

as reliable as the sun

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by [astrolesbian](#)

Summary

During his weeks at the cottage the only people Shane usually had to interact with were his parents, and it was always so—nice. Such a relief. To not have to be a person, for a couple of weeks. Or, at least, to not have to be the kind of person other people seemed to think that he was, or that a hockey player was, or that a hockey player had to be. It wasn't just about pretending he was straight. Sometimes, despite doing his best to ignore the jabs, Shane was forced to confront the fact that he really did often feel like a robot, and that the cottage was—for lack of better phrasing—his recharge time. And now—now Ilya was here. And Shane knew how to kiss him, how to play against him, how to be fucked by him, but there was no rulebook for this.

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shane does not like change. he does not like shifts in the status quo. he also honestly doesn't really like when people are in his house.

however. shane *does* like ilya. maybe enough that none of that matters.

Notes

yeah yeah the hollanov bug bit me too. this fic is called shane hollander i love your autism <3

title is from a [jeanette winterson](#) quote. only barely edited and i am still getting used to writing in shane's voice, so bear with me. i also have only interacted with the show (tho i have seen book screenshots floating around) so this is mainly showverse, and i wrote it before ep 6 dropped so i know it has some inconsistencies (for example: their i love yous haven't happened yet) but i decided i like it anyways!

also if you saw me post this and delete it and repost it no you didn't. (i wanted the day i posted it to reflect the day i posted it and not the day i made the ao3 draft sorry)

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

Shane heard Ilya before he saw him.

For a second the noise confused him, then its source clicked into place in his mind; it was the obnoxious engine of an expensive, impractical car. He felt himself smile at just the thought of Ilya trying to make it up the winding driveway of the cottage in one of them. For all that the house itself was remodeled, Shane had originally picked the place for the land, and so the driveway was and had remained long and unpaved. There were some annoying potholes in it that Shane hadn't had the time or inclination to really fix. His Jeep handled them just fine, and he was only really here a couple weeks out of the year, so he felt like it didn't matter.

As the sound of Ilya's car grew closer he had the urge to check his hair, what he was wearing. The stylist he had talked to didn't really give him the best advice on what to wear when you invited the guy you'd been hooking up with for seven years to your house for two weeks. Or any advice, really. He'd asked Rose, for lack of other people to ask. She was equally unhelpful. *Wear your little yoga shorts* would have been fine if he just wanted to get laid, but

He looked in the hallway mirror, the one his mother had insisted he needed above the chest of drawers where he usually dropped his keys and sunglasses and phone, and he puffed his cheeks out in a sigh. Same choppy hair, same freckles, same familiar face. His glasses. He didn't look as nervous as he felt; that was something, at least. He tried to mess with his hair a little, running his fingers through it this way and that, but quickly got disillusioned. It looked worse now. He tried again; failed. Told himself to give it up. He kicked on the slides he used when he needed to go out and get the mail or when he wanted to sit on the front porch, and followed the sound of the approaching car.

Maybe it would explain some things to know that the first and only time Shane had gone on a date in high school, he had spent the night before reading dating advice from his mom's magazines.

It was really hard to reverse-engineer the questions and answers in order to figure out what the guy was supposed to do. Men's magazines didn't offer the same kinds of questions and answers—Shane could only surmise from this that guys were meant to be born knowing how to go on a date, and wondered when he'd missed the memo—and even the tips that the women's magazines *did* offer were frustrating and vague. Movies seemed to imply that the guy did things like bring flowers, but those were adult guys, not high school guys. Shane also fast-forwarded through a couple of teen movies, ostensibly for research, but a lot of what the guys in those movies talked about was sex, and how to get it, and how to get the girl to like you enough that she'd give it. He went to bed way too late and woke up jittery.

He just wanted some goddamn *instructions*. Or at the very least some pointers. When were you supposed to show up? Early, on time, or a little late? There were different rules for these things, depending on the situation. He'd been trying to memorize them after getting laughed at for showing up to a party on time the year before. When did you ask her questions, and what questions should you ask? Was it okay to talk about hockey or should you wait until she

asked you? (This was a rule of thumb he'd been going by in school for as long as he could remember: *you're allowed to talk about hockey if someone else brings it up first.*) Did you hold her hand? When did you do that? The best he'd gotten was go-with-the-flow bullshit about doing things when they *felt right*, as if Shane had ever felt right in his life, or even knew what that would feel like in comparison to how he felt the rest of the time.

He gave in and asked his dad. His mom and dad blinked across the table at each other.

"I didn't know you had a girlfriend," his mom said. "What's her name?"

"It's Ely from school," Shane told her. "Who plays soccer." It was pretty much all he knew about her. She'd only spoken to him a few times before asking him on the date. "And she's not my girlfriend. I don't even know her. But she asked and I said yes and I need to know what to do." He could feel the edges of panic creeping in. He wished he could go to the rink and do drills instead of going to school and seeing Ely in class and pretending that the thought of going into this situation, this date where everything was apparently lawless and there were no rules or expectations, was something that he wanted to do. He stared at his plate, jaw tense.

"You don't have to do anything," his dad said. "You just have to have fun, kid." His tone was encouraging. It was the way he talked about games that Shane didn't have a hope of winning. *Just get out there and have fun and play some good hockey.* But hockey had *rules*. Even if Shane didn't win, at least he knew what to do. He took a deep breath in and out. He didn't finish his breakfast.

The date ended up being stilted and awkward and awful. Shane could barely remember it now. And sure, admitting thirteen years later that he was gay probably explained some of it, but it didn't explain why he had gotten that same anxious feeling, the desire to know what he was supposed to do and exactly how he was supposed to do it, from the moment Ilya had said he was going to come to the cottage.

He leaned against the doorframe to watch Ilya pull up. He could only half-see him behind the tinted window of the car he'd rented—white and low and sporty, talk about fucking flashy—but he could tell that he was wearing sunglasses and his leather jacket, could see the shadows of his hands, resting casually and confidently against the steering wheel. It occurred to him that he'd never seen Ilya drive. Was he lazy about it, missing his turn signals, barking at the other drivers, weaving carelessly through lanes? Or was it like the way he was with Shane—where he paid attention, without admitting that was what he was doing? Shane wanted to know. He wanted, with an ache that felt sudden and almost physical, to know everything.

"You are trying to fucking kill me, Shane," Ilya said when he got out of the car, leaning with his elbows on the roof and grinning. His hair was messy, in a good way. He looked like he just woke up from a nap. Maybe he had dozed on the plane; imagining it felt odd, and sweet. He'd only seen Ilya asleep the one time, in Boston, at his house. He was about to see him asleep a lot in the next two weeks. He hoped. "This road is a death trap. I am passing fucking ravines everywhere." He looked pleased at the use of *ravine*, the way he always did when he used a new English vocabulary word correctly.

“Yeah, I probably should’ve warned you about the potholes,” Shane admitted.

Ilya arched an eyebrow. “I don’t know this word.”

“Holes in the road,” Shane said. He was smiling, he realized. Leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed, beaming. It was so surreal to see Ilya here, in his safe place, where he let himself breathe in between seasons. Ilya crossed the driveway and walked up the steps, slow and easy, like it was nothing, like it was what they did every day. Shane watched him. Ilya watched him back, eyes flicking from his mouth to his burning cheeks.

“You are wearing your glasses,” Ilya said. He pressed one palm to either side of the doorframe and leaned in enough that they were sharing breath. Shane’s entire body felt like it shivered as the air shifted. Just from having him so close. The anxiety in him softened to a dull roar, the kind he experienced all the time and could ignore. Especially in favor of better things. He tilted his chin up.

“I was reading.” It was a lie. He’d remembered Ilya’s reaction to them when they’d video called. He’d wondered if he would get the same reaction here. Wondered if Ilya would call him pretty again, in that low rough voice he only used when he was close enough to whisper, murmuring praise against Shane’s hot skin. Even imagining it had made him feel shy, and daring. Another thing that was actually two things at once.

“Mmm,” Ilya said, nearly a purr, a sigh. “Thank God for that.” Hands still braced on the doorframe, he leaned in. Pressed his mouth to Shane’s with aching slowness, tenderness that made him shudder. For a moment the quiet of the forest around them was punctuated only by the sound of their mouths moving, of the barely-there moan that fell out of Shane’s mouth and into Ilya’s. He couldn’t help it; with the kiss had come a silent but earth-shattering kind of relief. It was the same as the kisses they had shared in the hotel room in Florida, the same as the kisses they’d been sharing for years. The small bit of consistency, the way Ilya’s body tilted into his to provide it, made him dizzy. It made facing the rest of it and all of its unknowns easier.

“Hi,” Ilya said, pulling back, barely a whisper.

“Hi,” Shane parroted, and pressed back in, dotting kisses over his jaw, his neck. Ilya’s hands left the doorframe and settled at Shane’s waist, pulling him close and then pressing him back achingly gently against the wood, so that Shane could imagine how it looked from a distance, the two of them framed by it like a postcard. Their mouths met again, slow, tender. The heat it stoked in Shane’s stomach was a different kind than he was used to. Anticipatory but not urgent. Ilya licked into his mouth, and Shane’s jaw hinged open for him willingly. He could feel the plastic of his glasses cutting into his nose, and wondered if they were fogging up.

He moaned again, a little. At the thought. It rumbled out of his throat and into Ilya’s, and Ilya broke the kiss with a gasp. “Eager,” he said, not a complaint. “You want me to fuck you now?”

Shane’s skin was burning hot. He did want it. He wanted to lean into the sameness, the comfort of sex, of consistency, but he steeled himself. He had wanted this to be different. He was determined for it to be different.

“I wanted to show you around first,” he admitted. He watched as Ilya processed this; as he, too, remembered that they had time. The smile it pulled out of him was extraordinary. Crooked, and perfect.

Shane was granted one more kiss, like a reward, lush and drugging. Then Ilya pulled back, putting his hands in his pockets. “Show me then,” he said. “I have seen your little, uh, place by your lake where you do yoga. Not the rest.”

“The dock? When did you see that?” Shane asked, leading him inside. Ilya calmly took off his shoes without being asked and shrugged out of his jacket, which he held in both hands while raising his eyebrow at Shane questioningly. Shane opened the coat closet door and held out his hands. Even that simple act of hanging Ilya’s coat next to several of his own made the whole thing feel more real, more solid, more like something he could navigate. He was actually here. They were actually doing this.

“Your documentary,” Ilya admitted.

Shane turned back to him, delighted. “No way. You watched that?”

“Mmm,” Ilya said. He stretched his arms above his head and yawned. “I watch, I think it’s boring, I watch again. Still boring. But then I watch again anyway. Always to see you.”

“You,” Shane said. He had planned to make fun of him. Now he couldn’t. “You watched it because you . . . missed me?”

Ilya cleared his throat. Looked away, over down the hallway to the kitchen. Shane, struck by a sudden burst of tenderness, reached over and tapped his fingers lightly to the side of Ilya’s face, turning him back. Ilya, with what looked like visible effort, allowed his shoulders to come down from around his ears and met his eyes. There was something tense in his expression. For the first time Shane wondered if Ilya wasn’t sure what was expected of him, either. Now that they were actually here.

Shane couldn’t remember much of the immediate after-surgery haze, but he remembered that Ilya had been the first person that he’d seen, before his parents, even, and that he had been too floaty to even consider being nervous. Too glad to see him, to hold his hand. So he’d asked him to come to the cottage like it was nothing, and it had *felt* like nothing, in the moment. Of course, he’d been high as a kite, so. It had been impossible to be anxious. Even when Ilya’s answer was a resounding *maybe*.

When he looked back on it the wording made him cringe—*come to my house, we’ll have so much fun*—like a grade schooler asking their friend to come for a sleepover. As the high from the meds faded and he replaced them with industrial strength ibuprofen, the ban on screens gave him a lot of time to worry. Specifically about *maybe*. What did *maybe* mean? Was Ilya letting him down easy? What would he do, if he didn’t come? What would he do if he *did*? The cottage was where he was most himself, even if that self was anxious and neurotic and sensitive about weird things. What would it be like to have someone else there with him?

Even his parents didn't often stay the night, mostly because they could tell that it got Shane's hackles up and they were eternally nice about things like that.

Would they just be having sex the whole time, throwing themselves at each other like animals? Logistically, it had its problems. For example, he wasn't sure if his ass could handle that. (He ignored the interested frisson of heat through his body, at the thought.) But if they weren't fucking, what the hell would they do? He'd never done anything with Ilya that *wasn't* fucking or playing hockey, and the water of the lake wasn't frozen enough to skate. Wasn't frozen at all, actually, given the fact that it was summer. Could he even pretend he could offer Ilya a good time? Would Ilya care about the weird shit Shane tended to do around the cottage in the summer—the way he never turned the lights on if he could help it and hated listening to the radio and how he had to shower immediately after getting out of the lake, because otherwise he felt the lake water on his skin all day? Surely these things weren't any weirder than the shit other people did when they were alone, though Shane obviously had never witnessed other people being alone and couldn't say for sure.

It was really just the uncertainty of *maybe* that was throwing him off. Shane was good with exact specifications. *This is happening*, or *this is not happening*. He was notably *not* good with *maybes*. His fingers had been twitching for what felt like weeks, his brain staticky and not just from the medicine. Maybe. Maybe. *Maybe*. What the fuck did *maybe* mean?!

Then Scott Hunter had kissed a man on center ice. And the *maybe* had become a *yes*. Shane absconded with his pain meds and his sling to the cottage and set about deep-cleaning it with a frenzied anxiety that was unfortunately not unfamiliar to him. It was the same way he had always felt before his first days of school and his first day with the Metros and his first time meeting Ilya in a hotel room. The same way he'd felt before that first disastrous high school date. The way he felt before anything unknown.

He'd texted Hunter, too. Sometime in the anxious haze of all the cleaning. He had sent it knowing that Hunter might know what it meant, and not minding as much as he probably should have. It was just a brief message, though; dull, really. *Congrats on the win. Well deserved. And congrats on the rest of it, too.*

Thanks, Hollander, Hunter had said. There had been more Shane wanted to say. Questions he wanted to ask, but hadn't. Instead they pounded on the inside of his teeth. *What's it like to wake up with him in the morning? What's it like to cook for him? To watch movies and go to restaurants together? Even if you can't—don't—hold hands. What's it like to look at him across the table and know that you're keeping the same secret?* The same impossibly precious secret, but a secret, nonetheless. How did you keep the difficult parts from outweighing the good? How did you decide it was time to tell someone—to tell everyone? How had they made the decision to come out? That was the question he wanted to ask most of all and the one that would be the most telling, the most dangerous. So he didn't—couldn't, even if Scott fucking Hunter was probably the only person he knew that could have given him any kind of real, practical advice. He only wasted a few minutes imagining a world where coming out would not be the most stressful and invasive thing that could ever happen to him, a world where—in the same tone that they'd jokingly used to ask about *your girl* when he'd been with Rose—his teammates cuffed him on the shoulder and teased him with *hey your man was looking good the other night, but we're still gonna kick his ass*. It was such

an unlikely idea that it might as well have been a fairy tale. Then again. So had kissing a man on center ice, once.

He went back to fluffing pillows and cleaning his floors, held and pinned by the knowledge that soon, soon, soon, Ilya would be here. He thought about it while he was scrubbing the tile in the bathroom and while he was mopping in the kitchen and while he was sweeping dried leaves off of the patio. In just a few days Ilya would be here. Walking on these floors, showering in Shane's bathroom. Sleeping in his bed, his body warm and gentle and close. He kept having to stop in the middle of his tasks and rub at his chest, amazed at the warmth glowing there. Something small and tender amid his nervousness. He thought it was amazing how he could hold so much uncertainty and so much excitement at the same time.

Standing in the spotless hallway that led to his living room, Shane shifted closer, and moved his thumb against the side of Ilya's face. He thought of holding him in Florida, listening to him talk over the phone. Those moments had been confusing and unknown, too, but he searched for the thread that had tied them together—his sharp, burning desire to help, to make Ilya happy. In whatever way he could. Framed like that it felt less like something new and fumbling and awful and more like something he had done before and succeeded, at least a little bit, at. Something he could do again.

"Same principle applies as a couple weeks ago, y'know," he said. "If you have something to say and you can't—express it. You can always say it in Russian."

Something flickered warm and heartfelt in Ilya's eyes, in the corner of his mouth, which wasn't curving up yet, but threatened to. "You will not understand," he said.

"Maybe someday I will," Shane said. "Or maybe someday you'll be able to say it in English. Or—" He hesitated, then plowed forward, probably with all the grace of a bull in a china shop, but then no one had ever really called Shane delicate with emotions. "Look, I didn't know what you were saying, when you called me from Moscow. But I felt—I heard how you sounded, and I knew—I could guess." He let his fingertips trail from the side of Ilya's face to his chest, pressing his palm flat against it. Beneath his ribs his heart was rabbit-quick. It was a comforting feeling. Shane's heart was going like crazy, too. He wasn't alone in this. It was fucking terrifying and new and different and they were both doing it, both stepping into it.

"What did you guess?" Ilya said. Their faces were close. Ilya surprised him, then, by letting their foreheads and noses drift together, Shane's glasses getting in the way, but they didn't kiss like they had before. Just stood there, in that little bubble of air. Close.

"You were sad," Shane said. His thumb moved, back and forth, against the soft cotton of Ilya's T-shirt. "You were—angry. With your brother, I thought. Or, I thought I heard the word brother. He—something happened? He pissed you off? And you—" He swallowed. "You sounded lonely. I hope I helped."

"Ты всегда помогаешь," Ilya said. His eyes were glassy. His hand closed, briefly, on top of Shane's. Then he pulled Shane's knuckles to his mouth and kissed them. "How do you know me like this, huh?"

“Years of practice,” Shane said, and tried to smile. His chest felt too full to really commit to it. “Anyway, it’s not a long term solution, but for now, I just—I want you to talk to me, I don’t care what language it’s in.”

“How do you know I am not saying very mean things,” Ilya said. “Like . . .” He clicked his tongue. “Shane is so nosy, trying to get me to be spilling my stomach.”

A laugh bubbled out of him, and he pulled back a little. “It’s ‘spilling your guts,’” he said. “And I guess I don’t know. You don’t have to do it, if it doesn’t help.” He didn’t let go of Ilya’s hand. “But, I don’t know, offer’s open.”

Ilya’s fingers, hesitant like they were kids, wound through his. Their palms pressed together. Shane felt—he felt. He had touched every part of Ilya’s body, but he was warm all over with the knowledge that there were still new things to have. And that the newness, rather than being something uncertain and dangerous, could be as sweet as it was right now.

“C’m on,” he said, over the deafening sound of his own heartbeat. “Let me give you the tour.”

Maybe it would also explain some of that fathomless anxiety to know that Shane had always viewed his vacation time as an opportunity to become vacant, unviewed. The rest of the year, he had to put his captain’s face on and answer questions; deal with the incessant buzz of phone alerts and bright lights and conversations with strangers and remembering to arrange his face in the correct set of expressions as he read ad copy or spoke to reporters or hyped up his team. During his weeks at the cottage the only people he had to interact with were his parents, and it was always so—nice. Such a relief. To not have to be a person, for a couple of weeks. Or, at least, to not have to be the kind of person other people seemed to think that he was, or that a hockey player was, or that a hockey player had to be. It wasn’t just about pretending he was straight. Sometimes, despite doing his best to ignore the jabs, Shane was forced to confront the fact that he really did often feel like a robot, and that the cottage was—for lack of better phrasing—his recharge time. And now—now Ilya was here. And Shane knew how to kiss him, how to play against him, how to be fucked by him, but there was no rulebook for this. No expectations. Which, to other people, seemed to be something that was a relief, that made things easier; to Shane it was like being thrown into a post-game interview without going through the talking points with his coach. Inevitably, he knew he would end up floundering, and then crashing, and then burning.

But even that wasn’t fair. Because it was the same feeling, yes, but it was also a different feeling. Even amid all the worry—it had never occurred to him not to try. During the leadup to that awful first date when he’d been young, he would have done anything to make sure that it didn’t happen. During the leadup to Ilya’s arrival at the cottage his skin buzzed with anxiety, but also with anticipation. Ilya was, maybe, one of the only people in the world that Shane consistently wanted to see more than he wanted to be alone. So that was something. It was enough to make it feel worth it, to try and push through.

Ultimately he had been afraid that what they had was only sex, after all; that Shane in the light of day would be a different person than Shane under the lights of a rink or in the dim

low light of hotel rooms. He had been afraid that Ilya would regret his decision to come. He had been afraid that, in this space where he had always let himself be especially boring and weird, he would be too much of both things for Ilya to like him any longer. And he had been very afraid that Ilya would get out of his car and walk up to his door and it would feel like that first date had, so long ago. Floundering, rudderless. Shane grasping at straws for conversation, to fill the silence that would inevitably spring up between them. Shane feeling the same resentment for Ilya that he did for anyone else in his space when he couldn't handle them there; Ilya waking up bored and irritated and leaving as quickly as he'd come. An experiment, failing before 24 hours could even fully pass.

Instead he had made fun of the potholes and kissed Shane like he was the same person that he'd always been. Instead he had let Shane lead him through the house and the backyard by the hand, pointing things out as they went. Instead he had kissed him again, on the back porch, dappled with fading sunlight as the evening began. Instead he looked perfect framed by the lush green trees and the rippling lake water, his hair moving in the breeze. Instead he slid his hands under Shane's shirt, squeezing his sides, his palms weighty and solid. Instead, it was Shane who smoothed his hands over Ilya's chest, across his shoulders, whispering, *come to bed*.

In the morning he woke up slowly, with his nose full of Ilya. His face was mashed into his neck. His mind was blessedly quiet, not exactly in the way he got after sex but in the way he often was when he was alone, in the cottage, like always. Quiet and comfortable and—and Ilya's chest was rising and falling beneath his palm. Shane waited for the discomfort to come, the someone's-watching-me feeling that he almost always got, even with people he knew very well, but it didn't. Somehow Ilya had come inside the bubble that separated Shane from the rest of the world without popping it. It was too much of a good thing to process while only half awake.

He dozed off again. In an hour or so Ilya kissed him awake, and Shane talked him into getting up and brushing their teeth, and then they kissed again in the bathroom, mouths minty and tasting like each other, like Shane's toothpaste. Shane looked at Ilya in the mirror next to him, shaving his face as Shane washed his. Ilya made a face at him, covered in shaving cream. Shane made one back. "I want to try this," Ilya said, poking at the moisturizer that Shane was putting on.

"Are you fucking telling me," Shane said, "you don't moisturize?"

"I have this," Ilya said, and wiggled a half-crumpled tube of SPF 30 at him.

"That's sunscreen," Shane said.

"It's all just creams you put on your face," Ilya said.

"Oh my God," Shane said. He wasn't, like, crazy about skin care or anything, like some of his cousins were. He was really picky about what textures went on his face. But he knew about fucking moisturizer! "Come here," he said, when Ilya was done shaving, and rubbed a careful dollop of face cream onto his cheeks and forehead and neck. Ilya smiled all the while,

lashes fluttering deliberately like he was trying to get Shane to laugh. And eventually Shane did, so fond he was bursting with it. “And I have better sunscreen for if we swim later.”

“I don’t burn,” Ilya objected.

”I am not letting you get skin cancer,” Shane said.

“Will you put it on me then?” Ilya said, crowding close to him so he was pressed up against the sink. “Maybe now?”

”You want to go swimming now?”

“I want you to touch me,” Ilya said plainly. His eyes were glittering. Shane slid his arms around his waist, obligingly.

“If we swim I’ll have to shower again,” Shane said.

“Good idea,” Ilya said. “Lake water. Nasty stuff.” He paused. “I could shower too.”

“Then I wouldn’t get clean,” Shane said.

”Hmm,” Ilya said. Pressed in a little closer. “You have an answer for everything.”

Shane smiled. He thought again about how he’d felt when he’d half-woken up. He compared it absently to the jarring, stiff feeling of waking up in a hotel room, the relief of thinking he was alone that lasted only a second before he registered Hayden’s breathing and remembered he wasn’t. But Ilya’s breathing, the deep thud of his heart, had not evoked that feeling at all.

He stretched up the barest amount and kissed Ilya again, tasting the mint of the toothpaste and the sweetness of his mouth underneath it. He slid his fingers up lazily to lace against the back of Ilya’s neck. He kissed him just to kiss, not as prelude to sex. Until their mouths were ruddy and swollen and he felt lazy and indulgent with the taste of him, the feel of his hands. “C’mon,” he said, once he could no longer taste the toothpaste at all, only Ilya. “Let’s have breakfast. I bet you want coffee.”

Ilya was still Ilya; Shane was relieved about that. He didn’t seem like he was editing himself to be in Shane’s presence, in his home. He was still flirty at inopportune moments and still intensely competitive, he was still loud and still physical and still so hot it melted Shane’s brain. But somehow he fit in the cottage like he belonged there, like he’d been there every time. Shane felt uncharacteristically light and smiley. When they worked out together Shane found himself laughing, comparing their routines, stealing some of his glute exercises and then walking him through a yoga flow, which he was almost hilariously bad at.

Shane made them lunch—they had foraged for breakfast in the end, too lazy, too interested in kissing against the counter—while Ilya sat on a stool nearby, reading tweets off his phone about public reactions to Hunter’s surprise coming out and stealing pieces of carrot and cucumber from the pile that Shane had already cut. Shane showed him the jet skis, to his obvious delight, and they raced across the lake at speeds Shane had never been goaded into

before. In the afternoon Ilya went swimming in the lake and Shane sat in his hammock and read, and when Ilya climbed out and shook his hair out on top of Shane like he had in Florida Shane was allowed to toss his book to the side and yank him down on top of him, kissing him with no end goal in mind, until Ilya's skin dried against his and they were both laying there, comfortable and warm. Until Ilya dropped a kiss on his shoulder and announced his intent to nap and Shane picked up his book again, soothing a hand through Ilya's hair, enjoying the weight of him. They kicked a soccer ball around on the grass until the half-hearted game turned to wrestling. They kissed so much that Shane wondered with dizzy delight if his lips might get chapped. Something he'd never had to worry about before.

As the days went on, it went on being good. They tried things in bed that they hadn't gotten the chance to, or hadn't had the time to, or hadn't had the trust to. Shane let Ilya tie his wrists to his headboard and slip a blindfold over his eyes, shivering at the slow glancing touches of his hands and mouth over the length of his body. Ilya liked drawing it out, something Shane had half-suspected but never had the time to prove. There had always been something so rushed about their time together, so frantic, even on the days when they'd actually had more than a couple hours. But in their bed, here, Shane was happy to lose those hours to Ilya's hands and mouth and dick, surrendering to the way Ilya whispered commands against his skin, emptying him out of everything except desire. The difference was that now Ilya had the time to hold him, after, to kiss him lazily and urge him to drink water as Shane stitched himself back together. That Shane could stroke his hair and kiss his face and tell him how much he'd liked it, in the afterglow instead of in the heat of the moment, where things felt so much more serious. He could doze off in his arms and wake up itching for a shower and then drag Ilya in with him.

They talked, they didn't. He learned things about Ilya, random things he'd never gotten the chance to before: that he always used the front left burner on the stove before any of the other ones. That he had little patience for most longer, story-based video games but loved Smash Bros, which they spent a good couple of hours beating each other at until the smug, victorious grins Ilya was throwing him got to be too much and Shane climbed into his lap on the couch. That his favorite color was red. That he had never done well in school. It was a familiar story to Shane: bad at school, good at hockey, good at nothing else. That he actually didn't mind reading despite his lack of interest in school, once in a while, but just not in English, and it was hard to find books printed in Cyrillic in the States unless you custom ordered them. Once, he settled with his body draped over Shane's in the bed and demanded he read to him, humming as Shane stroked his hair. And he told Shane a little about Russia, about growing up. He skirted around the topic of his mother, but once in a while she would appear at the edges of whatever story he was telling, this warm lovely person who he seemed desperate to preserve the memory of.

It had never been like this before. The most they used to share was their schedules; the most they used to communicate was how hard, how fast, how deep they wanted it. But just being here, together, alone, had opened a door that was once bolted shut. It wasn't like they spent the entire time talking, but they were learning how. How to push, when to back off. It didn't hurt that they were both hungry for it, almost more so than they had been for each other's bodies. Shane felt like every small detail was a perfect snowflake that he was examining, frozen against a dark glove, before it could melt away.

Shane spent the first day in a state of disbelief and the next couple filled with buzzy, unfamiliar joy. He didn't know how to put it into words. He just knew that with anyone else he would have been drained by now, exhausted with the effort of seemingly simple interactions like hello and good morning and good night, tense and on edge just from the idea that someone else was in the room. Sometimes on bad days he wouldn't even be able to sleep in the rooms on the road that he shared with Hayden, too aware of someone else's breathing, of their existence, miserable even with the weight of his blankets and unable to shut himself off. But there was none of that here.

He wanted to hold Ilya's shoulders and shake him or cup his cheeks and make him look right into Shane's eyes, to ask him, *do you realize what a miracle you are? How amazing it is that you don't make everything too loud?* He didn't, couldn't, say it, so he just kept trying to kiss it into Ilya's skin, leaving marks, leaving scratches. *My man*, he thought to himself, a couple of times, like he was testing it out; new and delicious and possibly even true. *My man, my man, my man*.

On their fourth day there, together, he woke in the middle of the night to Ilya tracing circles on the skin of his back and murmuring to him in Russian, the way he had been over the phone so many nights ago. He couldn't understand the words, but he adored the sound of them, washing over his skin like rain. He couldn't pick out individual words from the rush of them at first, too sleepy to try to parse them out, but then he caught one that he knew.

“Больше, ещё больше...”

“What's that one mean?” Shane said, bleary. “You said that before, when you called me from Moscow.”

“Which one?” His voice was rough and low. Tender.

Shane wrinkled his nose and gave it a try. “Bol-shuh.”

Ilya laughed. His mouth found Shane's cheek, his lips. Weakly, Shane kissed back. He felt, briefly, the warmth of Ilya's tongue before he pulled away. “Больше,” he corrected.

“Bol-she.”

“Better,” Ilya allowed, and kissed him again. “It means more.”

“Oh,” Shane said, sleepily. He shifted a little so his leg was hitched up around Ilya's waist. “Do you want...?”

Another laugh. Warm, fanning out over Shane's skin. It gave him goosebumps, and Ilya kissed them, too. His hand skimmed up and down Shane's back. “What I said when I was in Moscow,” he said, “I was talking about . . . my brother is . . .” He paused. “He has no love for me,” he said. “But he has love for my money. He is always saying, more, Ilya, more, and there is . . . for him there is only so much I can give.” Shane shifted again to prop his chin up on Ilya's chest, to look at his face. He looked contemplative, not exactly sad. He wondered

when he'd learned to tell the difference. "But with you . . . hm. Very different." He rolled them over so Shane was pressed back against the mattress, bracketed by Ilya's warm body, where he liked to be. "You say more, more, more, and I give it to you. And I want more, too. Always, always more."

Shane reached up and traced the side of his face with his fingertips. "I was scared," he admitted. "To have you here. Not just because—we might get caught. I—I'm not good at being with people. I'm good at being alone, but people are—so much. It always feels like so much. And then I get to come here and I get to—it stops being so much, for a little while. And I know that a lot of the time I'm not—I'm not easy. I wanted to be. So you'd stay."

Ilya turned his face and kissed Shane's fingers. Playful. He snapped his teeth lightly at them, after the kiss, a little nibble that was more silly than it was hot. "You are very easy for me, Shane," he said, a little loftily. "You always have been."

Shane laughed, too. "Not like that," he said. "I meant, more like—my head—the things I need—oh, God, I don't know. It's hard to—I guess it's sort of like—" He blew some air out of his cheeks. "Hayden says I'm, uh, complicated, I guess. He says it took him a long time to figure out how to deal with me. Especially because we room together and I can get," he waved a hand to try to encompass it all, the silences he would fall into when words became too much, the specifics of his bedtime routine that felt more important to complete in their exact order when he had had a long and stressful day. How he always had to bring his own pillow when he traveled just so at least one thing would be the same wherever he went. "I can just get, um, regimented?"

"Hayden Pike is a piece of shit," Ilya said, mouth twisting in a frown. "What does he mean, deal with you? You are not so difficult. Just a brat. And that, eh, only sometimes." He kissed Shane again. "Most of the time, you are very good for me."

"I'm not talking about sex," Shane said.

"I hope not," Ilya said. "If I learn now you are fucking Hayden Pike too I am going after him with a hammer."

"Ilya," Shane said, half-laughing.

"Shane," Ilya said, drawing it out teasingly. He kissed Shane's nose, his forehead. "Солнышко."

Shane blinked up at him. His eyes were glittering in the dim light.

"I am not easy," Ilya said. "Either."

"You are," Shane said. "That's what I'm trying to say. If it was anyone else I think I'd—I don't know, I'd be going crazy by now. But you're—"

"Yes," Ilya said. Kissed him again, again, again. Between kisses he said, "yes. You too." His thumb stroked Shane's cheek the way it had in the hospital. Counting his freckles. "You are easy to me. Like this, us together, it—it is very easy."

Shane breathed out, slow and careful. He felt soft and floaty. “Yeah?”

“Да,” Ilya said. He tucked himself in next to Shane, their bodies touching everywhere. He didn’t need to translate. That one, at least, Shane knew. “Sleep. In the morning,” he yawned, “I will . . . hm . . . I will wake you up with my tongue.”

“How’m I supposed to sleep after that,” Shane said, feeling very sleepy. Very safe. Very—he wondered if it was bad luck to think it—loved.

“Hm,” Ilya said, triumphant. “Just try.”

End Notes

like isn't it so romantic that shane who is so adverse to changes in his routine / status quo that he couldn't deal with exchanging first names back in e4 is the one to INITIATE the changes in their relationship by flirting with ilya at the bar and confronting him about feelings in tampa and then asking him to come to the cottage in e5. bc he's that certain that they have something worth going after. wow!

i was also thinking abt the romance of shane asking ilya to come to the cottage specifically. esp since we had that "i only get like two weeks off a year" line from shane. Like sorry that's my nightmare. imagine you only get two weeks of silent unmasking home time per year where you can swim and read your hockey books and listen to loons. and the rest of the time you're booked and busy doing hockey and commercials and captaining and sharing a room with hayden pike and like the ghosts of his 8 children. and you have to decide like okay i might not get that Very Needed Regulation Time but it's okay because i love this guy so much and i want to have this time with him. and then realizing as the time goes on that his presence in your house DOES feel okay and it feels safe and it feels homey. oh my god. Like guys i love love!!!!!!!

oh also re: russian translations i used google translate (sorry) but tried to be rly minimal to hopefully minimize mistakes/awkward grammar which GT is soooo good at. the basics of what i was trying to have ilya say were "you always do" in response to shane's "i hope i helped" in that earlier scene, and then later when they're in bed i imagine him just kind of watching shane sleep and talking to himself (sap)(i imagined the gist of the monologue being "i thought i would come here and be with you and be satisfied and now i'm here and i want more and more and more") and then that last endearment he uses is "solnyshko" which to my understanding translates as sunshine/little sun. i personally opted for cyrillic text vs. romanization of the words to kind of narratively emphasize that it's a language shane doesn't understand; it appears in a slightly different font/format. hope that makes sense!!! if anyone notices anything awkward about the grammar/phrasing please do let me know ❤️ i'd love to make that part better!

edit 1/25/26: changed around some of ilya's dialogue after rewatching the show a bunch and feeling like i was not writing him with the level of english fluency he's working with in eps 5 and 6. i do think his quest for new vocab words is charming so i tried to keep that energy but i'll take responsibility for having him drop too many articles in the first version.

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