

Invisible String

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/78737116) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/78737116>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov
Additional Tags:	Post-Canon , Weddings , Wedding Night , Married Couple , Late Night Conversations , Alcohol , Domestic Fluff , Blow Jobs , Anal Fingering , Anal Sex , Spoilers for Book 6: The Long Game (Game Changers) , Reminiscing , lots of soft conversations , they just talk for like half the fic , they do also fuck though don't worry , Not Beta Read
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of they say that the world was built for two
Collections:	Broc's Hollanov Oneshots , Worth much reheating
Stats:	Published: 2026-02-01 Words: 11,763 Chapters: 1/1

Invisible String

by [broccolicheddarchicken](#)

Summary

“This one is almost full,” Ilya said from across the living room. He was holding something up.

They’d both ditched their jackets and rolled up their sleeves, so Shane’s eyes followed the line of Ilya’s arm: shoulder, to bent elbow, to bare forearm, to wrist, to hand. Ilya’s fingers were wrapped around the neck of a champagne bottle. Shane wasn’t really certain how many there had been lying around—Yuna and David had been in charge of handling refreshments—but an open, nearly-full bottle indicated that perhaps there had been too much.

“Bring it here and I’ll dump it out.”

“Dump it out?” Ilya frowned, crossing the living room towards the kitchen. “And waste it?”

“What would you rather do?”

Ilya set the bottle on the counter and came up behind Shane, strong arms slinking around his waist, Ilya’s lips just barely brushing against his ear. It wasn’t surprising—they’d both been a little clingy ever since the ceremony.

“I want to share it with you.”

Shane and Ilya’s wedding night, after the guests have gone home, and a bit of the day after.

Notes

When I read The Long Game for the first time, got towards the end of the book, and realized there wasn’t enough book left for there to be a wedding night scene, I was devastated. This is my attempt at fixing my own disappointment, haha. It’s been sitting half-finished in my drafts for a while, but I decided it was finally time to complete it and share it with y’all.

Also, I’ve gotten some people asking why I don’t tag the TV show fandom, and I’ll just be blunt: I fucking adore that TV show, but when I’m writing fanfic, in my mind I’m writing for book Shane and Ilya. You can read it however you want though!! These fics include the five inch height difference, use the old team names, include Ilya’s tattoo, don’t include the 2-year gap where they didn’t meet up, include TLG elements that aren’t in the TV show (at least not

yet), etc etc. It doesn't make sense to me to tag the TV show when I'm using so many book-only elements. But I do love the show and the actors very much, and like I said, you read it however you want it to be <3

Anyway, I hope you enjoy reading this at least half as much as I enjoyed writing it :)

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

There were things about marriage, Shane expected, that he'd only find out firsthand. An early example: nobody told Shane that the first hour or so of being alone with his brand-new husband would be spent cleaning.

Their guests had been very thoughtful about the state of the house. The reception—if you could even call hanging out at home a reception—had never become anything close to a rager. As people filed out and headed back to their hotels and homes, they'd generally been considerate enough to pick up after themselves before making their goodbyes and exits.

But there was still more to do: food to be put away, counters to be wiped, trash to be taken out. David and Yuna had insisted on staying behind and helping, but it was already well past the time they usually went to sleep. He'd told them to go home, assured them that it wasn't too much, and for good measure, implied that he'd really like to be alone with Ilya.

It wasn't even a lie. As ridiculous as it was, Shane was enjoying kicking off his marriage with a little domestic activity. They didn't need to do everything tonight—the fairy lights would definitely be tomorrow's problem—but there was something sweet, romantic even, in watching Ilya gather up empty champagne bottles while Shane washed the dishes. They were tending to the home they'd shared for the last few weeks, the place where they'd build their new shared life.

That was a little strange, too. Shane was the only person he knew of his generation who hadn't lived with his spouse before marriage. It had been out of necessity, not choice, but it still felt old-fashioned. Sure, they'd shared the cottage for two months at a time each year, but that was different from truly living in the same space.

The house was ours when I bought it, Ilya had told him a few days prior. I never really thought of the houses as 'mine' or 'yours'. It was just where we stayed when we were in Montreal or Ottawa.

It wasn't that Shane didn't feel like this place was his. He'd helped Ilya pick the place, he'd helped Ilya pick the furniture, he'd helped Ilya decorate. Even three years ago, they'd both known that this would be the house they'd share once Shane was finished with Montreal, whenever that day came.

It was just an adjustment, that was all. A pleasant adjustment, an adjustment Shane was enjoying, but an adjustment nonetheless.

"This one is almost full," Ilya said from across the living room. He was holding something up.

They'd both ditched their jackets and rolled up their sleeves, so Shane's eyes followed the line of Ilya's arm: shoulder, to bent elbow, to bare forearm, to wrist, to hand. Ilya's fingers were wrapped around the neck of a champagne bottle. Shane wasn't really certain how many

there had been lying around—Yuna and David had been in charge of handling refreshments—but an open, nearly-full bottle indicated that perhaps there had been too much.

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“I want to share it with you.”

Shane had barely drank the whole night. Part of it was that he wanted to stay in the moment, part of it was that despite his best efforts, his brain was still in “performance diet” mode sometimes.

He was working on it. Ilya’s touch was soft and warm and earnest, and it was a beautiful night out. Their home was empty, save for the two of them and the fluffy dog they were raising.

Warm and happy with the man he loved didn’t sound like such a death sentence.

“Okay. But you need to let me finish this first.”

Ilya nuzzled his face into Shane’s shoulder blade, then, his arms still around Shane’s waist, and it made it incredibly difficult to focus on something as banal as dishes. His fingertips lightly brushed over Shane’s stomach, perhaps an inch or two below his belly button.

“I was just thinking.” Ilya interrupted himself by dropping a few soft kisses along the curve of Shane’s neck. “I was thinking how I can’t wait to feel you. Right here. I’ve been thinking about it all night.”

Ilya slightly pressed down on the spot as punctuation, kissing Shane’s neck and ear again. Shane thought his knees were going to go out.

“*Ilya.*”

“But not right now.” Ilya stepped back, withdrawing his hands, and it took everything Shane had not to *whine*. “Right now, I want to drink champagne with you. We’ll sit on the deck and watch the river. It will be nice.”

Shane spun around to face his incredibly annoying, brand-new husband.

“You’re such a fucking tease.”

“It’s my specialty,” Ilya said, already heading for the door.

It took somewhere between five and ten minutes for Shane to finish washing dishes, which he spent scrubbing hard enough his fingertips turned white. As soon as he finished he dried his hands and rushed outside to the back deck.

Ilya patted the spot right next to him. As if Shane was going to sit anywhere else. He plopped himself down, put his head on Ilya's shoulder, and hugged his arm. Just to make sure he couldn't go anywhere.

"Here." Ilya offered a champagne glass, which Shane took with his free hand.

Ilya set his own glass on the deck on his other side. He filled Shane's glass first, then his own, then set the bottle down.

"What were you thinking about before I came out here?" Shane asked.

Ilya kept his eyes fixed firmly on the river, water slowly passing them by. He took a sip before answering.

"My mother."

"Oh."

Even now, even four years after that first conversation at the bonfire, Irina was still a difficult subject. Shane had learned more about the woman—had come to see more and more of her in Ilya, too—and he knew that Ilya was terribly protective of her. It was one of few topics between them that made Shane feel cautious about where he stepped.

"I feel her sometimes," Ilya said. "With me. And I felt her today."

"You did?"

Ilya nodded.

"Was she... happy? You think?"

"I think she would have been." Ilya's gaze broke, and he turned to his husband. "How's the champagne?"

"I haven't actually had a sip."

Shane knew a topic change when he heard one. He lifted the glass to his lips and let the light-colored liquid pass. It wasn't flat, like he'd worried. It was light, sweet, bubbly. He looked up and found that Ilya had been watching him.

Ilya *kept* watching him.

"You took my breath away when I saw you in the kitchen," Ilya murmured. "That is why I had to hug you. And now you are doing it again. You're so beautiful, Shane."

"Stop."

“No.”

It was Shane's turn to stare out at the river, cheeks hot and corners of his lip tugging upwards. It was still difficult to put up with Ilya's raw adoration, sometimes. The man loved more deeply, more authentically, than anyone Shane had ever known.

"You're ridiculous."

"I am honest."

I know.

“You’ve always been like this. Since we first got together.”

“Since before, too. Only I was too afraid to say it.”

The conversation lulled, then, and Shane found himself staring at the reflection of the moon in the river, all wavy and distorted because of the moving water.

"I've been reminiscing a lot today," Shane said, after a long moment.

“Reminiscing? What is reminiscing?”

“Like, thinking about the past. Thinking about *our* past.”

“Oh. I have too.” Ilya's smile was obvious in his voice. "During the ceremony, I kept thinking ‘this can’t be that dork I met in that parking lot’, but somehow you were.”

“That makes one of us. I have zero difficulty believing that the man sitting next to me was that asshole teenager.”

Ilya rolled his eyes, but he also leaned into Shane. His sweetness would always betray him.

It was an uncharacteristically cool evening, considering it was the middle of summer. Shane focused in on a few sensations: the light breeze, the warmth of Ilya’s body next to him, the way their fingers fit together.

“I don’t think I have ever been happier than I am right now,” Shane whispered. “In this exact moment. Sitting right here with you.”

“I don’t think I have, either.”

They stayed out there for a half hour or so, letting the night get darker and the world go by. Shane knew that fundamentally, marriage wouldn’t change their relationship—they’d been hopelessly in love before, and they’d be hopelessly in love after—but it *felt* new, like the beginning of something that they’d finally get to build together. Shane was so tired of living apart.

"This is the last of it," Ilya said, refilling each of their glasses halfway. "We should toast."

"To what?"

"Hmm. Would toasting our marriage be too cliché?"

"Oh, absolutely. We can do better than that, Rozanov."

"To Roger Crowell."

Shane's nose wrinkled. "No."

"To the owners of the Centaurs for not making you take too much of a hometown discount?"

"Better. But no. I don't wanna think about hockey right now."

"Aww, you really do love me." Ilya's eyes were bright and teasing.

"We could toast your mom," Shane blurted.

Shane could actually watch Ilya's emotions play out on his face in real time—surprise, apprehension, consideration, acceptance. All in only a few seconds, but Shane had gotten impossibly good at reading him.

Ilya nodded, then held up his drink.

"To *mama*."

"To Irina."

They gently clinked their glasses together. When Ilya poured a little bit of his out, Shane followed suit. They ended up leaning into each other, Shane's head on Ilya's shoulder.

"She is your mom now too, you know. It's official."

Shane considered this information. "What should I know about my mother-in-law? Would hate to make a bad impression."

"She was not so hard to impress. You are kind and good at hockey and treat me well. That is all it would have taken."

"That implies she wouldn't like me if I were bad at hockey."

"She would. It would just take more time."

"My mom would've liked you *more* if you were bad at hockey."

"Not anymore."

Shane shook his head with a smile. "Not anymore," he agreed.

Shane loved how integrated Ilya was with his family—their family. He loved how easily he'd slipped into their lives, their routines. When they'd first gotten together, Shane had worried

that his parents wouldn't accept him or that Ilya somehow wouldn't fit in. It had been just the three of them for so long.

The worries ended up being unfounded. By the time the first year was over, it was like Ilya had been there the whole time. David became the father he'd never actually had, and Yuna became the maternal figure he'd been missing for fifteen years.

"I love your family," Ilya said.

Shane lifted his eyes so he and Ilya were looking at each other. "*You're my family, now.*"

The words washed over Ilya slowly—Shane watched his eyes widen softly, adoration raw on his face—and then he tipped Shane's face up with gentle fingers under his jaw and took his mouth. Shane whimpered, the contact somewhat unexpected, but allowed Ilya whatever he wanted. Whatever he needed. The kiss was slow and deep, and Shane had to catch his breath when they separated.

Ilya was looking at him so *earnestly*.

"You're the best thing that ever happened to me." Ilya reached out and brushed a few longer pieces of hair away from Shane's face, and met his eyes with an impossibly serious expression. "I need you to know something, Shane. You have me. Always. I will do anything for you. I will give you anything you want. Anything you need."

Shane didn't know how to respond. "Ilya—"

"I mean it."

There weren't words for that, so Shane just leaned forward and kissed Ilya again, and tried to say everything he felt with the movement of his lips: *I feel the same. Anything you need. I'm here. You always come first.*

They parted again, Shane feeling dazed, Ilya keeping their foreheads pressed together. For a long moment, they simply stayed like that and breathed, Shane allowing his eyes to drift shut. Ilya's hands were firm but gentle on his face.

"We're so lucky," Ilya whispered.

Shane opened his eyes. "It's not luck. We worked for this."

"It feels like luck. It feels like I could never do anything to earn this."

When Shane was five years old, he officially decided he was going to be a professional hockey player. His parents, ever supportive, outlined the process for him: minor hockey, development, learning the basics. Triple-A, individual lessons, team tactics. He'd have to dominate by the time he was thirteen or fourteen, because that was when OHL scouts started taking notice, and the only way into the NHL was standing out in the OHL.

Then his dad had told him a secret: if Shane really wanted to do something, all he had to do was picture it. He told him to sit with his goals, imagine them, *see* them happening, and then

come up with a plan to achieve them.

Shane did. Over and over. Anything he wanted, he visualized, and then he made it reality. He pictured himself making tough plays in junior games, he pictured the fabric of an NHL jersey hanging off his teenaged frame, he pictured opening his mouth and taking Ilya to the hilt. He pictured being named captain, hoisting the cup, a tattooed chest in clean lake water.

Every goal he'd ever had, Shane had dragged out of his mind and into the daylight. There were players that were faster than him, there were players that were stronger than him, but no one was as determined, consistent, or *resilient* as Shane Hollander.

Maybe, then, that was why he took issue with Ilya's statement: it didn't feel like luck to Shane. This marriage was a prize, an achievement. They'd both put in *years* of effort to get to this moment. One more thing Shane had seen, wanted, and taken.

Right then, Shane could think of another thing he wanted.

"Take me upstairs."

Ilya grinned at him, all masculine confidence, and then they were both standing up. Shane grabbed the empty bottle and went inside the house, then shut and locked the door behind him. He put the champagne on the counter—tomorrow's problem—and bent down to untie his dress shoes, removing them carefully as to not damage the leather.

When he looked up, Ilya was watching him.

"What?"

"Nothing." Ilya kicked his own shoes off at the door and waited for Shane at the base of the stairs.

In his rush to get Ilya's hands on him, Shane damn-near ran to catch up. Shane Hollander, international superstar of an athlete and arguably the single best hockey player alive, nearly fell onto his ass after coming to a sudden stop and losing traction in his dress socks against the hardwood floor. The only reason he didn't lose his balance was that Ilya put his hands on his waist, stabilizing him and keeping him upright.

"Woah," Ilya said. "Not so fast."

Shane glared. "Shut up."

"You should be grateful."

Their eyes met. One second, two. Words passed silently between.

Shane was going to win.

With all the speed his legs could muster, Shane bolted up the stairs, Ilya just on his heels. He held out a stiff arm to keep Ilya from passing him and beat him to the top by only a step or

two. Still, he let a cocky smile split his face. For whatever fucking reason, he almost never beat Ilya in these little competitions. He was glad for the victory.

"Slowpoke."

"Remember when I saved you from eating shit like thirty seconds ago?"

"Still beat you."

Shane practically sauntered down the hallway, passing by the open door to the spare bedroom. There were piles of boxes surrounding the bed, each one filled with things from the Montreal house that Shane had to deal with. He'd mostly unpacked the things he needed to function day-to-day, like his clothes, but there was still a bunch of random bullshit to be taken care of. It was weird. He never realized how much he owned until he had to put it all in boxes.

They finally entered the master bedroom, which was thankfully neat. Shane would've lost his mind if any of the moving clutter had made their room a mess. Exhaustion settled into his limbs—it had been a long day, and he hadn't realized just how tired he was until he'd laid eyes on their bed.

"God, I need a shower. We both do." Shane loosened his tie until it came undone, then tossed it vaguely in the direction of the dresser. "And tomorrow we need to send thank you messages to everyone who came. Did you see if—"

"*Shane.*"

Shane turned his head, and was assaulted by what he saw. Ilya: tie gone, top buttons undone, sleeves rolled up, holding on to the top of the doorframe. He looked beautiful, with his dumb tattoo visible and his smooth face, and Shane was vaguely reminded of watching him sip vodka in a penthouse in Las Vegas some seven years prior.

"Come here," Ilya said.

They met somewhere halfway, not quite the doorframe and not quite the dresser, mouths coming together with a desperation that was rarely felt now that they were boring and settled. Ilya tasted like champagne and vanilla buttercream and something else, something that was completely Ilya, something that had been there from the very start.

Something that belonged to Shane now.

All Shane could think about was getting his hands on Ilya, everywhere. He pushed the bottom of Ilya's shirt up and trailed his fingers through the hair below Ilya's navel, earning a breathy exhale from Ilya. Shane's mind conjured images of dipping his fingertips downward, past Ilya's belt, into his waistband—

No imagination was required. Shane could do as he pleased.

Shane reached down for Ilya's belt and made quick work of the buckle, which was as far as he got before he was being forcefully pinned against the bedroom wall. His body thudded

against the drywall, Ilya's hand coming between Shane's head and the hard surface to make sure he wouldn't be hurt. Then they were kissing again, and that hand was downright cradling Shane, keeping him close as the other worked the buttons of Shane's shirt.

How many years had his best nights gone exactly like this—caught between Ilya Rozanov and some vertical surface, Ilya's tongue in his mouth, his hands on Ilya's body? Shane could never get sick of this. He never *had* to. He had Ilya for life.

Ilya stepped back slightly to let Shane get his now-unbuttoned shirt off, then closed the space between them. With his body bracketed by Ilya's, it didn't take long for Ilya to realize he was hard as granite, not that Shane was doing anything in particular to hide it.

Ilya brushed his palm over Shane's cock in his pants. "That's for me?"

"Always for you," Shane breathed.

Ilya chose that moment to slot his thigh between Shane's legs, which was an unexpected kindness. He pushed against Ilya experimentally, mostly to find the right angle, and couldn't help the noise he made once he had it.

"There you go," Ilya purred, borderline condescending. He bent his head down to suck on Shane's collarbone.

Shane ignored Ilya, except to rock his hips slowly against Ilya's thigh. It wasn't even close to being enough stimulation to finish, but he didn't care. For once, Shane didn't feel the need to skip all the bullshit and fast forward to the good stuff. He wanted to take it slow. He wanted to feel Ilya's warm palms on his bare skin. He wanted to bury his face in Ilya's hair and inhale his scent until it was entirely memorized.

He wanted to taste him.

Ilya's turn in the driver's seat was up. Shane pushed Ilya away from him with two hands, then spun them around so that Ilya was the one against the wall instead.

"Oh?"

Ilya's eyebrows went up, but he stayed where he'd been placed. He looked almost amused—Shane remembered Ilya once telling him that he loved that Shane was actually strong enough to toss him around. He was the only person Ilya ever had sex with who really could.

Shane grabbed the belt, pulled it through its loops, and tossed it aside. "Trust the process."

Because Shane was feeling sexy and confident and because Ilya was the man he loved, Shane let his fingers trail down Ilya's thighs and undid the zipper of Ilya's pants with his teeth. It was a little tricky (the damn thing was so small) but once he had a good grip, he tugged carefully, gaze locked with Ilya.

Raw adoration was written across Ilya's face, as plain to see as his honey-bright hazel eyes, his thick brows and parted red lips. It was an expression he wore often, but Shane loved when he could pull it from him like *this*.

Finally, zipper undone, Shane reached up and pulled down Ilya's pants and underwear in one motion. Ilya's cock, most of the way hard and begging for attention, sprang up to meet him, and Shane didn't wait another second before opening his mouth and taking it past his lips.

"*Fuck*, Hollander." Ilya's hands immediately found Shane's hair, gently guiding his head to set a rhythm. On another night Shane might've complained about being directed, but tonight he wanted to be whatever Ilya needed. He wanted to give Ilya whatever he wanted.

Still, Ilya couldn't be permitted total control. Shane wrapped one hand around Ilya's thigh and gripped his ass, mostly to keep himself stable, then used the other to gently tug at his balls. He was rewarded with a breathy exhale above him, then a *thunk* as Ilya's head rested back against the wall.

Shane smelled blood in the water, and decided to follow the source. He came off slowly with a little hum, savoring his boyfriend—no, *husband's*—dick like the treat it was. Then, he kissed the tip and down the shaft before replacing his mouth with his hand, stroking lazily. Finally, he dipped his head and sucked one of Ilya's balls into his mouth.

Ilya made a deep noise then at the base of his throat, an exhale mixed with a groan. His grip on Shane's hair tightened, but he wasn't guiding his movements anymore. He *was* cursing in Russian, however, which was always a good sign in Shane's mind.

Shane released Ilya carefully, then looked up to find Ilya's eyes.

"Good?"

"Great."

Pride radiated in Shane's chest as he took Ilya in his throat again. He hadn't been good at this at the beginning. Ilya had never complained, obviously, but Shane knew. Shane loved knowing that he had real technique now. He loved knowing that even back when he didn't, he'd still been able to make Ilya come. Just from the excitement? The knowledge that Ilya had his rival on his knees?

Shane didn't know and he didn't care. What he did care about was indulging in the taste of Ilya's cock, and the feeling of it stretching his lips. He loved the way the muscles of his throat flexed as he swallowed around him. He loved—

"Stop," Ilya said from above, pushing at Shane's shoulders. "Fuck, fuck fuck fuck, *stop*—"

Shane immediately lifted his head and looked up with some concern, but as soon as he saw Ilya's face, he realized nothing was wrong.

"You have to stop," Ilya gritted out, "if you want me to fuck you."

Shane just smiled, proud to have pleased his brand-new husband. He could see in Ilya's gaze that he was drinking Shane in—Shane, half naked, on his knees, staring up at him with wide eyes—and imagining all the different ways he could have him.

It would be gentle, though. Sweet. Shane already knew it. Even if Ilya had wanted to fuck him harshly, he wouldn't have been able to. Not tonight.

Ilya offered an entirely unnecessary hand to help Shane up, which he took, because it had been many years since accepting kindness from Ilya felt like being weak. Once he was on his feet again he felt Ilya's big hands on his waist, holding him firmly in place.

"Can't believe how good you are at that," Ilya said, then pressed an open-mouthed kiss to the hinge of Shane's jaw.

"Lots of practice. Are we gonna go to the bed?"

Ilya didn't answer. Instead, he cupped Shane's face and kissed him again, slow and deep and proprietary, his ruddy cock pressing against Shane's hip. Then his hands slid downwards, over the bare skin of Shane's back, over his ass—and then Shane was being scooped up by his thighs. He wrapped his legs around Ilya's waist and let himself be carried to the bed, which was a little ridiculous seeing as it was all of five steps away, but whatever.

Shane laughed as he was deposited onto the mattress. He was always happy with Ilya, but he couldn't remember the last time he'd been filled with such unrestrained joy. Logically, he knew that there would be unforeseen difficulties ahead, that life would throw them curveballs, but all Shane cared about was the new knowledge that he'd navigate every single one of those tribulations with Ilya at his side. It felt unreal. It felt like a fantasy. It *had* been a fantasy for so many years. Shane remembered chiding himself: *he's never gonna be your boyfriend*.

Ilya wasn't his boyfriend. Ilya was his husband.

Shane felt hands on his hips and looked down—Ilya had undone his belt and was now unbuttoning his suit pants. He lifted his ass to make it easier for Ilya to pull them off, along with his underwear. With every meaningful item of clothing discarded, Shane thought that would be it. Then Ilya grabbed onto one of his legs, holding it up by the calf. Shane wasn't really sure what he was doing, but allowed it. He watched Ilya kiss the arch of his foot *twice* before tugging off his sock.

"You're gross," Shane said. His cheeks almost hurt from all the smiling.

"I'm in love. Forgive me."

Ilya dropped Shane's leg and removed the other sock, tossing both in the same general direction of the rest of their clothes. Now completely naked, Shane shuffled up the bed. Once he reached the top, he sat against the headboard and watched Ilya get undressed.

Ilya had always been a showman. It was natural to him, practically inherent to his personality. From the time he was nineteen—hell, from the time he was in juniors—he'd been able to pull a crowd to its feet the way Shane never could. He didn't care if they loved him or hated him. He cared that they were watching.

It was different now, of course. They weren't the men they were when they were twenty-two. The stands didn't matter anymore—Ilya's crowd was a single spectator.

Because Ilya was such a natural, Shane didn't even know if what happened next was on purpose. What he *did* know is that Ilya slowly undid each button of his dress shirt with nimble fingers, and peeled it off his body with complete fluidity before unceremoniously dropping it to the floor. Then he got on the bed and came towards Shane like some large cat, all flexing muscle and narrowed eyes.

He never even broke Shane's gaze.

"Fuck, you're gorgeous," Shane said once Ilya was near enough to touch. "I still can't believe I get to see you like this."

"Only you." Ilya winked, which should've been cheesy, but the bastard pulled it off. Shane watched Ilya's eyes rake up his body. First his thighs, then sliding up to his cock, then his stomach, his chest, and finally landing on Shane's face.

"All of this is mine. Forever."

Shane nodded. "Yours."

Ilya *finally* leaned down and kissed him: passionate, but not hurried. For once in his life, Shane didn't feel the need to claw at Ilya until he was inside. They had time: the whole night, and a lifetime after that. However much he wanted Ilya, whatever ways he wanted him in—Shane would get them all.

Shane squirmed when Ilya lowered his head to kiss and suck on his neck. He knew how much Ilya loved it—loved to abuse all the sensitive points that made Shane whimper—but fuck, every square inch of Shane was wrought out and buzzing. Ilya found the pulse point under Shane's jaw and nipped at it, earning a yelp. Then he gently sucked the spot as an apology, and Shane had the sudden urge to beg Ilya to make him see it later.

It wasn't a good idea. When they sequestered themselves at the cottage, it was one thing—a hickey would only be seen by the two of them. The only people who might see it were his parents and the Pikes, and while that was a little embarrassing, it wasn't really an issue.

This was different. They left for Spain in two days, and in theory, *anyone* could see them. Someone could take pictures. Those pictures could get posted online. It was such a teenaged thing to want, anyway. They were grown adults and a married couple, they didn't need love bites to prove to the world that they were into each other.

Shane found that he didn't really care.

"Do it," Shane ordered.

Ilya's eyes lifted, dark and hungry. He didn't need further explanation to know what Shane was asking.

"The ring is not enough? You need more? You need everyone to know just how much you belong to me?"

"*Fuck* yes."

Ilya growled and latched back onto the spot where he'd been gently nipping before. It was hardly the first time he'd left marks, but it was the first time he'd left marks knowing someone would see it. The burn was familiar, something to be reveled in.

After a long moment, Ilya let go, then licked the spot he'd bruised. Shane was excited to see how it would look the next morning, and also so deliriously horny he was losing the ability to think straight. He wanted Ilya inside, more than he knew what to do with.

"Ilya, please."

Any other night, Ilya would've made him spell it out, would've made him beg. Maybe the sentimentality of the wedding had him feeling generous. He didn't ask Shane to explain himself, just stretched towards the nightstand on his side of the bed and tugged the drawer open.

"Spread your legs."

Shane parted his thighs automatically, his muscles obeying Ilya's command before his brain had time to process it. It had been like that for a long time, he supposed. When it came to sex, he'd always trusted Ilya implicitly. From the very first time.

Ilya settled in the new space Shane had created for him, his hips brushing Shane's inner thighs. "Tell me what you want."

Shane didn't know. Shane couldn't know, not with so many possibilities. He could name anything. Any hedonistic indulgence, any desire, any fantasy, and Ilya would give it to him. There was no doubt in his mind.

Time, he thought. They had an entire future spread out before them, a lifetime of chances. Shane didn't need to have everything right now, that night. He could choose. There would be more opportunities.

"Want your cock," Shane finally decided. "I don't care anymore, just fuck me, *please*."

Ilya grinned, that crooked, devilish smile that had been driving Shane insane since he was eighteen years old. "In a minute."

Shane scoffed and tipped his head back in the pillows. Damn him for thinking Ilya would actually play nice for once. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on the good things: Ilya's hand, which he'd wrapped around Shane's cock; Ilya's teeth against his earlobe; Ilya's hips against his inner thighs.

With his eyes shut, the press of a slick finger at Shane's entrance came as a surprise. He opened his eyes and looked up at his husband. Shane could feel the heat on his cheeks, and

could only imagine the sight he made at that moment: pink and sweaty with mussed hair and parted lips, eyes begging for something he knew he'd have in just a few moments.

Shane shuddered when Ilya's fingers pressed deeper. This was far from new—new wasn't exactly common between them nowadays—but it managed to take him by surprise every time. It was like he forgot how it felt the second Ilya finished.

"So pretty like this," Ilya murmured. "I love the way you open up for me."

"You make it easy."

Ilya, bless him, didn't stretch this out nearly as long as he could've: just a few minutes of gentle fucking and stretching. He waited until Shane was pushing back on his fingers and keening, of course, but another night that might've just been the warm-up.

"I'm ready," Shane said in soft Russian. "I want you."

Ilya withdrew his fingers, then carefully settled his weight over Shane. He loved how Ilya felt on top of him—protective and comforting, like a warm blanket. Shane let Ilya take his mouth again, and he didn't feel the need to rush him this time, knowing he was mere seconds away from getting what he wanted.

When Ilya pulled back, he was looking at Shane more tenderly than he'd expected. Tender, and yet... serious, too.

"Ya tebya lyublyu," Ilya whispered.

Shane smiled. "Ya tozhe tebya lyublyu."

This time, Shane was the one who stretched up and caught Ilya's lips in a kiss. He loved kissing Ilya more than almost anything on the planet. He loved how adoring Ilya's kisses were, how they made his stomach float and his toes curl, how he could be loving and filthy at the exact same time.

Ilya smiled at him when they separated, then pushed his legs back until his knees were nearly at his ears, but didn't immediately move to fuck him. Rather, he just took in the view of Shane before him, open and slick and flushed and wanting. Shane knew he must have looked like a whore right then, and he didn't care. When it came to Ilya, he *was* a whore.

"Look at you," Ilya said, then pressed his lips to the inside of Shane's calf. "On display for me. Like the fucking gift you are."

"Always for you," Shane said.

Leaning into Ilya's possessiveness had been the right move: Ilya exhaled and pressed the blunt tip of his cock to Shane's hole. There was a moment of frozen anticipation, and then Ilya finally, *finally* pushed in.

The drag was slow, hot, and perfect.

Once Ilya was fully settled inside of Shane's body, they both stilled for a moment. Shane wrapped his legs around Ilya's waist, one hand knotting itself into the loose curls at the nape of Ilya's neck. He didn't want Ilya to be able to separate even an inch from him.

Then Ilya started to move, and Shane forgot anything but that feeling. He forgot anything but the perfect way his Ilya, his *husband* worked his body, the sweet grind of Ilya inside him, the pressure and the fullness and the stretch. Every inch of Shane was filled with warmth.

"You said you were thinking about it all night," Shane panted. "How is it?"

"Unbelievable." Ilya placed Shane's wrists on either side of his head. "You're so fucking tight."

Shane grinned and kissed him, then fell back into the pillows again. Ilya was doing all the work tonight, which left Shane feeling fuzzy and spoiled. He was allowed to just lay here and take it, accept the pleasure Ilya was gifting him, the rolls of Ilya's hips and the sound of skin meeting skin.

Then again, Ilya loved to fuck, loved the physicality of it—his cheeks turned red, little droplets of sweat forming at his hairline. Shane watched a bead roll down Ilya's face, down his nose, until it rolled clean off the tip. It landed on his cheek with a tiny splash.

Shane, feeling drunk on sensation, reached up to his own cheek, scooped up the little drop with the tip of his finger, and licked it off, all without breaking Ilya's gaze. Ilya growled in response, tightening his grip on Shane's body and picking up his pace. The rhythm was overwhelming but not rough; every thrust was careful and controlled. They'd been fucking for long enough that Shane could easily tell when Ilya was focused on Shane's pleasure and when he was lost in himself—this was the former.

Ilya knew what he was doing, too, which meant that tell-tale pleasure was already coiling low in Shane's belly. He wanted to stroke himself, wanted to bring himself over that edge, and also wanted the night to go on forever.

Like always, Shane's impatience won out. He tried to reach between his legs and found Ilya holding him down again, his thumb gently pressed into Shane's palm.

"Let me do it for you," Ilya murmured, dipping his head to press messy kisses to the bend of Shane's neck.

Shane tipped his head back to grant Ilya better access. It wasn't every time he could come without his hands—sometimes, no matter how well Ilya fucked him, it just wouldn't work out.

Tonight, though, he could. He was pretty sure. If they both worked at it. Fuck, he wanted it. He wanted it more than he knew what to do with. This could get so intense, so fast when he wasn't careful. It was the constant feeling of being on the edge, like he'd spill over every moment, and yet his orgasm never came.

"O-okay," Shane managed to grind out. His skin felt hot and over-sensitive, his limbs felt heavy, and his entire body was focused in on the slowly-building tension inside him. He

wanted everything, he wanted Ilya everywhere, Ilya's weight on top of him, Ilya's *scent*.

Ilya reared back and tugged Shane down the bed a little by his hips, so he could push his legs back a little farther fuck him deeper. In the shift, he slipped out of Shane's body.

Desperately, Shane reached down, blindly trying to find his husband's cock and guide him inside again. "Give it *back*."

Ilya *immediately* lined himself back up and entered Shane, at an even more impossible angle this time. Shane let out a relieved moan, overwhelmed by sensation, clinging to Ilya's back like a raft in the ocean. He was sure he'd already covered Ilya in red scratches, but he knew he'd admire them in the morning.

Shane still remembered the first time he'd shredded Ilya's back open, during one of their hookups. He'd apologized profusely, but Ilya had just smiled and called them *victory stripes*. His attitude hadn't changed in the years since.

"You feel so good," Ilya murmured into Shane's ear, thrusts punctuating his words. "Like home."

"*Fuck*, yes. It's where you belong."

It got fast then, and rough, and quick. And all the other things Shane loved. Shane could feel the tension in his belly, different from when he was allowed to stroke himself. More intense. He started babbling, things he knew weren't English, and when the orgasm finally came, it wasn't gentle, it wasn't just a bit of warmth. It *ripped* through him, harsh and unforgiving, and he screamed into Ilya's shoulder as his body tensed and convulsed.

It felt incredible, and like far too much, and Shane wanted it to go on forever.

A few hot, desperate tears rolled down Shane's cheeks as he began to come down. He wasn't one to cry during sex, usually, but tonight wasn't a normal night. He'd never felt so loved, so accepted, so vulnerable—and so overwhelmed.

Ilya slowed, then stilled inside him, caressing his cheek and kissing him. It was impossibly tender, hot and reassuring and masculine and *Ilya*. When he started to withdraw, though, Shane locked his ankles behind Ilya's back.

"You want me to keep going?"

It was a fair question. After an orgasm this intense, Shane's body would usually be too spent for Ilya to keep fucking him. He'd end up finishing a different way. Tonight, though...

"Yes." Shane nodded. "Don't you dare fucking stop. I need you to come inside me."

Ilya watched Shane carefully as he pushed back inside. Shane accepted him greedily, and when more little tears formed in the corners of Shane's eyes, Ilya offered two fingers, which Shane greedily took into his mouth. The sucking let him focus on something besides his overstimulated body. Ilya was looking in his eyes, and Shane felt as though he were cracked down the middle, like Ilya could see straight through him.

"Fuck, *fuck*—Shane, I—"

Ilya spilled inside him, losing the ability to form coherent words. He just dug his hands into Shane's body and cried out, cock twitching and spurting and *filling* Shane, the way he'd craved.

Ilya didn't usually yell like that when he came, but it wasn't a usual night. Besides, being in a house instead of a hotel room had its benefits. Once he'd finished, Ilya collapsed on top of Shane. Shane let him, more than happy to accept his husband's weight.

"I love you," Ilya murmured, then kissed the hickey he'd placed no more than half an hour prior. "I love you so fucking much."

Sometimes Shane thought that Ilya acted twice as sappy as he felt to make up for seven years of buried feelings. Would he run out of affection, eventually, a pen low on ink?

"I love you too."

"I need a minute," Ilya said. "Can't feel my legs."

Shane laughed. "Me too. And I'm thirsty."

Wordlessly, Ilya grabbed his plain black water bottle from his nightstand and handed it to Shane. It felt around halfway full.

"Isn't this from yesterday?"

Ilya looked at him blankly. "It's water."

Shane still thought it was kind of gross, but he was also really fucking thirsty, so he popped the cap and drank the water, anyway.

"I'll go get the shower started." Ilya pulled out of Shane carefully, although Shane couldn't help the little dissatisfied noise he made. He wished he could keep Ilya inside of him forever.

A minute or two passed, Shane stretching his sore muscles and listening to the water run. Ilya's day-old water was refreshing, and Shane's body was recovering. He felt better, now, and the steam wafting from the bathroom indicated that their shower was just about ready. When he stood, his legs were still slightly shaky, but he was able to make it to Ilya without any real drama, thankfully.

They showered together slowly and lazily, enjoying the warm water and the steam. Ilya wanted to wash Shane's hair, and Shane let him, resting his head against Ilya's chest and hugging him.

When Ilya dropped to his knees, Shane didn't complain about that, either.

Ilya made quick work of him. Shane loved the sight: Ilya's powerful chest, heaving, his head bobbing as he worked his throat around Shane's cock. He gripped on as well as he could to

Ilya's wet hair, and it didn't take more than a few minutes for Ilya to bring him over the edge for the second time that night.

Ilya grinned up at him cocky after he'd swallowed. "You taste so fucking good."

"Shut up."

"I mean it!"

They got out of the shower and dried off, then brushed their teeth. Sometimes Shane would do Ilya's product routine for him, but tonight wasn't going to be one of those nights. He put his head on Ilya's shoulder instead, and watched Ilya work curl cream into his hair.

Ilya kissed the top of his head. Shane opened his eyes; he hadn't even realized he'd shut them.

"Go lay down. I will be there in a minute."

Were it a different night, Shane would've put up a fight, but the combined force of a long, high-energy day, two great orgasms, and a hot shower left him unable to provide any resistance. He nodded sleepily, kissed the loon on Ilya's shoulder, and wandered off to bed.

Shane laid on his back, comfortable, under the covers in his newly-broken-in marital bed, and smiled at the ceiling. He was reminded of a similar night, some ten or so years ago, the very first time he'd let Ilya fuck him.

It was the start of something that Shane would *never* have been able to predict. He remembered being pressed up against the hotel wall and kissed in a way he'd never experienced before. He remembered how Ilya had taken the lead—confident, passionate, gentle. At the time, Shane had figured that Ilya was demanding in bed, used to giving orders and getting what he wanted.

Looking back, Shane realized that Ilya could probably tell that he was nervous, and thought that providing some direction would help calm Shane's racing mind. Ilya had been right, of course.

He remembered gentle reassurances of *we do not have to*. He remembered closing his eyes as Ilya pushed his fingers inside him for the first time. Shane had experience now—he knew how much prep work it took—and he knew that Ilya had worked him on his fingers far, far longer than was reasonably necessary. Even for an uptight virgin.

Ilya, the sap that he was, had been worried for Shane. He'd needed to make sure it would be good for Shane, even as a self-centered, hedonistic twenty-year-old. Fuck, it *had* been good. Even now, did Ilya know how many months afterwards Shane had almost exclusively jerked off to the memory of being fucked by Ilya Rozanov?

Shane remembered his thighs trembling when they were done, and a passing, fantastical wish that Ilya had come inside him, instead of into the condom. He remembered the sickening realization that Ilya was *good*. That he'd done this many, many times before.

Was that a flash of jealousy? All the way back then? Shane wasn't sure.

And then they had finished, and Ilya had gone to shower, and Shane had laid on the bed and smiled, much like he was doing now. He'd been happy then because he'd had his first-ever undoubtedly enjoyable sexual experience. At the time, he'd only been mildly horrified that it was with his archrival, because he thought it was a one-time thing. He thought he'd be able to taste Rozanov once, then let him go.

Shane had never been more happy to be wrong.

Had Shane walked into that hotel room in that exact moment, his twenty-year-old self on the bed, twenty-year-old Ilya in the shower, and told his younger self that they'd wind up sharing a home, becoming teammates, getting married, and planning for kids... would he have been happy?

No, he thought, then chuckled to himself. If the Shane Hollander of a decade ago knew that he ended up married to Ilya Rozanov, he'd have been disgusted. Horrified. Forget the fact that it was a same-sex marriage, which already would've been panic-inducing: Rozanov was a prick. Shane hated him. Why the hell would they become a couple?

But a decade ago, Shane hadn't known how Ilya sounded when he breathed in the middle of the night. He hadn't known what it felt like to have strong arms wrapped around his waist, to have sweet nothings whispered to him in a language he barely spoke. He didn't know the white-hot flash of vindication he'd feel when he watched someone he loved brand themselves for him.

He hadn't *known* Ilya. Not really.

Shane covered his eyes with his hands. His grin hadn't faded an inch. When did he get so sappy?

"What are you smiling about?"

Shane moved his hands and turned to face the bathroom. Ilya was standing in the doorway, his hair wet, but now styled. He was still naked, leaned against the doorframe with his arms crossed, every long line of limb and muscle accentuated for Shane's pleasure.

Ilya was beautiful.

"I was thinking about our first time," Shane admitted. "Do you remember?"

Ilya's eyes tilted up. "I want you to think for about half a second, and then reevaluate whether or not to ask me that question."

"Ooo. Reevaluate. Big word."

That got a laugh. "You are such a dick to me."

"It was a compliment!"

“Do you know how articulate I am in Russian?”

“How would I?” Shane didn’t get the chance to continue his defense, as Ilya had closed the distance between them, gotten on top of him, and began tickling Shane’s ribs. Shane immediately started to laugh, even as he tried to fight Ilya off. “No, no no no no no—”

“Fine.” Ilya withdrew his villainous fingers, collapsing in bed next to Shane. “Only because it is the wedding night.”

“What a gentleman.” Shane snuggled up to his new husband, tucking his head against Ilya’s chest. Ilya’s arm automatically wrapped around him.

“Do not test me.”

They laid like that for a long moment, the only noise the soft, rhythmic sound of their breathing.

“Why did you ask me if I remember, anyway?”

“Oh. Because I wanted to tell you something.” Shane lifted his head. “Do you remember what you did right after we finished?”

Ilya nodded. “I showered. You stayed on the bed.”

“Mhm. What I wanted to tell you is that while I was on the bed, I smiled at the ceiling like a dumbass. For a few minutes, I think.”

“Why?”

“I was just that happy. Part of it was that you were my first good sexual experience, and I was excited about that. But also... I don’t know. You were just so sweet. You were so good to me. It took me by surprise.”

Ilya raised an eyebrow. “Were you expecting me to be selfish?”

“No.”

“To hurt you?”

“No!” Maybe Shane had misspoke—Ilya wasn’t getting what he was trying to say.

“Then what surprised you?”

Shane nuzzled up closer to Ilya. He tucked his face somewhere into his husband’s neck before he spoke.

“It was just a really weird situation, I guess. Given... everything. And I was really vulnerable, and really scared. I didn’t think it was going to be *bad*, but my expectations weren’t high, either. You were so sweet, and careful, and you made me feel so safe, and you

made everything feel really good.” He nervously ran his palm across Ilya’s chest, soft hair catching against his skin. “I *shouldn’t* have felt as safe as I did. I barely knew you.”

“I was scared too.”

Shane lifted his head. “Why were you scared?”

“It was my first time with you. I didn’t want to mess it up.”

“I think it’s a little different for me, considering I was the one who had to put that—” he pointed in the general direction of Ilya’s crotch “—in my ass.”

“This is true.” Ilya laughed. “But I was still scared. I thought if it was bad, you would not want to see me again. Lots of pressure.”

“Why would you care if I didn’t want to see you again?”

Ilya's eyes went soft. “Because I already liked you. A lot.”

Goddammit—Shane hated when Ilya did this to him, made his cheeks get hot with just a few words. “Stop.”

“Is like I said—I fell for you the first time I saw you.”

“You don’t *really* believe that.”

“No, I *really* do. You don’t know how much I thought about you, even before we first met up. It was pathetic, honestly.”

“Well.” Shane held up his newly-adorned ring finger. “If this is how you being pathetic ends up, I’m happy for it.”

Ilya grinned. “Me too.”

Shane snuggled a little closer to Ilya. He really was tired. Maybe it was time to go to sleep for real...

“I will tell you a secret,” Ilya said. “Since it is our wedding day, and we can’t keep secrets anymore.”

“I’m listening.”

“I was smiling, too. In the shower. I had to make myself calm down before I could come back into the hotel room.”

Shane *giggled* against Ilya’s skin. “Oh, really? Had to play it cool?”

“Of course I did. It scared me how happy I was. That I had gotten you off, and that you let me touch you.”

“You weren’t sure I’d come?”

“It was your first time.” Ilya shrugged. “Sometimes people don’t. I was proud of myself. I still get proud of myself when I make you come.”

Shane was going to make fun of Ilya for that, but quickly realized he couldn’t—he felt the same way. Nothing brought him quite as much joy as making Ilya feel good.

“Then you should be very happy tonight.”

“I am.”

“I’m happy too.”

The conversation naturally wound down after that, both of them with nothing left to say. They were past comfortable silences at that point—they spent almost their entire day together, every day. There were quiet moments, and there were moments they talked, and both were equally treasured. Shane let exhaustion seep into his bones and snuggled with his new husband. His hands tangled lazily in Ilya's hair, tugging at the wet curls or wrapping them around his fingers before releasing them.

“You are going to mess my hair up,” Ilya whispered.

“I’m finger-curling it.” Shane didn’t really know what that meant, but Rose had told him about it once or twice and said it was a trend on TikTok, so he figured Ilya would probably know about it, too.

“Sure you are.”

Shane looked up at him. He felt like he might drift off at any moment. “Have I ever told you how beautiful your eyes are?”

“Once or twice.”

“They’re like… emeralds, with honey drizzled inside. Except way prettier.”

“Shh.” Ilya kissed him. “Sleep.”

“I don't want to,” Shane said. “I never want this night to end.”

“I know, sweetheart. But it is a good thing.”

“What makes you say that?”

Ilya smiled. “Now that the wedding is over, we get to start the marriage.”

Shane pouted, heart filling with unbidden affection. He nuzzled a little closer to Ilya.

“You’re sickly-sweet, you know that?”

“You *make* me sweet. I was never like this before we met. You bring it out in me.”

“I like you exactly as you are,” Shane said.

"I know you do."

"I'm exhausted."

Ilya looked amused. "Then we should sleep."

"Okay." Shane yawned. "Goodnight, Ilya."

"Goodnight, Shane." Ilya kissed his temple, then, and Shane allowed himself to fall asleep.

Waking up in Ilya's arms had never been commonplace—infrequent, a treat that came in the summers, and otherwise only a few times a month. At best. Shane was almost dizzy with the vastness of that simple pleasure, spread out before him.

Every morning, for the rest of his life, Shane Hollander could expect his husband to be the first thing he saw when he opened his eyes.

Ilya was beautiful, of course. He was facing away from Shane, the morning light illuminating his skin, red scratch marks from last night highlighted across his back.

His back, which was shaking. And trembling. If Shane didn't know any better, he'd think—

"Ilya?"

Ilya made a wet, weepy noise on the other side of the bed.

"Ilya, what's going on?"

"Nothing. Go back to sleep, it's early."

Shane half sat up and put a hand on Ilya's waist. He hoped he was being reassuring. "You don't have to tell me, but I wish you would."

Ilya sighed, a noise that sounded like relenting, then rolled onto his back. His eyes were red and glassy, little tear tracks on his cheeks. Shane hated it.

"I had bad thoughts. I am... afraid," Ilya said. "I have not had so much to lose in a very long time."

"Baby." Shane grabbed Ilya's hand and squeezed it. "You're not gonna lose me."

"What if there is a car accident?" Ilya sniffled. "Or you get sick, or..."

Shane didn't know what to say. He could tell Ilya that those things wouldn't happen. That he was right here, and always would be, and he'd love him forever.

That would be bullshit, though, because as they'd both learned firsthand, nothing was guaranteed. Shane had never imagined sobbing in a hotel room at the nightmare of a crash that had thankfully not come to pass. Ilya had never imagined getting married without his mother watching.

Shane would say something else, then.

"There's no point in worrying about the stuff we can't control." Shane moved his hand in (hopefully) reassuring circles over the broad expanse of his husband's back. "If we're scared of things that might happen in the future, we miss out on enjoying right now. And I feel like right now is pretty great."

Ilya tipped his head onto Shane's shoulder, then sniffed again. "It is, isn't it?"

"Yeah. It is." Shane smiled. "I mean, for starters, we have, like, eight tons of leftover wedding cake in the freezer. I was going to suggest cake for breakfast."

That got the smile out of Ilya that Shane had been angling for. "You? Cake for breakfast? Oh, you must *really* love me."

"I do." Shane kissed the top of Ilya's head. "I love you more than anything."

There wasn't really anything else to say, and Ilya wasn't really crying anymore, so Shane just hugged him from the side. It was the best thing he could think to do. The sun was up, the orange light of early morning flooding the room, and he took a moment to marvel at the pretty copper and gold swirls in his husband's hair.

He could've spent hours like that. Breathing Ilya in.

"C'mon," Ilya said. "Let's go do coffee and breakfast."

"We are not actually having cake," Ilya informed Shane.

"Oh. Why not?"

"I want to cook for you. We can have cake after dinner."

Shane was sitting at the kitchen island with a mug in front of him. Ilya, being Ilya, had not only gone through the trouble of pulling fresh shots of espresso from the machine a teammate had gifted him two birthdays prior—he'd also steamed milk to pile on top. It wasn't coffee—it was a homemade cappuccino, prepared with love. He watched Ilya prepare their food: bread, eggs, maple syrup.

French toast. Homemade. Shane was already quite enjoying the married life.

A few minutes later, Ilya served Shane his plate, then sat across from him with his own. The empty champagne bottle from the night prior was still sitting on the kitchen island. Shane had the ridiculous, sentimental urge to keep it. Which he wasn't going to do. He picked up the bottle and stood, intending on tossing it in their little recycling bin under the counter.

Ilya grabbed Shane's arm once he realized what he was doing. "No, wait—we should keep it. That is the first thing we did as a married couple."

Shane raised an eyebrow. "There was a whole reception. People didn't start going home until, like, nine. Did you forget?"

"Doesn't count. We weren't alone. This—" he took the bottle from Shane "—was the very first way we chose to spend our time together. I am keeping it whether you want me to or not."

"Marriage is about compromise."

Ilya ignored him. "Maybe I will make it a vase in our room."

"No, you won't," Shane said, even as he had to resist the urge to swoon, because what was once Ilya's room was now *ours*.

"Hey, Shane?" Ilya's voice had gone serious. He set the bottle back onto the table.

Shane looked up at him, mildly concerned. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry for being sad this morning. I just... my brain took me a weird way when I saw you asleep next to me. I would die of heartbreak, I think, if something happened to you."

I would die of heartbreak. Shane swallowed.

"You don't have to be sorry. I told you, I don't need you to be anything but yourself. I'll sit with you as long as you need." Shane held one of Ilya's hands between his own. "As for the other thing... why don't you talk to Galina about it next week?"

"Okay." Ilya nodded.

"Besides." Shane let go of Ilya's hand and took a bite of syrupy bread. "We both know that one day you're going to piss me off really bad and I'm gonna kill you."

Ilya smiled, *finally*. "Can you make it not hurt?"

Shane held out a hand to be shaken. "Puck to the head?"

Ilya took the deal, his eyes crinkled at the corners. When Shane tried to withdraw his hand, Ilya grabbed on instead, preventing him from taking his freedom.

They finished breakfast like that—feet brushing under the table, holding hands, even though it made it incredibly inconvenient to eat. After that they wandered onto the couch, lounging half on top of each other while some sitcom Shane's dad loved played in the background. They were hardly watching, too focused on smiling at each other and kissing.

Then Shane realized he'd forgotten to do something that morning. He sat up, ignoring Ilya's confused expression.

"I'm gonna go grab the mail."

"Right now?"

"I don't want to forget again!"

Ilya rolled his eyes playfully. "You and your routines."

Shane smirked at Ilya, shoving his feet into a pair of slides that belonged to... one of them, and winked before going out the door.

There wasn't anything too interesting in the mailbox. A couple of bills that needed to be paid, some spam letters. One thing did stand out, though: a pink envelope with handwritten information addressed to *The Happy Couple*. Shane looked at the top left to see the return address.

Svetlana Vetrova. Boston, Massachusetts.

Shane went back inside and handed the envelope to Ilya. "From your friend."

"Oh!" Ilya smiled. "I wasn't expecting... I told her we were getting married and she was welcome to come, but I didn't think she'd send anything."

Shane kissed Ilya's hair in response. "Open it. I want to see."

Ilya peeled the flap of the envelope back, then removed the card. The front cover had a few flowers on it, and the word "Congratulations" in golden font. The inside was in Russian, except a small note at the bottom: *Shane, if you don't trust his translation, here's my phone number. XOXO, Svetlana*

Below that was a phone number with a Boston area code. Shane smiled, genuinely amused. He'd once despised Svetlana for existing, but she seemed like an interesting woman, if nothing else. Maybe it would pay off to make nice with her.

That could come later. For now: "What does it say?"

"The first line is a Russian saying... hmm." Ilya paused for a moment, eyebrows furrowed as he tried to come up with a translation. "Is like, 'husband and wife are one devil.' It means married couples start thinking the same way and liking the same things. Rubbing off on each other?"

"Oh. That's kind of sweet, actually." Shane wrapped his arms loosely around Ilya's upper body. "What's the rest?"

"She says that we are both insane, but we are good for each other, and she wishes us lots of happiness."

"See, that's how we know she's more your friend than mine. *I'm* not crazy."

Ilya didn't even respond—he just snorted.

Shane gently took the greeting card out of Ilya's hands and tossed it onto the coffee table. "Y'know, there's something else I was meaning to do before I remembered the whole mail thing."

"Really? And what was that?"

Shane walked his fingers up Ilya's leg, trying his hardest to be coy. "I think I wanted to suck my husband's cock."

"Oh, well don't let *me* stop you." Ilya laid back on the couch, putting his hands behind his head, the picture of lazed contentment.

Shane laughed, dug his fingers into Ilya's waistband, and got to work.

Shane spent the rest of his day lounging around the house with his husband, playing with the dog, opening wedding presents, and having sex. By the time dinnertime rolled around, neither of them were particularly interested in cooking, so Ilya suggested going to the cute little sandwich shop around the corner from Ilya's neighborhood.

The owner knew Ilya since he went there so frequently, and while Shane being there too was a relatively recent addition, he'd never had anything to say about it. Just waved to them both and asked Ilya if he wanted the Reuben with extra dressing, like usual.

"Yeah, you *would* want extra Russian dressing," Shane teased.

"There's nothing Russian about it. If it was Russian, it would be made out of sour cream."

"Isn't that a stereotype?"

"Stereotypes are sometimes a little bit true. Like polite Canadians."

After they'd finished ordering, Ilya swiped the debit card associated with the brand-new joint checking account they'd opened for household expenses. It didn't really matter—both of them had more money than they knew what to do with—but Shane liked the principle of it. He liked the thought that they were both contributing to the care of their shared home.

When their food was ready, they sat together in their little corner booth and ate, on the same side instead of across from each other. Shane felt silly and young, much younger than he was, like they were teenagers on their first date.

"I like coming here with you," Shane said, earnest and soft.

"I like coming here with you too," Ilya replied. "Even though once people realize we eat here, they're going to start camping out to try to get autographs from Shane Hollander."

Shane just smiled. "Say my name again."

Ilya's brow furrowed. "Shane?"

"The other one."

"Hollander."

Shane sighed happily, some bone-deep satisfaction he hadn't known he needed settling over him. He supposed he owed Ilya an explanation.

"I love how it sounds in your accent." He nuzzled Ilya's shoulder. "I always have. Even back when I hated you, I loved to listen to you talk."

"I think I will have to say it more, now that I am a Hollander, too."

The thought filled Shane with warm, fuzzy feelings that only Ilya had ever been able to truly pull from him. Neither of them had actually changed their names—they'd considered hyphenating, but a six-syllable last name was quite a mouthful—but that didn't really matter. They were one family, now. Ilya was a Hollander and Shane was a Rozanov.

"Let's be honest, you've been a Hollander for years. I'm pretty sure my parents like you better than me."

"Yeah, they do."

Shane playfully punched Ilya's shoulder, and Ilya faux-yelped in response. "One day of marriage, and already you are hitting me."

"I'm the worst." Shane rolled his eyes. "Hey—wait. What last name are we gonna give our kids, anyway?"

"We can figure that out once we have some."

"How many?"

Ilya leaned back, propping himself up with his hands. "At least two. I think I maybe want four?"

"We agreed four was too much."

"Eh. I changed my mind." Ilya took a sip of his coke and shrugged, casual as ever. "You make me want to be a papa."

Shane had to come up with something quickly to suppress the wave of heat passing through his body. "You just can't stand the thought of Hayden beating you at something."

“Hayden will not beat me at anything. Definitely not parenting.”

Shane nodded in agreement. “They’re gonna have *two* stay-at-home dads. They’ll be the best cared-for kids on the planet.”

“We’re going to have to find something for you to do all day when we start having kids. You’ll go crazy, otherwise.”

Shane furrowed his eyebrows. “I’m gonna be playing hockey. Obviously.”

Ilya laughed.

“What?”

“If I have retired, you have *definitely* retired.”

“That’s confident.”

“Is true. You have maybe five more good years in you. I will play until I’m fifty.”

Shane gave Ilya a look. “You’ll play until I tell you you’re not allowed to anymore. I want you to be able to, y’know, walk. Play with our grandkids. All that stuff.”

"Such a worrier," Ilya chided.

"Just figuring that out now?"

Ilya smiled at him, all kindness and endearment. "No. I've known that for years."

Shane smiled, even as his cheeks got absurdly hot. Someone understood him, had understood him for years. Someone had cut him to his core, to the very bone, and liked all of it. Someone *knew* him. Someone saw him at his worst—his overworked mind, his annoying fussiness, his flashes of temper—and still wanted every ounce of it.

And wasn't that what it was to be loved?

Shane thought it was. He thought love was being known, and also a million other things. A million things he'd had the joy of discovering over the last five years.

Love was gentle hands in a hotel room, whispers of *are you sure?* Love was the slow, creeping realization that Shane was capable of being adored and cherished and admired, even, simply for being the person he was. Not for any achievement he'd ever earned.

Love was a morning in the cottage, where the sun would peek gently through the trees as if it was trying not to disturb the lovers in their bed, and Shane would wake up with his Ilya's arms wrapped around him as though he was scared Shane would get away.

A piece of french toast. A spoiled, fluffy dog. A private home, tucked between a semi-circular driveway and the river Shane was born along.

Love, in all its scary, wonderful, terrible forms, was a man with a crooked grin and wild curls. Shane couldn't wait to spend the rest of his life with him.

End Notes

TWO Ilya doorframe leans because I couldn't decide which one to cut. Also, if you've read *On the Brink of Forever*, you may have noticed a familiar exchange about the Reuben sandwich, haha.

thank you so much for reading! comments and kudos are always appreciated :)

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