, so Ilya just pulls him close, letting him nuzzle his face into the crook of his neck while he strokes his hair. He'll wait if that's what

Shane wants. It hurts, but it's only a dull ache compared to the love he feels whenever he's around him.

He dozes off after a while, a habit he's gotten into whenever Shane is around. Jake has even started to notice. The three of them spend a lot of time together and have started a weekly tradition that Jake had hoped to have with his brother and best friend since his first semester, such as movie nights on Thursday, where Ilya will undoubtedly fall asleep with his head on Shane's lap or shoulder within the first hour.

“-his birthday. What do you think?”

He jostles awake when Shane starts to gently shake him with an unattractive snort that he would usually be embarrassed about if it were anyone else.

“What?” he asks dumbly, leaning back to look at Shane, who is gazing up at him with those wide, shining eyes Ilya loves so much. He laughs at Ilya's dumbfounded expression, his eyes turning into little moons and what is Ilya going to do? Not kiss him?

“I said we should tell them ahead of summer, like maybe when they're here for Jake's birthday in a couple of weeks?” he repeats after pressing a final kiss to Ilya's lips.

Ilya hums, shuffling down to be able to press his face into Shane's neck.

“Sure, that will go over well. *Hey, happy birthday, bro. Oh and by the way, I've been fucking your little brother for three years,*” he mocks.

“Fuck off, that's not how we would say it,” Shane grumbles.

Ilya digs his nose into his skin, taking a deep breath in before pulling back to look at him.

“No? How about, *Hey, remember how you can never stop talking about how you taught Shane how to back skate? Well, I taught him how to suck coc-*”

He doesn't know where Shane got a pillow from that quickly but from one second to the next, he was being suffocated by one. Luckily, Ilya wins the wrestling match that follows. That is, by turning it into something way more pleasant than wrestling.

They agreed to tell Jake before their parents.

It was just hard to find the perfect time. For three people who spent as much time together as they did, there just never seemed to be a perfect day to arrange for someone's predictable mental breakdown; there was always a next assignment, a next game, a next *something*.

Though frankly, Shane was stalling more than Ilya. He knew Jake would get over it... eventually. What scared Ilya were David and Yuna.

He joked about being their favorite child but the truth was he was utterly terrified of losing the privilege to even be seen by them as one of their children. Shane had had this whole timeline set up, his little overthinking duckling, where they had agreed to tell Jake enough

time before his birthday so that they could inform Shane's parents when they'd be in town for it, a few weeks before summer vacation would start. Shane had laid it all out so logically, saying it would be better to tell them before summer started in Ottawa and they'd "be stuck in the same house" and it would be "unbearably awkward." Ilya was too happy about Shane taking the initiative, being *serious* about them, to tell him he'd much prefer to do it when he'd already be in Ottawa, since he didn't think David and Yuna would have the heart to kick him out if he was already there. What if they were too mad and didn't invite him back in the first place?

Which is why it was imperative to get Jake on their side. If he was fine with it, their parents would have little problem with it. At least that's how he and Shane had to keep rationalizing it to keep from freaking out.

It would be fine. They love Ilya. Ilya's still younger than Jake so there's barely an age gap between them, it's not controversial. If anyone ever asked, there was only handholding and maybe a few stolen kisses going on underneath the Hollander's roof. It would be fine.

Only now Jake's birthday was only two weeks away and they still hadn't told him.

Jake

Meet me at Hershey's at 8.

Need a wingman.

Ah fuck. He stared at his best friend's message and wondered if he should come up with an excuse not to meet him at their favorite bar or just stick it out.

Look, Jake wasn't entirely oblivious, as much as Shane probably hoped he was. He had started *prodding* Ilya as early as the beginning of the semester, when his usual spree of welcome parties and random hookups had fallen short. Not to mention the glances over at his phone or the confusion when Ilya had, for the first time since their friendship, actually put a password on it. Ilya had denied ever inquiry about a possible *girlfriend* but with the various invitations and gatherings he had declined in order to sneak his boyfriend into their apartment for the night, he was aware that Jake was aware that *something* was going on.

He had started to dig around Shane's personal life as well, though according to Shane, that seemed to be nothing new and probably mostly motivated by Yuna.

He bit down on his tongue, contemplating what to do when a message from Shane popped up, telling him he got held up by something and would meet him later. He didn't think much of it. Shane was often distracted by his assignments, like a little nerd, so he just texted back a heart emoji and sighed to himself, heading towards Hershey's and pep-talking himself on the way there to just act normal.

However, when he entered the bar, he was surprised to spot Shane. His eyes had found him almost immediately, like his brain had a built-in scanner for him, sitting in their usual booth and looking as utterly gorgeous as always. He was frowning at someone across from him, and Ilya could tell from the back of his head that it was Jake.

For a moment, his heart stopped. Jake had called him and Shane here, separately, without using their group chat. *Oh god, did he know-*

No. There was no way. They had been careful. And he had sent some stupid message about needing a wingman.

So he forced his shoulder to relax and sauntered over to the table, an easy smile on his face.

Shane noticed him just as quickly as Ilya had. Ilya allowed his smile to soften for a moment and send a wink his way before finally approaching the booth, settling a hand on Jake's shoulder and startling him out of whatever rambling he had just been on.

“What is this? Surprise gathering? Intervention for Shane’s drinking habits?”

“I don’t have any drinking habits, Rozanov.”

“Exactly. Is so boring.”

He delighted in Shane’s faux glare, resisting the urge to lean over the table and kiss him.

He stole a fry from the plate in front of Jake, who protested loudly while swatting his hand away, before deciding he could still sit next to his boyfriend even if he couldn't be affectionate with him. Of course, expect the playing footsie, and if Shane was relaxed enough, holding hands under the table.

He stepped forward to take his seat next to Shane, who smiled and already scooted aside to give him space when he was stopped by Jake pulling him back by his jacket. He almost stumbled back with the force of it but caught himself in time, turning to look at his friend in confusion.

“Sit,” Jake quickly grumbled, tugging at Ilya’s jacket until he plopped down next to him unceremoniously.

“What am I, dog?” Ilya asked, affronted.

Jake just rolled his eyes, finally letting go of him before turning towards Shane again enthusiastically.

“Shut up. *Anyways*, as I was saying, he also came in first in class that semester *despite* the insane practice schedule and the crazy working out-”

“Who?” Ilya interrupted, already stealing another fry from Jake’s plate.

Jake opened his mouth to say something when suddenly, someone placed three drinks on their table.

“Whew, sorry that took so long. But it’s a Friday night, what can you do?”

Ilya looked up at the guy, knowing he had seen him around somewhere but failing to recognize him.

Before he could do the mental gymnastics to figure out where he knew him from, the guy slung his arm over the backrest of the booth and glided in next to Shane with practiced ease, giving him a cheeky smile before delicately placing a hand on a glass and sliding it over to him. His arm lingered on the backrest, not yet touching Shane but remaining behind him, bracketing him in between himself and the wall.

“Here, Jake said ginger ale, right?” he said softly.

That tone. The poised and coy smile. The way his gaze swept over Shane's face, briefly resting on his mouth before moving up again.

Ilya clocked it all immediately, but that possessive part of his brain that couldn't stand the idea of Shane with anyone tried to block out the obvious. Because *surely not*.

Shane gave the guy a smile, polite but nothing else, before wordlessly picking the glass up and taking a sip. The guy's eyes never left Shane during the process, and a pit of dread opened up in Ilya's stomach. *Surely* this wasn't what it looked like.

The guy's attention finally snapped to him and he gave him a wide smile. Up close, he could objectively say that the guy was really fucking hot.

Ilya instantly hated him.

“Oh, hey man, Rozanov, right? Man, your power on those wideshots is something else. I love watching you. From captain to captain,” he easily compliments, giving Ilya a dorky salute that just looks charming with his buff arms and carefree smile.

Captain to captain. Right. Lance Vaughn. The captain of the football team.

“You know Lance, right, Roz?” Jake piped up next to him and Ilya turned towards him, squinting his eyes. Assessing.

Jake was positively beaming at Lance like he was the fucking last piece left on the shelf as he looked between him and Shane.

You've got to be fucking kidding me, Ilya thought as the situation became clearer.

“He's also made captain as a junior, just like you did! Even more impressive considering he's younger than us, Shane's age over here. Oh, Shane, did I tell you Lance is majoring in architecture?”

“Just in case the football thing doesn't work out.”

“Well, with those muscles it will, buddy! Don't you think so, Shaney? Oy, Lance, tell him about this diet you're on right now. Shane is big on nutrition and-...”

No. No. No. No.

This-...this was not happening.

Ilya genuinely felt like he was having an out-of-body experience, watching his best fucking friend set his fucking boyfriend up with some annoyingly good-looking jock right in front of him.

So what if Lance Vaugh is the captain of the football team who has all the same boring interests as Shane?

Shane already has a good-looking, captain-of-his-team, worships-the-ground-he-walks-on boyfriend, *thank you very much*.

He must black out for a minute, just processing, when a tap against his foot brings him back to reality. Shane isn't looking at him, but he isn't looking at *Lance* either - who's practically eye-fucking him right now and god, Ilya isn't afraid of murder...- anyway. His sweetheart is looking at his brother, giving him a polite but disinterested smile as he hooks his ankle around Ilya's.

It grounds him, even if he has to physically hold himself back from reaching across the table to take Shane's hand in his. He shuts his eyes and inhales deeply, just as Shane has taught him to do when he experiences a small panic and Ilya isn't there to help him.

When he opens his eyes again, he feels calmer, though there is this clinging need inside of him to just grab Shane and get the hell out of here.

He opens his mouth to try to join in the conversation, saying something safe about the school's gym they were just talking about in order to get in and hopefully manage to steer the conversation away from just how compatible Shane would be with this dude. But before he can even start, Jake interrupts him by putting an arm around his shoulder, almost forcefully pulling him into his side.

"Well, this has been nice, but Rozanov actually came by to ask me to help him with something, some assignment for your economics class, right? Due on Monday. So we better get going. You don't mind keeping Shane company, do you, Lance?"

"Oh, I can just go back to my dor-"

"Don't mind whatsoever, bro. Shane and I are good here, aren't we?"

Ilya feels like his head has been ducked underwater. He's hearing their voices but it's all muffled, and he feels like he can't breathe. His chest certainly feels like he's being waterboarded.

Lance turns towards Shane with that smug grin that Ilya wants to wipe off his face and though Ilya was seeing red at the moment, Shane's reaction still manages to make something loosen in his chest.

Because Shane, his adorable, sweet, utterly clueless Shane, just looks entirely confused. As lost as with every social interaction that required more of him than the prewritten script in his head.

“Uh, sure. I guess,” he says, his voice rising at the end as if in question.

Ilya relief that Shane wasn't realizing what was happening was short-lived when Jake just exclaims, "Great! We'll leave you two to it then!" before all but dragging him out of the bar.

Really, he had tried to protest, but what was he supposed to do? Kick and scream and get attention on him? Jake's grip on his shoulder had been like a fucking vice and even though his gaze had never left Shane, twisting his neck around like a fucking owl as Jake shoved him out of the bar, his friend still managed to drag him out.

He dug his heels into the ground when they were finally outside, needing a moment to ground himself.

Jake just laughed, carefree and happy, as he set his hands on his hips.

“Well, that seemed to work out fine. Thanks, man,” he said happily, stepping up to Ilya to clap a hand onto his shoulder before turning around and walking ahead.

“I hear O'Mally is having some people from the team over for beer and video games. You joining?”

He didn't follow Jake, instead remained glued to his spot to look through the bar window, where he could just so make out Shane and Lance sitting in that booth, *chatting*.

Then he saw Shane give the guy a smile, one of his real ones, and his heart dropped to his stomach.

Someone else blocked his view inside the bar then and he swore under his breath, his body already turned around to walk back into it.

“Dude? You coming?” he heard Jake call after him, stopping him in his tracks.

“No,” he grunted, fucking furious at his friend. And then he was furious at himself, because Jake had no way of knowing, and that was all Ilya's fault. Then he was momentarily furious at Shane, because it was also sort of his fault, but that only lasted for a millisecond before he remembered that this was in fact his fault for pursuing Shane so hard in the first place, and of course Shane was apprehensive about telling his family about them when Ilya was such a fuck up an-

“Fuck, I'm going back in there,” he grunts out, already turning to march back in there.

“Woah, hey, you're not!” Jake stops him, fast fucking runner that he was, holding him back with a hand to his shoulder.

Ilya turns back around in frustration, pullin his shoulder out of his touch.

“Fuck!” he curses again when he looks back into the bar and still can’t see him.

Jake was looking at him, about to ask questions Ilya wasn’t supposed to answer and most importantly, *his boyfriend was inside on a date with another man*, and Ilya felt like he was losing his *fucking mind*.

He pulled out his phone, walking a few steps away from Jake and the bar so he wouldn’t see that he was messaging Shane before simply texting him the words “Get. Out.”

“Dude, what is going on?” Jake calls after him, taking two long strides to catch up with Ilya, who refuses to stand still, walking the same three feet up and forward just by the bar while fighting the urge to go in there and drag Shane out by his arms, which would undoubtedly reveal their secret.

“What is wrong? That was a fucking set up!” he calls out, running a frustrated hand through his hair as he unlocks his phone. His message still doesn’t show as *seen*. He was about to pull out strands of his hair.

“Well, duh! College may be more diverse than fucking Ottawa, but it’s not like there are gay guys like sand on the beach here; finding out the captain of the football team is gay is like the fucking jackpot! I’m only doing him a favor, he rarely ever-“

“Oh who the fuck cares that he’s captain? *I’m* Captain of the hockey team! Is way better!”

“I-.I mean yeah, dude. Obviously, hockey is better, man, but no one on our team is gay that Shane could date, so I though-“

“You thought, what, you could just set him up like some *Сутенёр*? What, Shane is pretty and smart so he give you shiny football trophy for him and wins Super bowl and they make stupid champion babies together? *Fuck* that!”

“Okay, seriously, *what* is your problem? This is a good thi-“

“No! Is not good thing! Is very, *very* bad thing. Shane does not even like guy like that!”

“Wha-, you mean the hot athlete? I think he’s good, buddy, I’ve *seen* his ex-boyfriend.”

“THAT WAS NOT HIS EX!”

“Why the FUCK are you yelling at me? What the fuck is going on, Rozanov, you’re acting fucking insane!”

“Maybe I act insane because you’ve just set my boyfriend up on a fucking date with some useless fucking quarterback that wants to get into his pants!”

“Your what?”

“MY-...*fuck*. ”

They're left to stare at each other. Jake, with those wide, uncomprehending eyes that just blink uncontrollably at Ilya and remind him so much of Shane in that moment. He's not really sure what his own face must be doing at the moment, but he supposes it looks as defeated as he feels.

He sighs, long and weary, and closes his eyes while thinking, "*I am sorry, sweetheart,*" hoping the words will reach Shane.

He opens his eyes again, spotting just the slightest trace of panic settling onto Jake's disbelieving face the longer Ilya remains silent. He lifts his arm to the side, the breeze getting underneath the hem of his t-shirt as it raises up with the motion, spreading goosebumps over his flesh, though he's not sure if he wasn't already trembling before.

"I love him," he finally confesses. Jake's face scrunches up in confusion as if he had said it in Russian, and maybe he did, so Ilya repeats himself.

"I am in love with Shane."

"Ilya."

Both their heads turn to look at Shane just behind Jake, his eyes wide and staring right at Ilya with his unlocked phone still in his hand, and Ilya feels close to breaking out in tears all of a sudden and, at the same time, so, *so* relieved.

"Моя любовь, I am sorry," he breathes out as he categorizes the terror in Shane's face and before he can think better of it, he's already walking up to him.

Jake is wordless as Ilya passes him and Ilya is too focused on Shane, who has gone as rigid as a statue while looking at his brother, to spare a glance at him.

His hands find Shane's face as soon as he's reached him, forcing him to look up at him, and Ilya hates himself for the way he's made Shane's eyes wet with tears.

"I am sorry. Прости меня, пожалуйста, любимая. Я не хотел. I couldn't keep it in any longer, I am sorry," he whispers against Shane's lips, his breath getting mingled with Shane's, which comes out in little puffs. He doesn't dare to kiss him, doesn't know if Shane wants him to, if he can ever forgive him, and it's fucking killing him.

Shane doesn't say anything, but his hand comes up to Ilya's wrist, warm and steady as he just holds onto it while looking and meets Ilya's gaze, his eyes filled with all the things Ilya knows he wants to say but can't.

He almost leans forward when he finds, amongst the fear and the panic and the sadness, Shane's devoted love for him in his eyes, but a voice stops him.

"Tell me this isn't what it looks like."

They both turn toward Jake, Ilya's hands never leaving Shane's face, who takes a sharp inhale at seeing his brother's expression.

“Jake-” Ilya begins, but he holds up a hand to stop him.

“Tell me you’re fucking with me. That this is some prank. Sh-Shane texted you when we sat down and you came up with-...with this whole thing to get back at me? For setting you up?”

They both just look at him, silently shaking their heads.

Jake’s eyes widen, and he takes them in, the lack of space between them, the way Shane’s hand is holding onto Ilya’s hand like an anchor, and the way Ilya straightens up, all while still holding onto Shane like he’s prepared to throw himself in front of a bullet for him.

Jake opens his mouth to say something and then closes it, his brows furrowing together as his eyes just continue to look them up and down. Processing it.

“I am sorry,” Shane manages to say.

It’s the thing that finally seems to get through to Jake. They can see it land, heavy like a punch, his whole face shifting into something disbelieving.

Ilya wants to say something, anything. He doesn’t want to apologise for being in love with Shane, but he does want to say-...fuck, what, that it wasn’t personal? That it had nothing to do with him? It had everything to do with him.

A bell rings behind them, the noise of music and chatter going on inside the bar filtering back in briefly before it fades again

“Hey, Shane, you forgot your coa-...um...”

Fucking Lance Vaughn.

He has the nerve to stand there, arm outstretched with Shane’s coat in his hand as he takes in the scenery in front of him with a confused frown. Ilya puffs out air through his nose, reaching out his arm as wide as he can to pull the coat from him.

“It’s not cold, he doesn’t need a fucking coat, Vaughn,” he spits at him. Then he turns back towards Shane, immediately putting the coat around his shoulders, patting down his arms, and straightening it in places, fussing with it to see if it’s properly in place enough to keep Shane warm.

“Oh shit, *you’re* the boyfriend?” Vaughn then asks, finger pointed at Ilya as he looks between him and Shane.

Ilya looks between the guy and Shane, who instantly blushes, his brain taking a second to catch up until a gigantic smile threatens to overtake his face.

Shane must have rejected the guy early on, informing him he was in fact taken, instead of just making up some excuse why he had to leave. He wants to turn back towards the guy and put on his most shit-eating grin but then Shane shuffles uncomfortably in his hold, and Ilya follows his worried gaze towards his brother, and the humor quickly leaves him.

Shane looks from Jake over to Lance and gives him a single, curt nod before anxiously looking back at Ilya through his lashes.

“Oh...*oh*,” Lance says, unhelpfully. Ilya glares at him in exasperation as Lance looks between him, Jake and Shane and connects the dots.

Seriously, can't the guy just fuck off? Ilya opens his mouth to tell him so when Jake suddenly speaks up again, voice low and devoid of anything that would let his emotion show.

“How long?” he only asks.

Shane and Ilya are both silent again, sitting uncomfortably in the knowledge of their betrayal. From the corner of his eyes, he can see Lance back away, and he cannot even be delighted about it.

He closes his eyes, breathing in deeply to steel himself, but before he can turn back towards his best friend, Shane suddenly steps forward. He takes Ilya's hand in his and Ilya is left to stand behind him, suddenly feeling like he's the one being protected.

“I am sorry, Jake. For not telling you. We wanted...to see if it works out, first. We never meant to hide from you. It was just temporary, until we were confident enough to-”

“How long?”

He was only holding onto Shane's hand but he could practically feel his entire body stiffen in front of him. He puts a hand on Shane's shoulder, digging his thumb into his skin to let him know he's here with him.

“The entire time,” he says earnestly.

Jake turns around and walks away at the same time as Shane sighs deeply, muttering an “Not helpful, Ilya,” under his breath.

They didn't go after him. Shane had wanted to, but Ilya thought it'd be best to let him cool off for Jake's benefit as much as Shane.

Jake's reaction had been a “very Hollander response,” something Ilya had said to lighten the mood but had only brought a partial smile out of Shane.

They were sitting side by side on the couch of Ilya's and Jake's shared apartment, Shane with his head practically in between his knees and Ilya holding onto his hand while rubbing a comforting another hand up and down his back.

“What if he tells our parents before he's back?” Shane whispers.

“Hm, not likely. Neither of our phones are blowing up,” Ilya reassures him. Shane only shudders under his touch, and Ilya leans forward to press a kiss to his cheek, telling him again that it's going to be okay.

Jake comes home a few minutes later. He barely takes two steps into the apartment before he spots Shane and Ilya sitting on the couch together, hand in hand, and his entire body just seems to lock up.

Shane is already out of his seat before the door even shuts behind Jake, dragging Ilya up with him by his hand.

No one said anything. It was incredibly awkward, but Ilya knew he had to tough it out.

Shane was the first to break, his brave boy.

“Look, Jake. I know this is a shock. We never meant to hurt you and we are both really, really sorry that we did. We will answer any questions you have and promise to-”

“Why?” Jake interrupts him.

“What?” Shane replies at the same time as Ilya frowns at the hollow expression on his friend’s face.

“Just...why. I don’t get it. You with him. Him with you. It just doesn’t make-...I mean, it could be literally everybody else, for either of you, I don’t-”

The words fucking sting, confirming something for Ilya that had been inside his head ever since he met Shane.

You’re not good enough for him.

So he looked to the ground in shame, taking in a deep breath while concentrating on the warmth of Shane’s hand in his.

“Because...I love him. I don’t-...I just. I love him,” Shane answers quickly, perplexed by the questions.

Ilya’s heart twisted in his chest, expanding with the love Shane always so willfully gives to him.

Like a plant that had been in the dark for too long, finally being put into the sun and watered.

That’s what it felt like to be loved by him.

He looks back up at Jake, who is looking at his brother like he is seeing him for the first time. His gaze then turns to Ilya, his eyes sharpening as he lets out a dry, humorless voice.

“I don’t know what to believe, frankly. You say it’s been the entire time, but I watched you with-”

“I know. But it’s only ever been Shane. Who matters. The only person I’ve ever...been in love with.”

He was sweet to Shane all the time, had gotten there after their shared confession and his walls breaking down after his father's death. It was still new to him, however, to express himself in that way around somebody else, even if it was his best friend. Well, maybe because it was his best friend and this was his little brother they're talking about.

Jake looked at Ilya for a long time as if trying to determine if he was kidding or not, but neither Shane's nor Ilya's expressions faltered.

"Jesus fucking Christ," he eventually breathes, exhaling loudly before he let his hands rest on his knees, as he crouches down.

"Fuck me," he mutters, shaking his head.

"Look, I know this is a lot," Shane begins, stopping himself when Jake lets out another dry, disbelieving laugh.

"I...look, Jake. I know this doesn't make sense to you right now, but I mean...it should," he continues.

His brother's head snaps to him like he's lost his mind, but Shane simply squares his shoulders, facing him dead on.

"I know he can be an asshole, and he teases me a lot. Well, you both do. But he's also... incredible. He's kind and gentle, and he's so, *so* patient with me. He doesn't get freaked out when I panic over something or make fun of me for it or get annoyed when I don't say or do the right thing. He never even makes me feel like I am doing something wrong or that it's my fault. And yes, he calls me boring for not liking partying and drinking, but he also doesn't force me to go and will just stay in with me. He buys me my stupid cans of ginger ale and brings them to my dorm and carries my books for me when he's supposed to be going to his own class because he knows I hate doing the reading digitally and just jokes that he's working out his arms even though I know he hates how heavy my history textbook is. And Mom and Dad love him, and I know *you* love him, and most importantly, I love him so much sometimes I can barely believe that I can even feel that much and just-...I know you've spent your entire life looking out for me because you hate when people treat me like shit for being different from them, but I am telling you that with Ilya, you don't have to worry about that. Or protect me. Because he's the first person who...has ever made me feel like it's okay just to be me."

Ilya is in shambles by the time Shane has finished his little monologue, and he can't do much else but sink down onto his couch and hug Shane as tightly as he can, burying his face into his stomach to hide the tears streaming down his face.

It takes a moment, but eventually, Jake joins him on the couch, and Ilya knows they'll all be okay.

Summer. A year later.

“Did you remember the marshmallows?” Yuna calls over her shoulder as she makes her way over to them by the fire.

All three boys laugh when David behind her wordlessly turns around to walk back into the house.

“How are the sticks looking, darling?” Yuna asks as she sits down, gifting Ilya a beautiful smile when he instantly reaches over to place a blanket over her lap.

He returns to his position next to Shane, where he has been hovering for the past half hour, keeping a close eye on the knife in his boyfriend's hand, which he uses to sharpen the pieces of wood he and Jake have collected from the woods around the Hollander's house. Not that he'd need to worry, Shane applied the same exceptional focus to carving as he did to anything else, which Ilya found as mesmerizing as impressive. Not to mention fucking *hot*.

Shane blows the last pieces of shavings off the wood before handing the stick over to his mother, who smiles at him.

“That’s not sharp enough. Here, you should take mine, Mom,” Jake instantly pipes up.

Ilya rolls his eyes and leans forward, finally resting his chin on top of his boyfriend's shoulder now that he is no longer "distracting."

“Everything is competition in this house,” he sighs.

The three Hollanders laugh, and Shane turns his head to smile at him before lifting his hand to put Ilya’s face between his thumb and pointer finger.

“You’re just pouting because you’re useless at carving,” he teases, which Ilya will allow because he loves it when Shane gets happy and silly like that, especially in front of his family.

His head whips back to his brother then, scowling at him.

“And they don’t need to be sharp. We’re making smores, not spearing fish from the river,” he grumbles.

Jake sticks his tongue out at him before throwing one of the uncarved sticks at him, which Ilya is quick to block with his hand.

“Ah, do not attack my boyfriend with your murder weapons,” he warns.

“It wasn’t even sharpened,” Jake just replies, rolling his eyes.

Ilya pretends to pout, leaning back slightly before using his hand to turn Shane’s face toward him.

“Мальш, tell me he did not get your pretty face. Would be tragic,” he says, exaggerating his fussing over Shane, which makes him and Yuna laugh as Jake just rolls his eyes.

“I’m fine,” Shane tells him while fondly rolling his eyes. Ilya lets his gaze roam over his gorgeous boyfriend's face once more, his eyes locking on his lips as the fire's shadows dance over his freckles and his skin glows golden.

“Hm, yes, still perfect,” he whispers before leaning forward to steal a kiss from him, feeling Shane’s smile against him.

When he pulls back, deliberately keeping it chaste, yet less brief than he would've just a year ago, he can't stop his own smile from spreading across his face.

Because he cannot believe that this is his life. Just last year, he thought he was at the lowest point he could ever be. His father dead, his brother showing him that he really had no family left, Shane was slipping through his fingers. But now he was here, in his favorite place on earth, with his favorite people on earth.

Yuna and David had taken the news of him and Shane dating well, thankfully.

Well, maybe too well, according to Shane, who was still mortified about it to this day.

Once Jake had gotten around to the idea of them dating, he had agreed with their plan for them to tell David and Yuna during their visit for his birthday. Had even offered to help them, albeit begrudgingly, which at that point, they all knew was only an act.

Shane had looked ready to throw up all evening...and then just blurted it out before their appetizers had even come.

Shane had taken their entwined hands from the table to place them on it for them to see, terrified but determined to protect Ilya from them. Ilya had never felt more tense in his life, staring into the wide, blinking eyes of the two people who had been the parents he never had.

But then, to all three boys’ surprise, they had just broken out in gigantic smiles. Which turned into soft giggles, which, when Yuna’s eyes met David’s, turned into full-blown laughter. While he and the two Hollander brothers just sat by the table, looking stunned.

David had then pulled out his wallet from his jacket, handing Yuna a crisp 100-dollar bill, which she accepted with a wide smile.

Turns out there had been a bet on it. Ilya knew there was a reason he liked them, bursting out in bright laughter that echoed throughout the restaurant when Yuna just patted their intertwined hands over the table, giving Ilya a conspiratorial smile. *“Oh honey, why do you think I mentioned Shane had a crush on you? I just thought you two could use a little nudge...”*

His place with the Hollanders, and his worries about not being good enough to be a part of their family and, more importantly, be with Shane, had long since disappeared.

Their acceptance and Shane’s unbridled love for him, which would never cease to amaze him, had already built the foundation for it, but it had, unexpectedly, been Jake’s left hook that had cemented it.

Because a relationship, even with two people as perfectly suited together for each other as Shane and Ilya, had its ups and downs. And a few months after the official outing of their relationship to their friends and family, Shane and Ilya had gotten into their first - and hopefully last - huge fight.

The cause was a stupid game of Never Have I Ever during a team party, where their drunken teammates wouldn't shut up about all the things Ilya had gotten up to before 'being tied down.' Shane had participated in the game and drunk during most answers, for once letting himself go, but then confessed to Ilya afterwards that most of his experiences led back to Ilya. He had then shortly spiraled about it, the self-doubt creeping back in. Because he had been Shane's first in so many ways, and while Ilya intended to be his last, he felt awful about denying Shane the same scope of experiences that was so often rubbed under Shane's nose by people on campus, who couldn't shut up about what a party boy he had been. So he had offered for Shane to be with other people in an offhanded comment he hadn't even really meant, but loved Shane too much not to at least extend.

And God, had it blown up in his face.

They talked past each other, misconstruing things the other said until it ended with a slammed door in Ilya's face and a three-day-long silence.

That is, until Jake returned home late at night after undoubtedly visiting his crying brother in his dorm room and promptly punched Ilya in the face, making good on his promise to fuck him up if he ever hurt Shane, which he had whispered to him months ago when they had come out to him.

As they sat on their kitchen floor, Ilya pressing a wet towel to his bleeding nose and Jake telling him to keep his face elevated, both holding beers, Jake wondered what the fuck had gotten Ilya to tell Shane something like this. After mumbling something about not wanting to hold Shane back, Jakw had sighed deeply before settling himself next to Ilya before putting a hand on his knee, which Ilya would deny until this day he initially flinched away from.

"Look, you know I've had my struggles with this, especially considering how I watched you run through half the campus before our first semester was even over-"

"Wasn't half, just a good quarte-"

"Shut the fuck up while I'm trying to be nice to you, alright? Anyways, as I was saying, I've had my doubts, but man, what you and Shane have? You don't just throw something like that away. And look, I know your family gave you a lot of shit, so I can't speak for everything that goes on in your head, but I can speak for Shane because I've known him all my life. And what he said to me back then was absolutely true; he's never loved anything the way he loves you. Not me, not hockey, not even that disgusting ginger ale he drinks. So get your head out of your ass and accept that you won't get rid of us anytime soon. And I promise you there's not a single person out there who could look at how disgustingly sweet you two are with each other and think you're not enough for each other, alright?"

So he had apologized, with the same kind of flowers he had first brought to the Hollander house those fateful summers ago, and promised to make it up to Shane with lots and lots of groveling and good sex, which was enough for him to welcome him back in his arms.

And so he sat here now, on a beautiful night in Canada, pulling Shane closer to him even if they weren't cold.

Ilya wasn't entirely helpless with outdoorsy stuff, but he wasn't as well-equipped as Jake and Shane, something they loved to tease him about endlessly. Still, he didn't mind when it meant he could hold hands with Shane as they held onto the same stick, since apparently Ilya couldn't be trusted with not charring the marshmallow.

He wasn't even pretending to listen as Shane continued to explain the importance of rotating and holding it above a flame rather than directly into it, instead staring at him through half-lidded eyes that were taking in his glowing side profile before leaning forward to press a slow, lingering kiss to his freckles.

Shane smiled, and they both ignored Jake's exaggerated huff, which turned into full-fledged fake gagging when Shane was finally satisfied with their marshmallow and promptly built a s'more only to feed it to Ilya, who sealed the sweet taste of it with a kiss to Shane's lips.

His sweetheart. His family. His home. His everything.

End Notes

"You're still the one I run to" and it's Shane Hollander running into Ilya's arm even after months apart because they're each other's safe place, thank you very much

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