Pretend

by Strudelmugel, TikolaNesla

Summary

When they're five, Logan teaches Eduard how to pretend. He finds it comes in handy later in life.

Notes

Logan - Australia
Jem - nyo Australia

This is a project between TikolaNesla and I that we've been working on for a while now, featuring our favourite pairing: OzEst. We've both written large parts of this fic together and it was really fun!
Now, while I chose not to use archive warnings, the individual warnings for this fic are in the tags. But yeah, this fic touches heavily on various aspects of abuse. Neither OzEst or the other pairings listed are portrayed as abusive, though. New Zealand and Ukraine aren't going to be portrayed as abusive.
Also, we know this is a very rare pair, but we're asking y'all to give it a chance. It's a very lovely pairing!
Hope y'all enjoy this fic too!
Preliminarying

They first met when they were five.

It was the summer term, and Eduard still hadn’t made many friends. Or any at all. It didn’t bother him. Probably. Maybe. It wasn’t like he’d made enemies, and his parents said it didn’t really matter if he made friends as long as he did well in the lessons, didn’t get in trouble, and got his homework in, so surely it didn’t matter? Einstein didn’t have friends either, or Tesla, and they were the smartest people ever!

Still, he couldn’t help a pang of jealousy as he watched the other kids running and shouting and, well, laughing. His parents never laughed, though they did tend to sneer in amusement at the neighbours. And people they knew. And pretty much anyone they deemed to be beneath them, which was everyone. To be honest, Eduard couldn’t remember if he’d ever laughed. He’d have to try it sometime, when he was alone so he didn’t look stupid. Or not. It probably didn’t matter.

Still, he had his book! And what better way to spend lunchtime than relaxing with a good story? Okay, he barely understood a word of ‘Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy’, but he wanted to look smarter than his classmates, and the bits he did understand he loved.

Okay, maybe it wasn’t that much of a surprise that he had no friends.

Eduard tore his gaze away from the other children and settled down to read. He didn’t need them anyway. He just focused on all the words in front of him, willing them to make sense despite the fact that he was a small child and this was his second language.

He was concentrating so hard that he didn’t notice he had company until a hand was shoved under his nose. Eduard jumped, eyes fixed on the rock cradled in a rough, dirty palm.

“Hi!”

He glanced up. The owner of the palm was just as scruffy, a boy his own age with dark hair that stuck up everywhere and missing front teeth. His school tie was draped around his neck like a scarf, and there wasn’t a limb without a cut or scrape; even his nose was obscured by a plaster.

“Hey! You look lonely!”

Eduard scowled. “I am not lonely.”

The boy bit his lip; every inch of him was covered in dark freckles. “Well, you look it. So I got you a rock! Um, I thought you’d like it. You can keep it!”

Eduard looked at the rock. It was grey, and covered in tiny rings, like little eyes. His eyebrows shot up.

“It’s got fossils in it!” the boy explained, “isn’t that cool?”

Eduard bit his lip. He didn’t know what a fossil looked like, and didn’t like not knowing. He didn’t want to ask though, because that would mean telling the boy he didn’t know something.

“I can keep it?”

“Yeah! It’s a present.”
He’d never had a present before. Cool. When he put the stone in his pocket, it weighed down his school uniform’s trousers a little.

“Wotcha reading?” he asked, sitting down in front of him so he was still in the sun. Was he afraid of the shade or something?


“Oh,” he looked like he regretted asking, “what’s it about?”

Eduard scowled. “Things.”

He half-expected the boy to get bored of trying then. There was a reason he didn’t have friends, and it wasn’t just his need to focus on schoolwork. The boy smiled instead.

“I’m Logan Cooper,” he said, “and I like lizards.”

“I’m Eduard Mets,” Eduard mumbled, “I like… erm, computers.”

“Like, computer games and stuff?”

“Erm, yes.” Eduard at least knew enough to not make fun of the kid for being less intelligent than him. Sure, he played games when his parents weren’t home, but his computer was generally for learning and coding.

“I like that game where you’re the shark and you gotta jump out of the water and grab planes and stuff! I even grabbed the missile and blew up the world!”

Eduard tried not to morph his face into a sneer. Tried. “That’s impossible. Sharks are smaller than planes, and they can’t go out of the water, and if you go that high you get sick.”

Logan shrugged. “It’s a game, mate. Wanna play football?”

Eduard really didn’t. He tried not to make a face about it though, because this was the first time anyone had wanted to spend time with him, including his parents, now that he thought of it.

“We can play space exploring instead,” said Logan quickly, glancing at the cover of his book.

“Is that a sport?” asked Eduard worriedly.

“Nah, we just explore space and stuff.”

“We can’t get into space.”

Logan shrugged. “I know. It’s a game. We just pretend we’re in space.”

“But we aren’t in space.”

“I know. Just pretend.”

Eduard looked at him like he was a cat that started talking. “Pretend?”

“Yeah,” Logan grinned, “I’ll be the captain of the Mad Cunt Rocket Ship!” Eduard reeled at that; he’d said a bad word! “And you can be the pilot.”

“You’re not allowed to be a pilot if you have bad eyes.” Eduard pointed at his glasses. “I read it in a
book. You have to have to have 20/20 vision.”

“What’s that?”

“Good vision.”

“Well, pretend they’re your goggles! Anyway, you’re the pilot and you’re flying us to the planet Geekassnerdeon, home of the Geekassners.” Eduard gave him the stoniest expression.

“That’s not a real planet!”

“Pretend it is! And you’re from there-“

“No. I’m from earth and that’s a real planet.”

“Don’t you know how to pretend?”

Eduard shrugged. He still wasn’t fluent in English so maybe he just didn’t know the word, but he didn’t want to admit he didn’t know something.

“It’s, like, you use your imagination to play! You think of things, like, that bench over there can be our rocket ship!”

Eduard glanced over at the bench in question. “It’s not.”

“Yeah, but we can imagine it is.” Logan gently bumped his shoulder with a fist, “imagining stuff is great! It’s like real life but better. Like, you can pretend there’s no bad stuff, just aliens and pirates and space ships with lasers.”

“Pirates aren’t good,” he mumbled. Imagination sounded fun though. He thought about the rock Logan had given him, and could feel its weight in his pocket. “Can you teach me, please?” he asked.

“Course!” Logan scrambled up and offered his hand. Eduard took it.

“So,” he began, helping him onto the bench, “set a course for the planet Geekassnerdeon!”

Eduard gave a whine. “May we go somewhere cooler?”

Logan thought for a moment, then nodded. “Planet Icecream?”

“That is- yes, sure.” Eduard sat down and looked across the playground. “What now?”

“Well you’re the pilot!” Logan pulled his lunchbox out of his bag. “Here’s the steering wheel!”

Eduard took it silently. It was a lunch box. What the hell was he supposed to do now? Eat out of it? “Space shuttles don’t have steering wheels.”

Logan gave a whine. “It’s a rocket ship! Like in the films, and- and you built it yourself because you’re a genius who can make anything!” Eduard quite liked that. “So you put a steering wheel on so I can drive while you’re on the toilet.” Oh. Fun. “You can close your eyes if it’s easier. I do that sometimes. Like when I stared at the sun and it made my eyes hurt.”

Eduard wasn’t even going to comment on that. “Um, okay.” He closed his eyes and thought about space. Okay, he could see it, and maybe he could see himself in a spaceship. With a big, bulky steering wheel.
Logan flicked him on the nose.

“Ow! Hey!” Eduard pouted.

Logan shrugged. “Sorry, couldn’t help it. Now, the next bit is, um,” he thought for a moment, “try and picture the close eyes bit on top of what you’re seeing now. Like, use your brain to turn that lunch box into a steering wheel.”

Eduard looked at him. “I don’t know if I can.”

“You’re smart! You read books that don’t have pictures in it! I believe in you.”

“Maybe you’re pretending I’m here.”

Logan’s face fell.

Eduard flicked him.

“Ow! Wotcha do that for?”

“It was revenge. And it was funny also,” he grinned. Eduard actually grinned. Logan, despite being busy rubbing his nose, beamed at that.

“Oh no! An alien!”

“I doubt- oh. Oh no! I can see him!” So the other students… were the aliens? Or were the aliens invisible and he’d have to ‘pretend’ they were there?

“They’re horrible!” Logan cried, “look at all their slime and tentacles and big crab claws!”

“They have tentacles and crab claws?” Eduard raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, I made them up so I decided they have both.” He beamed.

Eduard looked at him with wide eyes. “Please can I make aliens up too?” He really liked aliens, and their various designs and bright colours and their spaceships.

Logan grinned at the question. “Of course! Make them whatever you like!”

Eduard thought for the longest time. What aliens did he like best? He sometimes looked through picture books in the library, but most of his experience with aliens came from films he’d occasionally watch, to improve his English.

“Blue,” he said eventually, “and… um, with feathers?” Birds. He was thinking of birds. And birds weren’t even blue, usually, not the ones around here. He saw some from his bedroom in his old house once - his book of birds said they were called barn swallows, and that they lived in more places than any other bird, but he hadn’t seen any here yet. But maybe swallow aliens would be cool? After all, they were pretending they were in space. Maybe they had swallows in space. No, that was stupid and Logan probably thought he was an idiot. He was an idiot. Birds can’t fly into space!

“Blue bird aliens!” Logan punched the air, “yes! Can they be like those birds of paradise with the weird feathers and stuff?”

Eduard smiled behind his sleeve. He’d seen those in his book of birds, but never in real life. “Yes, but they’re blue.”
“I like the blue bird aliens! I’m going to pet them!” Logan pet the air, making little kissing noises to these imaginary aliens. Tentatively, Eduard joined in. For some reason, that made Logan so happy he looked like he was going to burst.

“Yes! They like you!”

Maybe playing pretend wasn’t so bad after all.

“My mummy! I made a friend!”

Layla Cooper glanced up from her daughter, smiling as her son burst into the room. She put the little girl down to play, and Jemima toddled off, soon to be replaced by Logan, jumping up and down, fists balled as he practically vibrated with excitement.

Layla ruffled his hair. “Another one? Oh, that’s wonderful, dear!”

“His name’s Eduard and he’s small and quiet and reads a lot!” He climbed up onto her lap. “And he doesn’t know how to play! I had to teach him!”

Layla blinked. “He doesn’t know how to play?”

Logan shrugged, picking at a thread in his shorts. “Yeah nah. He doesn’t. He’s weird, but I like him! And he learnt how to play pretend!”

“Picked it up quickly, then?” Layla smiled and hugged her son close.

Logan nodded. “He’s really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really, reeeaaaally smart. He knows everything, except pretending. He had a book and it was bigger than Jem! And the words were tiny! And it didn’t have pictures!”

“Want to invite him round sometime?”

Logan beamed at that, “yes! We can play pirates and go exploring and-“

“You can’t make Jem walk the plank,” said Layla sternly.

“I wasn’t going to!” Logan said with the tone that he’d planned exactly to do just that. Layla looked at him knowingly, raising an eyebrow.

“I’ll be good,” he promised her.

“Dad, guess what!” Ever since lunchtime, Eduard had been thinking about him. He’d never had a friend before! And Logan was one of the boys who played football and talked in class, too- usually they just pushed him around, but Logan was actually nice, if a little bit stupid. As he stood in the doorway, he could barely stand still.
Anton didn’t look up from his computer. “I’m working, Eduard.”

He stopped bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Have you done your homework?”

“I don’t have any.”

“Why not?”

“They didn’t give us.”

“They didn’t give you any,” he corrected.

Eduard nodded. “Sorry.”

Anton rolled his eyes. “Go make dad some coffee, Eduard. Then brush up on your English.”

He nodded again and disappeared from the room. He couldn’t reach the mugs very well. He had to stand on a chair, but he had to be careful about that too. Once he had fallen off and bruised his knee. His mum told him off for standing on the chairs - she said he could have broken them - and for making a big noise about his knee. It had really hurt, but she told him to walk it off. At least he hadn’t dropped the mug.

Still, his dad was too busy to talk, and his mum wasn’t home yet, so he just left before he got in trouble again.

Eduard had never been invited round to anyone’s house before.

He wouldn’t have known it was something children did if he hadn’t overheard his classmates talking to each other about all the fun they’d had. He’d tried not to be jealous, but he was. Immensely. Not that his parents would ever let him invite someone over. They’d make far too much mess and be too noisy; they wouldn’t even be allowed to do homework together.

But what his parents didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them, right? He was scared to think what would happen if they found out, though. He’d always been as well-behaved he could be, and they were never happy with him.

He held Logan’s sweaty hand, letting the boy lead him down pleasant lanes in the afternoon sun, both children drenched in sweat from playing Star Wars at lunch time. Logan had suggested they continue having a lightsaber battle with sticks on the way home, but Eduard was too tired. He just rested his head on Logan’s shoulder.

He and Logan had played together every day for a week now. He hadn’t known he could be so happy during playtime. Not unless he was hiding in the library. The other kids tended to pick on him during playtime.

He was more than a little scared to meet Logan’s parents. He’d seen other kids’ parents, picking them up and dropping them off, but he’d never talked to them. He hoped they’d be a bit like his, because even when his parents were mean, at least he kind of knew how to talk to them. Kind of. He just had to say please and thank you, not complain, and not make any mistakes when he was talking
or he’d sound stupid. English was way too hard. Maybe he should just stay quiet. Talk when they asked him questions, but not too much.

“What’s your mum and dad like?” he asked. He’d read a book with a big word in it he liked. Reconnaissance. He loved that word. He didn’t know how to say it, but it was cool. He’d looked it up in his big dictionary. Preliminary surveying or research, it said. And preliminary meant it was preparation. That’s what he was doing now. Preliminarying.

“They’re alright. Daddy’s really good at guitar. I dunno, they’re just parents.”

“He has a guitar?” He’d never seen a guitar in real life!

“Yeah, it’s red. This house!”

“You’re living very close to the school.”

“I wouldn’t be walking home on my own if I weren’t.”

Logan knocked on the big door. He could hear a woman saying something, then footsteps. The woman who opened the door was tiny for a grown up. Her long, dark hair fell down her back in a messy wave, and her red summer dress was frayed and patchy. She smiled brightly when she saw him, though, bending down to hug him.

“Hi! You must be Eddie!”

Eduard froze. What on earth was she doing? He had no idea how to react. No one ever hugged him. No one ever called him Eddie either. Was it even appropriate to hug children? He looked at Logan desperately for assistance before he freaked out.

But Layla had let go before he’d had time to freak out properly.

“Hello Mrs Cooper,” he mumbled politely. It was impolite to mumble, but he was terrified.

“There’s no need to be so formal, young man,” she said, ruffling his hair. “Layla is fine.”

He nodded, but it felt wrong. It felt rude. But he couldn’t just ignore something an adult had told him to do, right?

“So, Eddie,” Layla continued, “what do you like to eat?”

He had no idea what to say. There were things he did and didn’t like to eat, but even if he could remember anything, he knew he shouldn’t tell her. He didn’t want to seem fussy or rude.

“Um, anything.”

“I’m making a prawn curry if that’s alright,” said Layla. “But I can put some chicken fingers in the oven if you’d rather that.”

Prawn curry sounded disgusting. He hadn’t tried a prawn, but he didn’t think he wanted to. They looked like little pink bugs and he’d have to eat the whole thing, guts and all! But it would be rude to refuse.

“No, that sounds lovely,” he forced a smile. “Thank you.”

“Great! Well, dinner will be an hour or so, why not go outside to play?”
Eduard nodded, and Logan lead him into the garden.

He’d never quite seen a garden like the Coopers’. His own was quite small, just fences and grass and a few stone slabs. He wasn’t allowed to go out much - he was supposed to stay inside and read and do work - but Anton mowed it every month or so to keep it from getting messy. That was the only time anyone went out in it.

This garden, however, wasn’t overgrown, but it seemed Mr and Mrs Cooper liked letting the grass grow more freely, so it came up past his ankles. The flower beds were filled with bright flowers clambering for sunlight, more trailing up the fence, and in the corner there was a vegetable patch. There was a pond in the middle, where tiny frogs sat on stones around the edge lazily, and when Eduard glanced at the inky black water, he found himself staring at a shoal of fat goldfish. Dragonflies and various other insects buzzed about, trying to avoid death by the sticky tongue of a frog. There was a tiny bird perched up on the fence. Eduard should have brought his bird book, then he could have seen what it was.

Children’s toys were left littered across the lawn, and Logan bounded straight over to a swing and slide set. Logan climbed onto the slide, skipping steps with a bit of difficulty, mostly to show off, then slid down.

Eduard stood awkwardly on the patio. He’d never actually played on a slide before, and though it did look fun, he was scared to try. What if he broke it?

He noticed a little girl next to him, about three years old, lying down and scribbling on the stone slabs in bright orange chalk.

“That’s my sister, Jem,” said Logan, joining him, “she’s boring.” Jem stuck her tongue out at her brother.

The two looked incredibly similar. In fact, Jem looked like Logan with twin ponytails. Her dungarees were covered in mud and grass stains and there was a big rip on her knee. Eduard didn’t quite know what to make of that. He would never be allowed to get his own clothes dirty, much less actually rip them.

“You got siblings?”

Eduard shook his head.


Eduard shrugged.

“Want to go on the slide?”

Eduard thought about it. Yes, yes he did. When he nodded, Logan took his hand and lead him to the ladder.

“Is it scary?” he asked.

“What? Course not!” Logan frowned, “Have you never been on a slide, mate?”

Eduard shrugged again.

“I did this thing once where I ran up the slide bit instead of the ladder bit. I had to go on crutches after. It was so cool.”
“Why did you do that?”

He shrugged. “Because.”

“Because?”

“Do you just never play?”

“Playing is for babies,” he sniffed, “I prefer to read.”

“It’s not! It’s fun!”

“It’s fun even when you get injured?”

“Yeah! Anyway, Jem’s a baby, and she never wants to play pirates with me.”

Jem threw a chalk at him with startling inaccuracy, though there was something to be said for how far she managed to throw it. “That’s ’cause you push me into the pond!”

Logan stuck his tongue out at her. “So you wanna go on the slide?”

Eduard looked up the ladder. It was a little too tall, now he was actually close to one. The plastic steps looked very fragile too, but he didn’t want Logan to think he was boring and not hang out with him anymore.

He nodded and took a step on the ladder. No turning back now. His hands were too sweaty for this. His legs were too shaky. But he kept climbing until he reached the top. The ladder didn’t seem very secure. It was pretty windy up here too.

He wanted to get down, but he didn’t want Logan to laugh at him, or to think he was a scaredy-cat, or stupid. But he looked so small from up here.

He sat down at the top and let his feet dangle out in front of him. That was half the battle, right? He could do this! He - slowly - lowered himself down, so he was holding on to the railing, arms stretched above his head. He was most of the way down now, surely. He was too scared to look.

He held on til his arms hurt, then let go.

It was the best thing ever! With a small noise between a cry and a squeal, he whooshed gracefully to the bottom and found himself sprawled out on the grass, breathless and limbs flopping everywhere. He scrambled up before his clothes got dirty, grinning at Logan.

“That was amazing!” he cried before making his way up the ladder again. This time, he slid down properly, and it was even better! He went again and again, until he finally grew bored. He wished he had a slide in his own garden.

Logan just watched him have fun from the swings, grinning at the other boy’s excitement. Eduard was practically trembling with joy when he trotted over to him.

“I have never had so much fun!” he cried, fully aware that he sounded stupid, but for once too happy to care. Much. Logan grinned and pulled him into a hug. Another hug.

“You can come round every day and play on the slide!”

Was this normal? Hugging people over every little thing? Logan and his arms were warm, though, and Eduard felt slightly sad when he pulled away.
“Wanna play pirates now?”

“No!” Jem shouted, having finished her scribbly picture and busying herself with decapitating her Barbies. “I’m not going in the pond!” She scrambled up to point an accusing finger at her brother.

Logan smiled, winking at Eduard. It was odd, that little gesture of complicity. It made him smile.

“Okay, you can be captain. Go get the captain hat!”

Jem beamed and did just that. She ran inside, and a few seconds later ran back out wearing an impressive feathered hat and long red coat. She was brandishing a wooden sword, with “JEMIMAS SORD! DOWNT TUCH OR U DI!” written on it in sparkly red gel pen. The J was backwards. Logan picked up two more from their apparent home in Mrs Cooper’s hydrangea. His was written on too- it said “LOGAN IS SO KOOL”.

“I’m going to make you walk the plank!” she squeaked.

“That’s very mean!” cried Logan, “you’re not a very good captain. Maybe me and Eddie are gonna have ourselves a munity!” He smacked the sword out of her hand. “We’re gonna have you marooned!”

“It’s a mutiny,” Ed pointed out, tapping his sword experimentally on the bush, “Not munity. Munity is that thing where you can’t be ill.”

Logan pouted. “Yes, that! Well, Captain Jem is gonna be stranded on a desert island, which she will swim to after walking the plank!”

Jem screamed.

Mrs Cooper told Logan off for pushing his sister in the pond again, and although she wasn’t annoyed with Ed, he still felt like he’d been told off too. Maybe if she was angry with him, he wouldn’t have to have any prawns - his parents didn’t give him dinner for smaller things than that, after all - but he was still a bit scared that she wouldn’t want him over again. Then he’d never get to go on the slide again.

“I’m sorry, Mrs Cooper.”

Layla just smiled at him. “It’s okay, Eddie. Just Logan being a big silly.”

“Am I still allowed to come here?”

She laughed. “Of course you are, sweetheart. You’re always welcome here.”

“Thank you very much. I like your slide. Never done a slide before.”

“Never?”

“I just read.”

Mrs Cooper blinked. “Do your parents not take you to the park?”
Eduard shook his head. His parents never took him anywhere.

“Oh, well maybe you can go with us then.”

Eduard would like that very much indeed.

On the plus side, Mrs Cooper wasn’t mad at him. But on the downside it meant he was now faced with a plateful of prawn curry. As well as prawn, Mrs Cooper had used yam, something he’d also not eaten before. Logan and Jem - now in clean clothes after her bath - were eating like they’d not eaten in a week. The Cooper family had now been joined by Mr Cooper, a skinny man barely taller than his wife, with a friendly smile and wispy blond hair. He liked wearing colourful shirts and things in his hair and beaded jewellery.

Apparently, Mr Cooper used to be in a rock band, and still played the guitar. He also had a massive record collection and a keyboard and Ed quite liked his music room. Mr Cooper had even put on some music for him, a band called Yothu Yindi that Mr Cooper listened to as a boy. Eduard also noticed a flag in the music room, a flag he’d seen around the house before: black and red with a bright yellow circle in the middle. He wondered what country the flag was from.

Mr Cooper didn’t mind being called ‘Mr Cooper’, because his name was also Logan. Eduard thought that was quite strange, but didn’t comment on it.

He’d never met anyone quite like Logan’s parents, but he decided he really liked them, and therefore he didn’t want to make them cross at him for anything. It was what gave him the determination to try Mrs Cooper’s cooking.

It was delicious. He’d never eaten anything with so much flavour, and the prawns weren’t as disgusting as he thought they’d be. He smiled and tucked in, much to Mrs Cooper’s delight.

“Why’s Ed talk funny?” Jem asked, her mouth full of prawns.

Mr Cooper frowned at her. “Jem, we don’t ask questions like that.”

“But he pronounces “wuh” noises like “vuh”!”

“When people come from another place,” he explained, “It can affect the way they talk. Where are you from, Ed?”

“Kohtla-Järve,” he told him, being sure to swallow his mouthful first.

“Where?”

“Estonia,” he clarified, very proud that he knew something a grown-up didn’t.

“Oh, is that far?”

He nodded. “It was a long plane ride.”

“When did you move?”

“Last year.”
“Really? How come?”

“My mother’s job.”

“You speak the language very well. Do you speak Estonian at home?”

He nodded. “Yes, but sometimes we have to talk in English so that I learn it, and all of my books
have to be in English.” Was he talking too much?

“It’s very impressive.”

“I don’t know a lot of words.”

“I think you speak very well. What does your mum do then?”

“She’s an astrophysicist. That means she’s a space scientist.”

“She must be very clever.”

“She is very clever.”

Mr Cooper smiled at him. “What about your father?”

“He is a doctor. What do you do, Mrs Cooper?”

“I'm an artist.”

He remembered something his mother had said about artists. “Do you have a real job?”

The corner of Mrs Cooper’s lips twitched, and she looked at him like she was sick of people asking
that. Layla Cooper was an intuitive woman, though, and she had a sneaking suspicion that young
Eduard was just parroting someone. “It is a real job. I have my own shop to sell my paintings.”

“My mother said it isn’t.” He pointed at a painting on the wall. “Did you do that one?”

She smiled. “Yes dear. Maybe your mum doesn’t know how much hard work goes into painting.”

“Maybe. She is knowing a lot of things, though, especially space.”

“Do you like space too, Eddie dear?”

He nodded.

“What if I painted you something space-related? Do you like constellations?”

“I like planets.”

“What if I painted you a planet?”

“Which planet?”

“Whichever one you like.”

“Why?”

“It’s a present.”
“What is it for?”

“It looks nice,” she laughed. Was she laughing at him? Of course she was. He was asking far too many questions, and it made him look stupid. He was stupid.

“Okay.” He looked down and went back to his food. He was always getting told off for asking too many questions. It was best he stayed quiet, so he didn’t upset them.

Layla just smiled at him. “So, did you boys have a good day at school?”

Logan nodded. “Yes! I did colouring and coloured in the lines. And Ed read a big book!”

“Which one?”

Logan looked at Ed to answer, but he just shrugged. “Something guide to the galaxy,” he supplied.

Mr Cooper blinked in surprise. “Wow, Doug Adams? Bit old for you, isn’t it?”


His eyebrows shot up. “Woah. You’re a smart boy.”

When dinner finished, the boys helped Layla clear the table, then she brought out dessert. As Eduard tucked in to a thick apple and blackberry pie, he wondered if he could come back every day.

Eduard spent as much of the summer holidays as possible round at the Coopers’. Not only because of the slide, but because he liked the entire family. And they in turn grew to love him like a second son.

Eduard liked everything about them, from Mrs Cooper’s hugs to how Mr Cooper let him play on the keyboard, however he wanted, because he trusted Ed not to break it. Some of Eduard’s fondest memories became those loud afternoons, Mr Cooper playing the guitar whilst he played something that could be considered a tune on the keyboard. Logan would be there too, banging his father’s beautifully painted clapsticks together with wild abandon, making more noise than Ed ever could.

Mrs Cooper ended up painting all the planets for him, each on their own little canvas and beautifully coloured and Eduard loved them all. He proudly displayed them on his shelf in his room, and even if his parents were unimpressed, he thought they were the greatest things he owned, along with the rock Logan gave him that first afternoon.

Jem liked to chase him with gross things on a stick: frogspawn, mud, the green slime in the pond. And Logan was always there to defend him from her, lift her up and carry her away whilst Ed doubled over and caught his breath.

And then there was Logan. He quickly became Eduard’s best friend, the kind of friend he’d seen in films. They planned adventures together, played, explored. Eduard became quite good at pretending, and over the weeks turned into an astronaut, Indiana Jones, a scientist, a naturalist trying to find the rarest birds. They watched Tarzan one evening, when it was too dark to be outside, and played at being scientists and monkeys every day for a month.
He knew his parents wouldn’t notice him staying over, and slept in Logan’s bed as often as he did his own. Logan was a far less experienced reader - he struggled with picture books - so Eduard would read to him before they went to sleep. It was something Layla had introduced him to: bedtime stories. When she wasn’t busy with Jem, she tried her best to read stories for the boys, until Eduard volunteered to help when he was around. They both loved learning, though, and when Eduard showed him his big book of birds, Logan got out his book of British wildlife to show Eduard what bugs and small animals ended up in the garden. Logan collected bugs for him, putting them in the little jar he’d got for his birthday with the magnifying glass on the lid and filling them with leaves so they wouldn’t get hungry, so Eduard could measure them with his school ruler and made little notes in his special book with “Feeld Notes” scrawled on the cover (Snail makes bables when you touch it). Everything about him was neat, except his handwriting. Logan was well past trying to read it.

Sometimes, Eduard would invite Logan over, when he knew his parents would be out all day. There were rules, though, so many rules Eduard had to make sure Logan understood. They couldn’t make a mess, or go out in the garden in case they ruined the grass, and Logan wasn’t allowed to tell anyone his parents weren’t home, not even the frogs in the pond. Technically, Eduard wasn’t allowed to tell anyone either, but he could trust Logan with all the secrets in the world - and after all, Logan had told him he had eaten the last three muffins and told his parents Jem did it, so it was only fair. Logan would lift Eduard up so he could get to the cupboards and find food for them both, then they’d spend the day in front of the telly eating and watching documentaries. The boys alternated between nature ones for Logan, and space ones for Eduard.

They played in Eduard’s room too. Whilst Logan’s was messy, bright, and warm, Eduard’s was bare and impersonal. He didn’t have toys across the floor. He didn’t have newspaper and magazine clippings about nature on the wall, like Logan did, or even National Geographic kids posters. Whilst Eduard’s shelf was filled with thick books, Logan’s was full of rocks, shells and fossils he’d found on day trips to the beach. Eduard’s room had empty white walls, and a desk, and an alarm clock, but nothing you could have much fun with. It looked like a grown up’s room. Even Logan’s parents had a cooler room. Still, Eduard seemed to like it.

When August rolled into September, Eduard still found himself spending time with Logan after school. Sometimes, the Coopers found the whole thing inconvenient, but they still let Eduard come over whenever he wanted. He was the most quiet, polite child they’d ever met, after all, and never made a mess. In fact, Logan tended to behave better around him too.

The days grew shorter, and Layla decided she didn’t want the boys out after dark. She picked them up from school one cold afternoon in early October to visit a family friend, and never even questioned it when Eduard climbed into the car with Logan. Jem was in the back too, strapped into her baby seat. When Eduard sat down next to her, she tried to put a finger up his nose.

An hour after they got home, Layla walked into her son’s room to find the two boys hiding in a little blanket fort, under siege, apparently. They were rationing a packet of Maltesers with an apparent amount of difficulty.

“What time do you need to get home, Eddie?” she asked.

The boy shrugged.

“Well, what time would you like me to take you home?”

“I can walk home all by myself,” he sniffed.

“Not when it’s so dark outside,” said Layla sternly, “it’s too dangerous. I can drive you no problem.”
Eduard nodded, a little upset Mrs Cooper didn’t trust him to be out after dark. “My bedtime is at 7 o’clock.”

So she drove him home by 6:30. He insisted he could walk the rest of the way for the whole journey, but she absolutely refused to let him.

Layla glanced at the Mets’ dark, empty house. “Are your parents not home?”

Eduard froze. “They are. They went to sleep early?” he tried. He fidgeted in his lap, and Layla looked at him in concern.

“Eddie, where are your parents?”

“I can’t tell you,” he squeaked, “they made me promise…”

“I’m not letting you stay home by yourself. You’re too young.”

“Do you promise not to tell?”

She hesitated. Eduard sternly stuck his pinky out at her.

“Promise. Or they’ll tell me off.”

She hooked her finger in his. “Promise.” She didn’t like lying to children.

“My dad’s on a business trip this week, and mum won’t be home until 11. They said I’m not allowed to tell people when they’re not home because some people will tell me off because they think I’m not old enough to look after myself. I am old enough. I’m five years old. That’s a whole hand.”

She glanced at the empty windows. Her heart ached for the poor kid. She’d had suspicions about his parents a while, but she could just about blow it off as eccentricity, or maybe just a cultural difference. This was so much worse. Nothing could excuse that.

“Are they away a lot?”

“Yeah, for work.”

She cut the engine. “Come on, let’s get you into bed.”

She picked Eduard up and carried him into the house, stroking the boy’s hair lazily. A thought struck her. “Wait, what are you supposed to do for dinner?” She made sure the boy was fed whenever he visited, but he didn’t come round every day. She didn’t even know if his parents knew she made him dinner.

Eduard shrugged. “I make a sandwich or something. I figured out how to make pasta but last time I spilt water on me and got really burnt, so I don’t do it anymore.” He pulled up his sleeve. There was a pink scar on his arm, his skin slightly wrinkled and shiny. “It really hurt, but I didn’t need to go to the hospital. Dad sorted it out.”

“Here, I’ll kiss it better.” She kissed his arm.

“That’s… not how medicine works.”

She just smiled sadly. “Can I have your keys?”

He passed them to her. “You can’t keep them,” he told her solemnly.
“I won’t.” She opened the door and walked into his house. It had the bare minimum of decoration - a rug here, a cushion there, but nothing personal. Like a catalog.

“You have to take your shoes off,” he ordered, neatly placing his on the rack by the door. She followed suit.

“Alright, go put your pyjamas on and brush your teeth. I’ll be with you very soon.”

He nodded and quickly padded upstairs.

She stepped into their kitchen. After finding they didn’t have any cocoa powder, she made Eduard a mug of warm milk and honey and took it up for him. He was waiting in bed, wrapped in his duvet. She sat down and placed the mug down on the bedside table.

“I made you milk and honey.”

“I’ve just brushed my teeth,” he pointed out.

“The taste’ll be gone by the time it’s cooled down a bit. Story?”

“Yes, please.”

She let him pick out a story for her to read - a thick one on his bedside table. She hated how many stupidly big words were in it, but got through the chapter all the same, because Eduard seemed to be having fun. Then she kissed his forehead and told him to go to sleep.

“G’night, mummy,” he mumbled, burrowing into his duvet.

She stroked his hair. “G’night, Eddie.”

On the way out, she closed the door - barely ajar, the way he liked it. Logan always wanted it open, and he always let him have it like that. Leaving Eduard to sleep, she padded downstairs. Their couch was somehow even harder than it looked. She didn’t mind, though - she sat down, made herself comfortable, and waited.

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Eduard woke up to the sound of a commotion downstairs.

“You monster!” he heard, in a voice just barely recognisable as Layla’s, “He’s five years old, and you’re leaving him to fend for himself? How fucking dare you?”

He gasped. She swore!

The second voice was his mother’s. It was quieter, but he could hear it. “I’ll raise my son however I want to,” she replied, “Just because yours is a little halfwit and can’t look after himself doesn’t mean mine is.”

He heard a sickening slap.

“Don’t say a damn word about him! He is a child! I don’t expect him to look after himself! Nobody
Eduard winced. Was Mrs Cooper angry with his mum because of what he said? And was he in trouble with his parents now?

He heard worse sounds - thumps and shouts and swears. Eventually, the front door slammed. He rushed to his window with wide eyes and saw Mrs Cooper storm down the garden path and into her car. He was too scared to go down, and pretended to sleep when she came in to check on him.

The next day, though, his mum was friendlier than usual, and made him breakfast in bed.

Eduard found his mother asked about his day sometimes. He suspected she wasn’t really interested, and simply scared of Mrs Cooper, but he liked the change all the same. He made the most of it and took the opportunity to talk about aspects of his life besides school work over breakfast.

His father still didn’t show any interest. In fact, he seemed to disapprove of the whole thing altogether. What was new there?

These conversations lasted until he found out how she felt about his friendship with Logan - *that Cooper boy*, she called him, with a sneer in her voice, spitting out the word like it was bitter to the taste - and he decided, with a sickening feeling in his stomach, to not bother talking about his life anymore.
Merry Halloween! Sort of. It's 2:38 in the morning and I'm playing that song from The Nightmare Before Christmas on repeat, so yeah, it's Halloween. Hey, you can't say we aren't dedicated.
Bits of homophobia and racism in this chapter. Always a fun warning to see. At least it's less horrifying than our tags!

Names:
Allirea- Nyo Hutt
Gunner- Denmark
Harry- Atlantium (OC)

As for Laura, is she Belgium? Is she nyo Luxembourg? Who knows. She's just some girl. Feel free to imagine who you like?

Eduard had read nearly every book in the Coopers’ house by the time he was ten.
He pored over Logan’s big encyclopedias of wildlife for hours, either reading with him or to him or borrowing them, if Logan let him. A distant aunt bought him a few Michael Morpurgo books at Christmas, figuring he’d like the animals, but Logan let Ed have every last one of them. He wasn’t much of a reader himself.

Once he’d worked his way through all of Logan’s, Mr and Mrs Cooper started lending him some of their books. They were older, both in terms of when they were written and who they were for, but he ate them right up. Mr Cooper had a few history ones, as well as musician autobiographies and books on various cultures, including the Aboriginal cultures that made up the Cooper family, whilst Layla had battered old novels and romances he wasn’t allowed to read. They didn’t have all that many, and some of them were a bit boring even for Eduard, but after a few years, he had gotten through all the books he wanted to. Before long, it was assumed that he didn’t even have to ask - the Coopers’ books were his books. By then, he wasn’t so nervous about his English skills, though it still preyed on his mind that his accent made him sound wrong. He spoke softly, so people wouldn’t notice so much.

Once he’d worked his way through their fiction, he found himself eyeing their cookbooks. Whenever she could, Layla would cook for him. She also made sure to keep a variety of snacks in the cupboard for when he came over, both the homemade and shop-bought variety. Even though the boy insisted she didn’t have to ‘have a chat’ with his parents again, and even though her attempts at getting the authorities involved were, for the most part, fruitless, she didn’t like how thin he was. As far as she was concerned, a plump child was a happy, cared-for child. Metses lost weight easily, it seemed - everyone on his father’s side, as well as his mother, was somewhat stick-insect-like in build, but that only made Layla more inclined to feed him.

“Mrs Cooper,” he would tell her, “I have to go home.”

Layla always put her hands on her hips, a wooden spoon sticking out of the pocket of her apron. “Are your parents home?”
“I don’t know.”

“Then you eat first.”

“But Mrs-”

“Uh-uh. You eat. First.”

Every time he stayed, without fail, she made sure he ate three servings and dessert before she let him go, but sometimes it was unavoidable that he cooked for himself. He knew how to make food better than most kids his age - he had mastered sandwiches, and pasta (after getting over the scalding incident), and most kinds of eggs, and beans, plus there was a TV show where kids cooked, which he copied meticulously - but those books, lined up in their messy rows on the shelf in their kitchen, bookmarked and batter-stained, got the gears in his mind whirring. Those were the ones Layla cooked from! If he read those, he could be as good a cook as her! When he asked to borrow one of his books, she gave him a stern reminder about health and safety - she was particularly adamant about that after seeing the scar on his arm - but gladly let him borrow the book.

The next time Eduard had to make his own dinner, he used Layla’s cookbook. He spent his pocket money on all the spices he needed, refusing to cut any corners. He followed every instruction to a T, and by the end had enough curry to feed Logan’s whole family. He took a bowl of it and a slice of bread he cut himself, and ate alone, doing his homework. The rest, he put in the fridge. When Eliisabet and Anton came home from their trip, they threw it away.

That didn’t deter him. He borrowed other cookbooks from her after that. He cooked whenever he could- curries, stews, pies, soups. The leftovers rarely lasted, but he liked the process regardless. His parents never tried anything he made.

It wasn’t until he borrowed her baking book that he got the idea. He and Logan had helped Layla bake a few times, but he’d never done it on his own before. He flicked through, trying to decide on something, until he remembered something she’d said. The three of them were out sitting on the grass in the back garden, picnicking on still-warm ginger cake, when she had told them it was her favourite. Her mother used to make it. It had to be that one.

He painstakingly measured every last ingredient, refusing to add even a gram too much or too little. He cracked eggs and stirred batter, reading and rereading every instruction. It had to be perfect. He was making it for Layla.

He was pouring the batter into the tin when his parents walked in. He froze in his tracks like they’d caught him red-handed at a crime scene. The big mixing bowl fell onto the kitchen tiles and broke into pieces.

“Eduard, what is this mess?” Eliisabet’s voice had a way of cutting into you. She didn’t shout, barely raised her voice at all, just made you feel like the smallest thing on earth with a carefully-placed intonation, a look that dissected you and pulled you apart, a dismissive wave of the hand.

“Ginger cake,” he mumbled.

“Speak up,” his father snapped.

His voice was shrill with anxiety. “I was making a ginger cake.”

“No, you were making a mess.”

Eduard just looked at the floor. His beautiful batter was everywhere, all over the floor and full of dirt
and pieces of bowl. He’d have to start all over now.

Anton sighed and pushed his glasses up his nose. “Clean this rubbish up and do some work for once. Stop playing around with cakes.”

“Yes, dad.” He didn’t mean for his voice to crack, he really didn’t. He wasn’t supposed to cry.

“Don’t look so upset about it.”

He nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s no use having a meltdown. You're always so oversensitive, it's exhausting. Clean this up.”

They shared an exasperated look and left the kitchen. He still had to make her that cake, he knew he did. It was important. Or maybe it wasn’t. Who was to say? But he wasn’t allowed to visit the next day, or the one after. He was in a lot of trouble. He had to stay home and do his work and stop wasting his time with the Coopers. Nothing could feel like more of a waste of time than not getting to see his family.

Inevitably, he got his free afternoon to try again when they left him alone for another weekend. He used the other bowl, the plastic one, and did everything exactly the same, just as carefully. He cleaned everything up until it was spotless between checking on it every few minutes while it was baking and made frosting while it was cooling. They didn’t have piping bags but he spread it on as neatly as he could, just like Layla showed him, with red food colouring, because she said it was her favourite colour. He had to make it perfect.

Once it was finished, he put the cake in a tin and carefully carried it all the way to Logan’s. It was a bit of a walk, but he was careful to hold the cake properly, making sure the icing didn’t get smooched. He rang the doorbell and waited patiently. She came to the door and a smile immediately spread across her face, just like every time she saw him.

“Eduard! Hello, lovely! Where’ve you been? I’m afraid Logan’s out at the moment.”

“Had work to do, Mrs Cooper.” He didn’t always tell her the whole truth about his parents. It was nice to be cared for, but he kept some things to himself. Sometimes it was overwhelming, especially when they did something really awful. She’d make a big fuss. Eduard knew she meant well, but he was insistent that he didn’t need it. “It’s okay, though, I’m not here to see Logan.” He held out the tin. “It’s for you.”

She gasped, the brightest grin in the world on her face. “For me?”

He nodded.

“Come inside and show me, sweetheart, I’ll make some tea.”

He sat in his usual spot at the dining table and put down his cake. When she came back with two cups of tea, he took off the lid with a proud flourish and a grin on his face.

“It’s to say thank you for the cookbooks,” he explained, “Because, uh, I really like cooking from them. And it’s ginger flavour!”

He’d not expected Layla to start crying, and panicked. Had he done something wrong? Course he had. He’d probably made the cake wrong. Or her favourite colour wasn’t actually red. Or she’d suddenly decided to go on a diet and assumed he was here to make fun of her. He felt like the worms he’d had to stop Jem from eating.
“Oh. Sorry. Is it- is it okay? I can make a different one if you don’t like it.”

“It’s beautiful, darling!” She hugged him tightly. “Thank you so much. Would you like a slice?”

“I made it for you!”

“So it’s my cake?”

He nodded.

“Then I say you can have some.” Her eyes sparkled as she cut them each a slice. “The icing on this is beautiful. Did you do all this yourself?”

“Mhm. It’s a second attempt. Mum and dad caught me the first time and said I shouldn’t make cakes ‘cause it’s a waste but I did it anyway.”

“Well, I think your mum and dad don’t know what they’re missing. I find making cakes helps me de-stress, and I get to eat a cake after.” She took a bite. “Mmm, this is amazing! You’re the best baker I know, Eddie dear!”

Then she ruffled Eduard’s hair, and they ate their slices of cake. He decided it had absolutely been worth all the trouble, just to hear her say that.

Logan and Eduard were inseparable now, like brothers.

When he could drag Eduard away from his studies, Logan took him to the park, where they could play all day if they wanted. Eduard loved trying bigger, taller, more twisted slides, and Logan could climb any playground equipment or tree. They explored the new worlds the fields and tree became, from the deepest jungles to alien planets. They rode Logan’s bike and pushed themselves down the hill in a cart, and Logan broke his arm breaking Eduard’s fall. Eduard wouldn’t stop apologising all through the trip to the hospital, but Logan said it was okay, and he liked spending the night in hospital. And by that he meant exploring and getting on the nurses’ nerves sneaking out of bed.

Because their frogs hadn’t been terrorised enough by Logan and Jem, the Coopers decided to get a dog too. A big, hairy, stupid one that terrified Eduard at first, but he soon grew to love it too. And Steveo provided him with more affection in five minutes than his parents had ever done. He also tended to sleep in Logan and Eduard’s bed, as if it wasn’t crowded enough.

At school, Logan helped Eduard make more friends, though he was content with just the two of them and never really got close to anybody, and Eduard in turn helped him keep up with schoolwork. Science lessons were particularly fun: Logan was great at experiments and actually following the method, and Eduard made sure every observation was noted down, thanks to his habit developed by looking at bugs.

He didn’t think Logan was stupid, and at times he felt like the only person in the school to think so. Logan was intelligent, about things that interested him, and didn’t involve reading or writing. He seemed to know everything about animals, and thanks to Eduard he knew a fair bit about space too.

One Christmas, the Coopers took Eduard into Hyde Park, London, to a Christmas market. The three children had been thrilled at all the different rides, and Eduard had even tried ice skating - none of the Australians wanted to go near the ice; it was cold enough, thank you very much. Still, Eduard could add being beaten up by flat ice to his list of life experiences, as well as comforting a crying Jem after Logan sneaked them all into a haunted house. He got in trouble for that, but they were still allowed to try hot, fresh churros from one of the food stalls. Jem made it a mission to get as much chocolate
on her face as she possibly could, which made Eduard laugh until she ran out and started using his.

Mr and Mrs Cooper, on the other hand, were most excited about a stall they saw selling burgers with unusual meats - including kangaroo. Eduard hadn't known it was possible to eat kangaroo, but Mrs Cooper explained it was actually pretty popular in Australia, and they really missed it. He wondered if he could ever find kangaroo meat in England again, and if so, cook something special for Mr and Mrs Cooper, as a ‘thank you’ for all they'd done for him.

Mr and Mrs Cooper also drank a lot of mulled wine, and kissed under the mistletoe, causing both Logan and Jem to protest loudly. Mr Cooper wrapped his arms around his wife’s waist just to annoy them further, and Mrs Cooper giggled.

That was another way the Coopers were different from Eduard's parents: he'd never seen his parents kiss. He didn't know if they'd ever, or if that was something grown-ups even did outside of films, until he saw Mr Cooper kissing his wife goodbye. Logan and Jem made retching noises, but Eduard thought it was quite sweet, that they did it every time one of them left the house, like it was painful to be apart for any amount of time.

Mr Cooper started teaching him how to play the keyboard properly, too. And it appeared to be the one thing his parents also agreed on, because his father bought him a piano to play on at home and paid for him to get lessons. Of course, he could only touch it after completing all his homework, and play the music his teacher told him to instead of dad-rock, and he suspected he was only allowed because it would look good to universities, but it was a hobby Eduard didn't have to keep secret.

A teacher finally took notice of Logan’s reading struggles, and at 11 he was diagnosed with dyslexia. It made going into high school a lot less scary for him, knowing he wasn't stupid or illiterate, and he would actually be getting the help he needed. Things seemed a little clearer. He kept noticing little things he did, things the doctor said were common in dyslexic people. It wasn't just the reading, he had said, it was remembering sequences and pronouncing words. That evening, Logan forgot the order of the days of the week, and realised why he kept doing that. The fact that he wasn't just stupid made him smile.

At 12, Logan started getting thoughts. He'd always thought kissing was disgusting, both when his parents did it and when the boring couples on the telly fell into each other's arms to kiss passionately. But one day he found himself wondering what it would be like to kiss Eduard.

He was sleeping over again, both boys tucked into Logan's exhausted bed, now on the brink of collapse from being jumped on for most of the past decade. Their faces were inches from each other. Eduard was fast asleep, looking so peaceful without his mind working away as it always did, and so much softer with his glasses on the bedside table, like he had nothing to hide behind. He wondered what it would be like to just… kiss him goodnight. Touch his lips to his, just gently. Make him smile.

The thought turned into a collection of feelings he couldn't quite comprehend and wouldn’t go away. He wasn’t sure he wanted them to.

When the feelings persisted for days that dragged into weeks, he decided the only option was to go to his mother.

Both Eduard and Logan were taller than Layla by now, but they were still her little boys. When she saw him come into the kitchen in tears, she put down her new baby - little Allirea, wrapped up in a baby sleeping bag - back in her Moses basket, the same one that had held Logan and Jem.

“Loggie, what’s wrong?” asked Layla, sitting him down on the sofa. He sobbed into her arms as he
told her about his confusing, but growing, feelings.

“I think- I mean- is it okay to like boys?” He played with his hands nervously, “like how other boys like girls?”

She blinked. “Course. You can like whoever you want to like, and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. Do you like a boy?”

Logan blanched. “No! Of course not! I was just thinking… about something I saw… on a telly…”

“A gay person on the telly?” Layla smiled at that.


“I’m sure there’s a word for it,” Layla kissed his forehead. “Want me to look it up with you?” Logan nodded, and may have started crying again at that point. As Layla booted up their massive, grey computer and then they were forced to wait whilst Mr Cooper finished his phone call to connect to the internet, his maybe-crying turned into definite-crying. Whilst they waited for the internet to dial up, Layla hugged him tight.

“It’s okay, son,” she cooed, “you’re so brave and amazing. How long have you been keeping this to yourself?”

Logan shrugged. “A few days, I guess. But I guess it’s been longer, I just didn’t know, like when I watched Hercules with Jem and thought Meg was cute, but also Hercules. It took me ages to realise, though.”

Layla smiled at him. “So there isn’t any boy you like?”

“There’s nobeddie- I mean nobody!” He looked scared, and Layla pretended to not know what he was talking about, for his sake. “I don’t like anyone! And all the boys at school make jokes, anyway. About gay bashing. I couldn’t ask him- err, anyone out. He might get hurt.”

Layla nodded solemnly. “I don’t know what to tell you. People can be horrible.” She did - briefly - entertain the idea of Logan and Eduard falling in love, and being happy together. Marriage wouldn’t be possible, though, which was a shame, because then Eduard would be her son for real. She just wanted her boys to be safe, though. “Whatever happens, you know you deserve to be happy, right? And Eddie. And my girls. I just want you all to be safe and happy.”

“Thanks, mum.” Could he and Eduard ever be happy together? He’d never actually pictured Eduard liking him back for real, but what if he did? What if they went on a date together, like a couple in a film. They could go to an ice cream bar, or the arcade. Logan could win him something!

Then they’d be seen by someone from school and probably beaten up. He didn’t care what happened to him, much, and after all he could hold his own in a fight. He’d proved that once when someone tried to push Jem off the seesaw, and again when someone called Eduard a geek and tried to make him give him his lunch. Okay, maybe that wasn’t the only fight he’d got into regarding Eduard. But the idea of him being hurt, maybe even killed, made his stomach lurch. He’d seen the articles. His imagination always had tended to run away with him. He imagined Eduard in hospital, clinging to life, beaten, stabbed, not pulling through, because he was so thin and fragile as it is. He didn’t think he could ever handle Eduard’s funeral.

“Huh, there’s bisexual,” said Layla, once the internet finally loaded. Logan welcomed the distraction. “or pansexual.”
He grinned. “There’s a word! Two words!” Layla tried to explain the difference, but Logan didn’t get it.

“It’s okay, Loggie,” Layla kissed his forehead, “you have your whole life to figure yourself out.”

And if he wanted to have a whole life to look forward to, it was best to keep his figuring out to himself.

Eduard rarely went out with his parents. They all preferred it that way - they didn’t care to go and do things with him and he didn’t care to be forced to be near them longer than he had to be. Still, sometimes it was unavoidable - it would be questionable for a 12-year-old to buy school shoes on his own, after all. He sat a seat in front of them on the bus, thinking his thoughts, when two young men boarded together, one’s arm linked in the other’s. They stood at the front, reluctantly letting go of each other to hang onto the rails. One said something, and the other laughed, pecking him quickly on the lips. The hands that weren’t grasping the poles found each other - one squeezed the other’s hand.

For some reason, Eduard thought about Logan. He imagined holding his hand like that, Logan laughing at him and kissing him on the lips. How you were supposed to kiss, he had no idea. He’d read in one of Mrs Cooper’s romance novels (which he’d read without her knowledge - it had a lot of naughty bits) that sometimes the tongues touched each other. He had wondered, first of all how tongues tasted, and second of all what direction they were meant to go in. Clockwise? Anticlockwise? Forward and backward, perhaps? Maybe there weren’t any rules. That sounded more complicated than he wanted to deal with, though. He imagined he would find a way to mess it up.

“Do they have to do that out here?” he heard his mother hiss to her husband in Estonian, “I mean, honestly, I’m an accepting person, but there are children on this bus.”

“It’s perverted,” he agreed, “In public like that.”

Eduard watched the man lean on his boyfriend’s shoulder. He wasn’t perverted, was he? Maybe he shouldn’t be thinking about his friend like that after all.

Logan decided not to tell Eduard his feelings, but that didn’t make them go away. Maybe it helped just a little that Eduard and him had stopped sharing a bed - it was getting too small for the two of them, and puberty made it weird. Either Eduard slept on a roll-out mattress, or (more and more frequently, it seemed) he didn't come over at all. He always had something to do these days - homework, piano practice, revision, tutoring he didn't need - and after all, he was 13 now. He didn't need Layla’s mothering quite so much anymore, or so he claimed. He certainly didn’t miss her or anything.

At school, Logan had more and more friends, while Eduard only had him. He wasn’t lonely, of course, and it certainly didn’t make his heart ache a little when Logan was laughing in a huge crowd of friends he could never hope to be a part of, and it didn’t kill him at all when Logan got his first girlfriend. Or his second. Or his fifth. He was perfectly content hunched over a textbook in the school library every lunchtime. Of course he was.

His parents seemed glad he was focusing on work instead of his friends, at least, though he suspected they’d rather he dropped Logan altogether. He was still his best friend, but with the little distance between them growing bit by bit, that seemed more and more likely. Logan was growing up and he
Eduard got sat next to Gunner Densen for English. Everyone knew Gunner, and most people liked him too. It wasn’t even in that popular asshole jock way - though he was an excellent footballer - it was just that he was a genuinely likeable guy, and made an effort to know just about everybody. He could be cocky and loud, but as the GCSE years began, everyone welcomed the entertainment. Even the sternest teachers couldn’t help but laugh at some of his jokes.

On the first English lesson of Year 10, he tilted back his chair, grinning widely at Eduard.

“Eddie, right?”

Eduard, for the most part, wanted to get his work done, but it would be rude to ignore him. “Yeah, you’re Gunner.”

“I sure hope so, or somebody really fucked up.”

Eduard smiled. “Wouldn’t put it past Mrs Hodson, honestly.” He glanced to the front, keeping his voice low. “Keeps using “who’s” instead of “whose” - it drives me nuts.”

“She’s nice!” he laughed, “And she loves you. All the teachers do, right? Like, you’re a fucking prodigy or whatever.”

“She is. I’m just pedantic. I wouldn’t say I’m a prodigy. I just read a lot. And code.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Code? How long you been doing that?”

“About ten years.”

“And I take it you, like me, are 14. So you’ve been doing it since you were, like, a baby.”

“My parents made me learn it.”

“But you learnt it. Are you any good?”

“Kind of. I do online uni work sometimes, but again, my parents make me.”

Gunner spread his hands, an “I told you so” grin on his face. “See?”

“Not that big a prodigy.”

“Yeah, by your standards, ‘cause you’re a prodigy.”

He couldn’t help beaming at that, though, and he bit his lip. He didn’t want to seem too proud. “Maybe so. Come on. Work.”

Logan was almost 16, sitting on the couch at some guy’s party with a plastic cup of vodka and Fanta. Eduard hated parties - if he wanted him to come along, he had to tempt him with free food. After
figuring out that free food generally meant alcohol and mini sausage rolls (one of which he'd willingly take, the other less so), even that didn't work. Still, Logan could have fun without him.

A girl fell onto his lap, blonde hair flying all over the place. She spilt wine all over his t-shirt.

“Oh fuck, sorry!” she cried, giggling.

“It’s okay,” Logan brushed her hair out of her face, then poured his own drink over her head. There was about a thimble left in it, but Laura still squealed.

“Hey, mine was an accident!” She didn’t seem to mind, not really. “You’re Logan right?”

“And you’re hot. How have I not hit on you before? Or, you know, seen you?”

“I go to the Catholic school across town. My cousin told me all about you, though: Slutty Logan. It’s his party, actually.”

He nodded. “Sounds about right. I’m not that much of a slut.” He was still a virgin, even if Eduard was the only person who knew that. He was perfectly happy for everyone else to think otherwise, though.

“I’m Laura, by the way.”

“Laura? Pretty name. Goes nicely with your face.”

Maybe it was best that Eduard didn’t go to parties, because seeing Logan and Laura snog on the sofa then disappear into one of the bedrooms would have not only broken his heart but his soul too. Not that he didn’t have to listen to Logan tell him all about it the next day.

“I’m an idiot,” Logan mumbled into Eduard’s pillow.

“Yes you are,” said Eduard, not looking up from his revision guide, “what did you do now?”

Logan hugged the pillow to his stomach, doubled up in the fetal position. “You know Laura?”

“Catholic school Laura? With the…” Eduard gestured vaguely at his chest area.

“Huge badonkas?” he supplied.

“I wasn’t going to put it that way.”

“No, you were just going to gesture like a coward. Actually, I think that's slightly worse. Anyway, she has them.”

Eduard didn’t like this conversation very much. “What’s this about? She seemed pretty into you.” He hadn’t seen much of her, but she always seemed to be at Logan’s house, acting as if she was permanently attached to him.

“Well, we’ve been dating for a bit, right?”

He swallowed the lump in his throat before replying. “Yeah?”

“Well, we, um… I might have…” he twiddled his thumbs, “she’s pregnant.”

Eduard dropped his revision guide. “What?”
“She took a test yesterday. She’s gonna go to a doctor next week and get a scan.”

Eduard didn’t know why he was shaking. “Do mum and dad know?”

“Not yet. They’re gonna be so disappointed in me. Eddie, I’m scared. You’re smart. You wear glasses. What do I do here?”

He thought for a moment. He may have been panicking, but he was nothing if not a problem solver. “I mean… it kind of looks like it’s her decision. She’s the one carrying a whole fetus. What does she want to do with it?”

“She goes to Catholic school; of course she’s keeping it. I don’t think she has a choice.” He hugged his knees. “Her dad’s gonna find out and kill me.”

“Is Laura the one with the racist dad? I can't keep track.”

“Yeah. He’s gonna flip his shit.”

“I’ll come to your funeral.”

He hit him with the pillow. “This isn’t funny!”

“You're right. Sorry. I'll make sure they don't have those shitty sausage rolls there, though. And make sure it’s Shrek-themed.”

“Eduard!”

“Right. Matter at hand.” He nibbled his lip. “Is there anything you can do?”

“Literally nothing. I'm trapped here.”

“Then wait for him to kill you. Or move to Mexico and change your name. I don't know.”

Logan gave a whine. “No, I wanna stay and help.” He didn’t look too sure, but nodded to himself. “I gotta be a dad, I guess? I’m not gonna leave Laura to deal with this on her own.”

“Good man. But what if it’s twins? Or triplets?”

“Don’t get me thinking about that! I guess… I guess we look after them anyway? I don't know.”

“What if they mess with your A-levels?”

“That’s what you're thinking about?”

“They're important.”

“Doesn't matter. I'm 16. We can get married, legally, right? And I can drop out and get a job and we can live somewhere and look after our kids. Our kid. Probably our kid. Singular. I hope. I hate counting things; please be one baby.”

Eduard made a face. Maybe he was just too ambitious himself, but that wasn’t the life he strived for, and he didn’t think Logan did either. “That sounds unsatisfying.”

“It's what I've got, mate. You don't need A-levels to work.”

“What are you gonna be, a bin man?”
“I don’t know!”

“You’d make a good bin man.”

“Ed!”

“Sorry. Sorry. Also, are you sure you want to marry her? After dating less than two months?” Not that he was jealous.

“I could… yeah. I like her.”

Eduard knew what he was like. He’d seen the things Logan kept under his bed and in his bedside drawer. Which apparently he was far from adept at using. “Like her or like her tits?”

“Shut up! Really. I could do it. Maybe. Probably. If her dad doesn’t have too much of an issue.”

As it turns out, Laura’s dad did have an issue with Logan, and certainly wasn’t going to think of him as a future son-in-law anytime soon. He also didn’t seem to care about his grandchild growing up without a father, as he told Laura just what he was going to do to Logan.

After finding out where Logan lived, he came round to shout and scream at the front house, threatening to kill the boy, and after he was ignored, the whole family. Laura had phoned ahead to warn them, so Logan had time to hide in the sitting room, holding his sisters close whilst his parents went to sort it all out, and he came to the grim realisation that he’d have to do things this terrifying for his own kid in future and maybe stop being a coward.

Mr and Mrs Cooper tried the civil approach, briefly, before telling Laura’s dad he needed to leave, and fast. He didn’t listen, and a fight broke out. The last time Layla had beaten up someone else’s parent, Eduard was tucked in upstairs, with a mug of hot milk.

Things probably would’ve gone a lot smoother if Logan had had the foresight to tell his parents Laura was pregnant. Maybe, just maybe, that would’ve been useful to know, going into a fight with their son’s girlfriend’s father.

Logan was banned from seeing Laura again, by her dad. And Logan was more than happy to avoid going over to visit. Laura, however, did take any opportunity she could to sneak over, to see Logan and get to know his parents, and give all the Coopers updates on the pregnancy.

Once Logan Sr and Layla got over the initial shock of just how stupid their son was, they agreed to support him, and after Eduard told them of Logan’s plans to drop out, made him promise to stay in school to finish his A-levels. Logan had insisted he needed to drop out and get a job, they didn’t agree at all. They would work out how he could balance sixth form and raising a child together, and if he wanted, he could get a weekend job to help provide for the child.

Logan asked Layla for her mother’s wedding ring to propose. He showed the simple band to Eduard when he stayed over, and he wondered if he should try to convince him to not do something so stupid and reckless, but the words wouldn’t come out. Would Logan get mad at him for trying to interfere? Would his voice crack at having to think - never mind talk - about Logan marrying someone else? Would he see right through it, figure out he was jealous? What then? Would he look at him like his parents looked at those men on the bus, call him a pervert? Would he think this whole friendship was a ruse to get into his pants? Maybe it was. Maybe he was a pervert after all.

He barely slept that night from overthinking.
“She said ‘no’,” Logan pushed past Eduard to flop dramatically on the sofa.

“Well, g’day to you too.” Eduard blinked, closed the front door and went to sit with his friend. “I hate to say this, but mate, what did you expect?”

“Well, not that she’d get weirded out and dump me.” He groaned and buried his face in one of Eliisabet’s boring cushions. “She called me a dopey twat when I got the ring out.”

Eduard hated how relieved he felt. How secretly gleeful, like a weight off his shoulders, like he could convince himself there was a chance when there really wasn’t. Logan was straight. He was also hurting and Eduard needed to be there for him and not think about his stupid feelings.

“Sorry to hear that,” he sat next to Logan and rubbed his back. “But it’s not exactly something one expects from a high school boyfriend. I mean, it’s 2003, not 1953.”

“I guess. Still, I had this whole plan in my head and now…” He shrugged. “I dunno, I kinda liked the idea of us being a family and raising a kid together.”

“Logan, it was a stupid plan and you were going to end up throwing your life away.”

Logan knew Eduard was right, but still glared at him sullenly.

“You know it was.”

Logan nodded, defeated. “I guess. And yeah, I admit it, I don’t love her. We don’t have a lot in common, besides this alien-looking fetus we made together.”

“You’ll find someone. A step-mum for Baby Cooper.”

“She wanted to give the baby up for adoption too,” he sighed, “and I know it’s probably for the best, but I asked if I could raise her instead and Laura said it was cool, since she didn’t want to be with me anymore. I’m being dumb, I get it, but… I don’t think I could go about knowing my kid was out there with no family.”

Eduard nodded. “I’m sure you’ll make a good dad. You raised all the frogs. And you’re like Steveo’s dad, kind of. And you have good parents to show you how to be good parent, right?”

Logan nodded.

He rubbed his back. “The world could do with more good dads.”

“And you reckon I can be one?”

“I know you can.” He paused. “Wait, ‘her’? You’re having a girl?”

“Yeah, we found out a while back,” he grinned, “I’m gonna have a daughter!”

Laura went into labour in early November.

Her parents didn’t show up, but Logan and his mum stayed with her the whole night, and in the early hours of the morning, she gave birth to a tiny, screaming baby.

Laura, just glad that her long, difficult pregnancy was over, paid very little interest in her daughter, and didn’t even name the child before leaving her and Logan at the hospital the next day. She told the Coopers she just wanted to put everything behind her, and move on with her life. She was
already planning to change schools to avoid the bullying from her classmates, and though she might be up to staying friends with Logan in future, for the time being, it was unlikely they’d meet again.

With a final hug, Logan watched Laura go, driven home by Mr Cooper.

The baby had to stay in hospital for a few days longer. She’d been born too early and needed help with breathing. Logan stayed with her, next to her big, terrifying incubator, stroking her through a little hole, singing to her and talking about anything he could. Whenever Eduard came to visit him, he had dark grey bags under his eyes, and wouldn’t let him touch the baby until he was certain his hands had been thoroughly washed.

“Be careful with her,” he warned, for the fifteenth time.

“Logan, I’m more hand sanitiser than skin and I’m patting her back through a hole in an incubator. What harm could I possibly do?”

He shook his head. “You’re right. Sorry. Daddy instincts.”

Eduard took his hand out of the incubator. “I was premature too.”

“You were?”

“Apparently. Though somehow I doubt my dad got daddy instincts. Two days old and she’s already got better parents than me. Lucky kid.” He tried not to sound bitter. Tried. “I think she’s gonna be alright, with you and mum and dad looking out for her. Speaking of, is everything sorted with Laura?”

“Yeah, she cleared off about as soon as she recovered. Don't blame her.”

“I don't know if this is the neglected kid in me talking, but she can't be that great if she left her with you that quickly.”

Logan waved him off. “Ah, it's not her fault. Not like baby here would be better off with her family than mine. Fucking asshole of a grandpa.”

“That bit I get, but she didn't even want to visit.”

“Yeah, well, she's 16, she's got her whole life ahead of her.” Logan watched as the baby drank milk from a tube in her mouth, and winced.

“So are you.”

“I think mum’s gonna end up doing most of the work anyway. I'm not dumping her on her or anything, but you know what she's like - she loves kids. And she doesn't have school to go to.”

“Well, that's good. I'm here too, if you need an extra hand.” Some stupid bit of him imagined them being her dads, but he pushed the thought down before it surpassed some bizarre image of him walking arm in arm with Logan and pushing a fancy stroller in the park like some 19th century pair of newlyweds.

“I'll be sure to take you up on that.”

After a week or so in hospital, Logan took his little, premature baby home in bumblebee pyjamas worn by Jem and Allirea, and didn’t leave her side for days. He moved Allirea’s old cot into his room, next to his bed so he could look at her while he slept. For a grand total of 3 hours a night, by
the look of him. Not only was she constantly hungry, but she pooped more than Steveo.

“Does she have a name yet?” asked Eduard, watching Logan, curled up on the sofa and holding his daughter. It had taken an hour, but she’d finally stopped crying, and Eduard was a mess of frayed nerves. And he’d not been the one feeding, burping, changing and carrying her around the room.

“Harriet. Harriet Layla Cooper. Harry for short, though. She’s an Aussie, after all. Gotta have a nickname.”

Harry yawned, looking slightly cross. She was wrapped up in a blanket Layla had knitted for her, wearing the thickest, softest onesie she had. Logan kissed her head, where a few tufts of pale hair were already growing. He was always kissing the baby, or stroking her, or holding her close.

Steveo climbed onto the sofa and sniffed at the baby. Then he tried to lick her.

“No, you great stupid twat!” cried Logan, shoving him onto the floor roughly. “You can play with Harry when she's not tiny and has an immune system!”

For the first few months, Logan would only let his mother hold Harry. No one else was allowed until she got bigger and stronger and vaccinated. And even then, Logan would hover over the person in question, fussing and driving everyone insane.

By the time Eduard mustered up the confidence to try holding her, Harry had been passed around the family like a blunt. Even Allirea had had a go at holding her, though the 4-year-old seemed more keen on dressing her up, and even once attempting to do her makeup. Logan had been horrified at the terrifying clown-baby he’d been handed back, and told his sister to go do that to her dolls, not her real, living baby niece. Mrs Cooper had made sure to get photos, though, just like she’d taken photos of everything her first granddaughter did, from smiling to blowing snot bubbles.

Logan picked up the habit if photographing Harry's every move, which was why Eduard found himself trying to forget Harry's very own paparazzi were focused on him as he held the baby for the first time.

Harriet had her father's eyes: round and greeny-brown and curious. She stared at everything with intense wonder, like an archaeologist finding ancient gold for the first time.

Eduard was terrified. He was holding one entire baby in his arms and so afraid he'd drop her. Or she'd take one look at him and start crying. Or poop. Or throw up like she'd done on Mr Cooper.

Instead, though, she reached up to attempt a gentle tap on his face, then settled down to sleep, and Logan gave him a silent thumbs-up.

“So this is it, huh? We're officially done with school.” Logan picked up the cuddly toy Harry had launched from her pushchair and handed it back to her. The baby took one look at him and launched it back out.

Eduard, sat on the park bench next to him, laughed.

“We still have our exams,” he reminded him, “but yeah, no more lessons.”

By now, the rest of their year would be trying to order drinks at the pub, as was the annual tradition. It was the one day bar staff tended to not ask questions, even when students came in still wearing what was clearly a scribble-covered uniform.
Logan and Eduard's school shirts were also covered in ink, from good luck messages to the huge cock and balls drawn on Logan's back, that he then copied onto Eduard's so they could match. His parents would probably evaporate in rage, but he didn't care to think of that right now. Logan's was covered in messages from friends and the silly string they'd been playing with. Eduard's was mostly just names and "good luck!"s from forgettable strangers - the only ones of note were from Logan and Gunner. Plus someone had thrown an egg at him - he suspected it was meant to be mean, but he was mostly just happy to be included in the mess. For a joke, since everyone knew he was a father, Logan had stuffed a football up his shirt to pretend he was pregnant.

Eduard was never one for loud gatherings, and he wasn't too heartbroken about never seeing some of his classmates again, and Logan decided to take him and Harry to the park instead of the pub. The same place they went to as children.

Eduard laughed and lifted Harry out of her pushchair whilst Logan gathered up her toys.

"You're such a strong girl already," he cooed, kissing her face, "you threw them so far!" Logan pretended to scowl at them both.

Harry stared at him blankly. "Ah."

"You're gonna be a big sports lady, aren't you? You gonna play rugby like your daddy?"

She opened and closed her mouth like a goldfish. Logan grinned and took her off Eduard, kissing her nose. "Let's get you back down, sweetheart." He put her back down in the pushchair and strapped her in. "Good girl."

"Looking forward to sixth form?" asked Eduard, once Logan had sat down again. He wrinkled his nose.

"Fucks sake, just let me get my GCSEs out the way before we start thinking about that!"

"I think it'll be nice to have a bit of change. Fingers crossed, we'll be in the same place."

"Oh, come on, you'll get in wherever you want," Logan scoffed, "Mr Predicted-Straight-A*s."

"Plus if I get a distinction on my piano exam, I've got that too."

"Doesn't that count if you pass at all?"

"You think my parents'll let me off with a pass?"

"Thought they weren't keen on piano."

"They aren't, but Cambridge isn't going to take in anyone without their extracurriculars." He imitated his dad's voice perfectly - Anton sounded like him with a stronger accent.

Logan smiled sadly. "Weren't even allowed to pick between that and Oxford?"

"That's dad for you." He grimaced. "Got to admit, he really does stick to a plan once he makes it."

"Okay, but we gotta make time for each other too. Like, whenever studying gets too much, just come over and we'll drink some cider and forget stupid work for a few hours, right?"

"Yeah, sure thing."

"Nah bitch," Logan held out his little finger, "pinky promise."
Eduard scoffed, then looked at Logan’s face, sighed, and hooked their fingers together. “Pinky promise. If my parents let me.”

“If they don't, come anyway. Mum’ll fight them off.”

Eduard wanted to say that no, that would be dangerous, they would kill him if he missed out on his studying, but in the interest of keeping things light-hearted, he just nodded. “Alright. Studying won't get too much for me, though. Further Maths won't beat me.”

“You’re taking further maths?” Logan said the words with the same tone that Eduard’s mother used for ‘homosexuals’ and people who took GCSE fine art.

“Yeah, plus maths, physics, and computer science.”

“Mate, you're suicidal.”

“I'm taking four heavily academic subjects, I probably will be by the end of the year.”

“Very dark of you to say.”

“It's one of my many talents.”

“You'd make a horrific comedian.”

“I'd make an amazing comedian. Guess that's the same thing, isn't it?”

“It is with your sense of humour.”

“Like you're any better.”

Logan grinned. “You know you love me.”

Eduard looked down at his knees. “Yeah. Guess I do.”

Chapter End Notes

Getting egged on the last day of school and just being glad to be involved is absolutely not based on true experience. Shut up.
Uncle Eddie’s got to get into Cambridge or he’ll be uncle deaddie

Chapter Notes

Kjetil - Norway
Estelle - nyo Cameroon
Manya - Wy

...

Warning for yet more depictions of abuse, both emotional and sexual.
Also this chapter is butt-numbingly long, but we hope you enjoy!

Eduard was 16 when he had his first kiss.

He and Gunner had become vague friends through English, but as it turned out, they went on to be in the same A-level Maths class too. He and Logan weren’t doing any of the same subjects, though they’d gotten into the same sixth form, so he quickly latched onto Gunner as the one familiar face in any of his classes. He liked Gunner. He was funny. Gunner got him to sit with his new friends, and though he felt a little like an intruder, he supposed he knew, after how school went down, to take what he could get. And after five years of getting called ‘bowlcut’ in the corridor, he was glad of the protection. As it turned out, one of them was Eduard’s cousin - he knew Tino went to the sixth form, but they moved in different circles before now- and the two had quite a bit in common. It was nice to know not everyone in his family was awful.

Bit by bit, he came to be a part of the group. He got to know them all: Tino’s aggressive music taste, Kjetil’s plethora of mythology facts, Berwald’s tendency to give his coat to whoever didn’t have one (or just Tino). Most of all he got to know Gunner. He already knew enough from English, of course, but as they got closer, he found he only got kinder the more you talked to him. He was fun, a bit of a party animal, reckless, and always, of course, the man in the spotlight. Just like at their last school, everyone and their grandpa knew him somehow. Eduard walked down the hall with him and he’d acknowledge about a third of the people he walked past - a nod for him, a smile for her, a little compliment for someone’s new haircut. He was also very much out, which made Eduard wonder if he could get away with it, just for a moment, but after giving it a moment’s thought he decided that was a terrible idea. He wasn’t Gunner. Nobody could hate Gunner.

It was the last period on a Friday- Maths- and Eduard was working through his questions, talking them through with him.

“No, look, it’s 120 metres,” he was patiently explaining, “You have to add that bit, too.”

“Ohhh.” Gunner wrote his answer in. “Fuck, you’re smart.”

“I just study sometimes.”

“Yeah, yeah, alright, dad.” He grinned at him. “Hey, uh, Ed?”

“Hm?”
“Do, uh, d’you maybe wanna go to McDonald’s after class?”

“Sure, but I don’t think Kjetil’s in around this time and Tino’s got—”

“No, no,” he chuckled, “Just you and me. I’ll pay.”

“Well, I’m not passing up free milkshake.”

“Good. I need to, uh, need to talk to you.”

“That doesn’t sound ominous at all.”

“It’s nothing bad, promise.”


After class, they took their detour to McDonald’s. Gunner bought them each a milkshake and some nuggets and fries between them. They sat out by the window. Logan passed, holding hands with a girl from his PE class. He’d mentioned her - Estelle was her name. She was on the girls’ football team. He’d told himself he’d moved on from Logan a million times - it still ached to see him with other people. He decided it was better to get his mind off it.

“So, what’s this thing you need to talk to me about? The suspense is killing me.”

“Right, right, the… yeah.” He cleared his throat. “What’s your opinion on, uh… on boys?”

Eduard raised an eyebrow. “That’s the thing you’ve been leading up to? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, just… what is it?”

“I am one.”

“Yeah, but, like, romantically.”

Eduard’s chicken nugget froze in mid-air. He tried not to dwell on that sort of thing. It made him feel wrong. “Oh. Uh…”

“No judgement,” he quickly added, “Obviously.”

“I-I don’t- I don’t really- y’know, like-”

“Are you straight, is what I’m asking,” Gunner clarified. Come on, Eduard wasn’t that socially inept. Usually.


“Hey, it’s cool, I won’t. Any particular guys?”

“No,” he lied, “Nobody.”
“So.” Gunner ate a fry, just to give himself another opportunity to stall. “if I were to, say, ask you out…”

Eduard blinked. That was not the direction he was hoping this conversation would head into.

“It’s- sorry. You can forget I asked, if you want, just… well, I like you. Kind of a lot. I’ve liked you about since last year.”

Eduard thought about Logan and Estelle, walking down the road hand in hand. He really didn’t have a chance there, did he? Maybe it was time he moved on for real.

“I like you too.” He held his hand under the table and smiled at him. “Kind of a lot.”

Gunner kept trying to hold his hand all the way home.

At first, Eduard would simply move his hand away, ball it into a fist so it was impossible to hold properly. He tried to put some distance between them, but Gunner closed the gap.

“Please,” he finally piped up when Gunner tried to force his hand in his. “Not in public. Not yet. It’s kind of… scary.”

Gunner nodded and let go, but he looked pretty upset about it. Eduard felt a stab of guilt at that, but he was so utterly terrified of being outed. Of someone seeing him and hurting him or telling everyone or his parents seeing. Even the thought made his throat tighten.

But Gunner liked him. A lot. He should try to be a good boyfriend if he was going to do this. Boyfriend. He actually had a boyfriend now.

“It’s okay,” said Gunner, “I like you. I don’t wanna hurt you.”

“My parents aren't home,” he said quickly, “you could, um, you could kiss me goodbye.”

Gunner perked up at that. “I'd like that.”

So, when he got home, Eduard checked the whole house for any sign of parental presence, then made them both coffee. Gunner sat in the kitchen watching him bustle about. They didn’t need to talk, but Eduard did catch him staring whenever he glanced back, and blushed. It was nice, domestic, even. He could get used to this.

He passed Gunner his coffee and sat next to him. He glanced at him shyly, and Gunner stared back.

“You're so pretty,” said Gunner, “I've wanted to kiss you for ages.”

“Well, here I am. Go ahead.” Eduard was on the verge of panic. This was really happening. What if he did something wrong? What if he messed up and Gunner got grossed out and didn't want to talk to him again? What if he lost his friendship with not only Gunner, but the whole gang? And he told them all just how bad at kissing he was and how he didn't know what to do and was weird and they all turned against him and- 

And then Gunner’s lips were on his.
Eduard’s mind went blank for the first time in his life, and before he could even acknowledge what was happening, Gunner was already pulling away. He smiled lovingly at him.

“I liked that,” he squeaked, and Gunner snorted.

“We can do it some more if you like.” His hand snaked up to the back of his head, and he pulled Eduard closer. Their second kiss lasted longer, Gunner sucking on his bottom lip gently. Okay, that was something you were supposed to do. He could do this. He could kiss back. He wasn’t going to mess this up. A few kisses later, and he was starting to get the hang of it.

Completely red in the face now, Eduard sipped at his coffee, occasionally glancing over at Gunner and smiling. Gunner massaged his neck slowly, and Eduard shivered.

“Wanna go upstairs?” asked Gunner, trailing a finger over his ear. Eduard shook his head quickly.

“Woah, let’s not get too ahead of ourselves,” he yelped, swatting his hand away, “come on. We just got together.”

“You’re right, sorry,” said Gunner, “we can, um, we can-”

“Play scrabble?” Eduard suggested. Nothing could kill the mood better than him being needlessly competitive. And showing off his unreasonable vocabulary.

Gunner didn’t look like he wanted to do that at all, but nodded all the same.

Now that Gunner has passed the ultimate test: seeing Eduard be dangerously competitive over the smallest thing and not dumping him, it only made sense that he introduced the guy to Logan.

They’d arranged to meet at the park, and Logan sat on his favourite bench to wait: the one in the hill with the view of the pond and the little crop of trees behind it. On that cold February morning, he’d wrapped Harry up in the warmest clothes she had, and she struggled to toddle about in her lilac snowsuit. She touched the snow with her bare hand, and her face screwed up in disgust.

“See, that’s why we wear gloves,” Logan stuffed her hands into the mittens she'd thrown onto the ground five minutes earlier. Although Harry didn’t much like the cold, she wasn’t too happy about the mittens either, and threw her doll as far as she could in protest. “Yeah, same. One day I’ll take you to Oz. You’ll love it there. It’s so hot and sunny, and you can see all the animals. And fight them. Strong, strong baby.”

He rescued her doll from the snow, then lifted her up so she was on his lap. “You're perfect, d’ya know that? You should know that. I'll tell you every day.” He kissed her forehead. “I love you; don't ever doubt that.”

He gazed across the park. “Look! Uncle Eddie!”

He let Harry down, and she took off across the park like she was fleeing a bear, arms stretched wide to hug him the moment they touched. She was squealing happily as he drew nearer, then uncle Eddie and his new friend disappeared above her head, replaced by the snow she fell face-first into.

“Harry!” Eduard ran forward to pick her up, brushing snow off her face. Harry didn't look too
happy, and her lip wobbled as she contemplated crying.

And then she decided to.

“Oh dear, Harry no it's okay. Just a bit of snow.” He lifted her up with all his very minimal strength, and kissed her frozen nose.

“How come she gets a kiss in public?” asked Gunner jokingly.

“She's cute.” Eduard bounced her gently until she stopped crying, and by that time Logan had joined them, dragging Harry’s pushchair and a massive shoulder bag behind him. It always baffled Eduard just how much a tiny baby could need, but he’d not had many experiences with kids. There’d been Allirea, but he’d never actually travelled anywhere with her. He’d also not watched her grow up as much, not like he had with Jem. And Logan. He needed to visit the Coopers more.

“Hey!” he gasped. “Good to see ya; you must be Gunner.” He took Harry back, scooping her into his arms, and he saw Gunner and Ed link pinky fingers. His heart sank, but he tried not to read too much into it. It was nothing. Eduard hated any form of PDA and Logan knew that. They’d talked about it. He knew he’d get embarrassed at even holding hands with someone in public, but was that all speculation? And if so, why was he holding hands - or fingers - with this guy?

“That’s me! Hey, I think I’ve seen ya around. I was gonna ask if you were they guy who got someone pregnant, but…” He glanced at Harry. Logan set her down and she hid behind his leg. Eduard flushed at that. Logan blinked.

“Just a joke,” Gunner nudged him, and in some - admittedly petty - show of strength, Logan made sure to flex before his hand touched him. “But seriously, you did get someone pregnant.”

Logan glanced at Eduard for some form of explanation. He just avoided eye contact.

“So,” Gunner clapped his hands as they all sat together on a bench, Eduard wedged between them, “Eddie tells me you’re his best friend.”

“Yes, you his friend too then?” All Eduard told him was that he really wanted them to get along, needed to, even. He was willing to put in the effort if this guy was. They must’ve been close, but surely...

“Boyfriend.”

Eduard froze. “Gunner.”

“Hm?” It dawned on him. “Oh. Oh, shit, sorry, I forgot, I- you didn’t know?”

Logan shook his head. He didn’t take his eyes off Eduard. He looked terrified. What was Gunner thinking? Surely he had told him not to say anything - Eduard was careful with his secrets.

“Might have, maybe, kind of, not told you. I’m sorry. I’m still figuring things out, I just-”

“I’m pan.”

Ed blinked. “What?”

“I like guys too.” Logan smiled at him. When things got too much for Ed, Logan could calm him down with just that smile. “No judgement here.”
“You do?”

“Yeah, loads. Don’t… I haven’t really told anyone either. I mean, mum and dad, but that’s all.”

“Good to know.” Eduard couldn’t help but laugh with relief. All this time he’d thought he didn’t have a shot with Logan, but now-

Now he still didn’t. Because he had a boyfriend. Obviously. Plus Logan probably would’ve said something by now, right? Right? Logan could get anyone - why settle for gangly, awkward Eduard, if he was going to risk outing himself by dating someone? Even his own parents didn’t want to spend time with him.

“How long have you been seeing each other, then?”

Gunner put his arm around Ed’s waist. Logan clenched his fists a little tighter round the handles of the pushchair. “All weekend, we got together Friday.”

“Over McDonald’s. Very romantic.”

Gunner shot him a stony look.

“Sorry. It was actually really sweet.”

Logan blinked. Was Gunner the only one allowed to make jokes?

Eduard hastily changed the subject. “How’s Estelle?”

“Still won’t believe I’m letting her win our football matches. You know, to be gentlemanly.”

“Are you now.”

“Oh, fuck off, not you too. And I’m still pretty sure she’s dating me for Steveo. And also that he’s trying to steal my girl. They’re stealing each other. He just lies across her when we’re trying to snog, and he keeps sitting when she tells him to. Old cunt never does that for me.”

“Oh, poor you.”

Logan laughed at that, and Eduard joined in. “How do I compete with someone that cute?”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

Harry whined and Logan picked her up again, bouncing her gently.

“Can I hold her?” Gunner asked suddenly.

Every inch of Logan wanted to tell him to fuck off. He’d rather hand his daughter over to her maternal grandfather than this guy. Gunner really rubbed him the wrong way, and he didn’t want the guy touching his child. But he didn’t want to cause a scene, and he didn’t know how to voice ‘I have a gut feeling that you’re a prick’ to someone without offending them. Not that he ever cared about offending people before, but he didn’t want to embarrass Eduard.

“Sure,” he croaked. Gunner prized Harry from his arms, and the child immediately screwed up her little face and started bawling her eyes out. He felt a flash of pride at that, but tried not to look too smug. Instead, he smiled apologetically.

“Sorry. She’s a little cranky today. Aussies and the cold don’t mix at all.”
“You mean she didn’t get my Estonian cold tolerance by osmosis?”

“Apparently not.” Logan laughed. “You need to come over more.” He held Harry up to his face, pouting. “She misses her uncle Eddie.”

He thought he saw Gunner’s lips tighten. Might’ve been the light, though.

“I’ve got studying to do. Uncle Eddie’s got to get into Cambridge or he’ll be uncle deaddie.”

Harry pointed at him. “Eggy,” she replied sagely. He hoped she never learnt to pronounce his name properly.

Eduard took her off him and kissed her forehead. “That’s right!” he cooed, “Uncle Eddie’s mummy and daddy are gonna kill him if he doesn’t get into one of, if not the most competitive university in the country! Yes they are! He’s gonna be a Cambridge graduate or a desecrated corpse! Those are his only two options!”

“Please stop telling my daughter about your daddy issues, she’s one. She doesn’t know how to help you.”

“Nonsense. Nothing wrong with talking to babies about desecrated corpses.”

“If her first word is “dessicated” I’m fighting you on the spot for turning my daughter into a fucking nerd.”

“Desecrated. Dessicated is what you do with coconuts.”

“Nerd.”

“Bitch.

Gunner put his arm around Eduard, and he was stunned to find the guy grimace and wiggle out of his grasp.

“Babe-”

“Not out here, please. You know that.” Eduard looked like he’d very much like to disappear. Gunner looked like a kicked puppy, but said nothing. Logan just glared at him.

“Honestly,” he sighed, shaking his head at Logan, trying to get the guy to agree with him. Logan continued to glare at him. He just grimaced and leaned back in his chair, fingers interlaced behind his head and legs in two different time zones. “Tough crowd.”

Logan tried to make eye-contact with Eduard, but he just fussed over Harry, determined to look at no one else.

She gripped his finger, grinning. “Eggy!”

—

“So, what do you think of Gunner?”

There were very few things that could tempt Eduard away from studying, but Layla’s baking could
usually do the trick. Logan and Eduard were sprawled out on his bedroom floor, making their way through a tin of homemade caramel shortbread. Logan was playing FIFA, which he insisted technically counted as revision because he was taking P.E., whilst Eduard was leafing through the guy’s biology textbook with mild disgust. He considered himself a man of science, but he hated biology with a passion. He was a physics guy. Also, his dad was a doctor. His mother’s job, he couldn’t help getting invested in, but out of spite, he decided against giving a fuck about biology. All someone had to do was mention cells and he would pretend to barf.

Logan made a face. “Not gonna lie, the guy’s a colossal prick. You could do better.”

“He’s nice!”

“He’s friendly. There’s a difference.” Logan wrinkled his nose, accidentally letting in a goal. “He just… doesn’t seem like a good person. There’s something slimy about him, something two-faced. Even Harry could see it. Hell, I trust Harry’s opinion more than my own.”

Eduard raised an eyebrow. “She’s a baby.”

“Kids can sense these things. So can animals. I bet Steveo wouldn’t like him either. I bet even the frogs wouldn’t.”

“That’s superstitious bullshit. She can barely walk, that doesn’t give her psychic powers.”

“Mum told me. Remember that teacher Jem wouldn’t go near? Every time she saw him she would burst into tears and hide? And remember him getting arrested a few years later? Kids know.”

“That’s coincidence. Or maybe she saw something. That’s not proof.”

Logan rolled his eyes. “Look, just… keep an eye on him. And if he does anything shitty, you drop him and tell me so I can fight him.”

“Please don’t fight him.”

“I will if he does anything to hurt you.”

“Which he won’t. Fucking hell, Logan, can’t you just be happy for me? It’s actually hard for some of us to get asked out, so don’t try and ruin this.”

“Fine,” Logan raised his hands, relenting, “fine, I’m just saying. If you need me, I’ll be here for you.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Gunner seemed to have misinterpreted the idea of “coming over to study”. Eduard’s timetable was stuck up on the corkboard over his desk - Thursday after school was Maths and he may as well make sure Gunner got some work done too.

Gunner had other ideas, and lasted all of twenty minutes before making them known. He put down the textbook he was half-reading, got up from his bed and kissed Eduard’s neck. “Exams aren’t for months, babe. Take a break.”
Eduard tried to pull away. “Gunner, we’re supposed to do 5 hours independent study a week per subject, minimum. That’s 5 hours Physics, 5 hours Computer Science, and 10 hours Maths. Get some of your hours done.”

“You’re the only one who actually does that and you do about twice that. C’mon, just-” His hand rested on Eduard’s thigh. “-take a break.”

“I can’t.” He knew where this was going. Gunner joked about it constantly - especially with their friends. Often about Eduard. It was just banter, he knew he didn’t mean anything by it, but he had to admit it was embarrassing - it even creeped him out a little. He felt guilty for thinking that. This was his boyfriend - he was supposed to like him, right? Supposed to want to… to do things. Even if his reasons for dating him might have had ulterior motives. That made him feel guiltiest of all. He couldn’t fault him for his jokes when he was the one using him to get over Logan. Maybe he should let him. He owed him, after all.

“Come on. You’ll like it.” His hand was creeping slowly inward. Eduard felt his breath on his neck. “We can get back to work right after, promise.”

“My parents are downstairs.”

“Keep quiet then.”

“I’ve never done it before.”

“First time for everything.” Gunner was apparently past subtly tiptoeing his hand between his thighs. He fully grabbed his crotch, gently, but roughly enough to make Eduard yelp.

“Gunner!”

“Nothing’ll happen, it’s fine. C’mon.” He could feel his lips on his neck as he spoke. “You’ve been teasing. Making me wait too long.”

“You’ll live.”

“Not if you keep looking that fucking beautiful. Please?”

“Take your hand off my balls, Gunner.”

“Do you not like me or what?”

There was a pang of guilt. “Of course I like you, I just-”

“Just what?”


“It’s cool.” That damn kicked-puppy face suggested otherwise.

“We can… like, we can do stuff if you want. Just, not too far. And not too long. Short break.”

“That’s fine.” Gunner kissed him. “We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”

As he kissed back, raising himself out of his chair and falling back into his bed, he considered telling him that they already were. Instead he let Gunner pin him down by the wrists, legs wrapped around his waist, and get to work bruising his neck with hickeys. Nobody would question him wearing turtlenecks for a week. He did that anyway. Gunner glanced up at him and smiled.
“See? It’s not so bad.”

Eduard just nodded. He was anxious, to the point of being genuinely scared. His skin crawled on every inch that touched his.

“Not once you get into it.” He took both of his skinny wrists in one hand and pulled Eduard's shirt up bit by bit until it was crumpled on his floor.

“Yeah, it’s good,” he lied, willing something to intervene. Like a plane engine crashing into his bedroom, Donnie Darko-style.

Just as Gunner was unzipping his jeans, his salvation came in the worst form possible.

His father barged in. “Eduard, have you done your-”

He froze. Eduard froze. Gunner rolled off of him, awkwardly doing his fly back up. Anton gave him a sharp look he didn’t quite know how to respond to.

He looked at Gunner for, well, something. Anything. Help? Reassurance? Instead, he took one look at Anton and ran out of the room, pushing past him as he ducked out the door. Thanks. Real brave, Gunner.

Now he was alone with his dad, and absolutely terrified. He grabbed his shirt with shaking hands and yanked it on, not noticing it was inside out and back to front.

“Come downstairs,” was all he said, with that calm voice that made Ed shiver.

With heavy, shaking legs, he followed his father downstairs into the sitting room. Anton was already sat next to Elisabet, whispering in hurried Estonian he was too stupefied to follow. Once he was done, they both looked right at him with poison in their eyes. They could have been guarding the gates of hell. They fixed their eyes onto him. He was being dissected, held under a microscope, like a specimen.

“Obviously, Gunner isn’t welcome in this house anymore.”

Eduard nodded. He couldn’t lift his eyes from the carpet.

“Your work is your priority, you can’t waste your time with him.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologise to us. You’re the one throwing away your future. And you’re too young to be fooling around with other boys.”

“I’m 17.”

“You’re too young to know,” Elisabet repeated, slowly, like he was a child, or a cashier who scanned her things a little wrong.

A rare flash of defiance possessed him. “No, I’m not. I know I’m not. I’ve known a long time.” He looked up at them, looked them right in the eyes. “I knew when I watched Star Wars with Logan and Harrison Ford came on screen. I knew when I saw two guys kissing on the bus and thought that could be me. I knew in the boy’s changing rooms and in the cinema and when I looked it up a few weeks ago on the computer and properly figured it out. I’m bisexual. I like boys and I like girls and I really like Gunner. He’s my boyfriend. He has been for a while.”
Eliisabet rolled her eyes. “Oh, really? Well, that’s lovely.”

Just that turn of phrase made his little act of rebellion feel like a childish tantrum. He felt smaller and smaller the harder she looked at him. He averted his eyes again. Why did he say that?

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, “I won’t invite him over again.”

He couldn’t focus through the ensuing lecture. They were disappointed, he was letting himself down, he’d heard it all before. There were worse things on his mind. He didn’t know why his hands were still shaking. He nodded and apologised until they let him scuttle off to his bedroom with his tail between his legs. Logically, he knew he should call Gunner, but instinctively he called Logan. He didn’t know why. He wasn’t involved in all this. Still, when he answered the phone he felt a little safer.

“Hey, mate, what’s up?”

“Nothing, nothing, just, uh…”

“You alright?”

No. He wasn’t. His parents knew his worst secret, Gunner couldn’t come over anymore, and even with the interruption, he felt wrong somehow - violated and ashamed. He didn’t know why. He had let him, after all. But his wrists ached where he had grabbed them and he couldn’t stop thinking about what he’d almost done.

“I’m… yeah, I’m all good. I just wanted to talk, that’s all. How’s Harry?”

There was a pause when he wondered if maybe Logan hadn’t bought it. That scared him. He didn’t want to explain what he and Gunner had done. But then Logan launched into some anecdote about her and, though everything had gone to shit, Logan’s voice was almost enough of a comfort.

Eduard loved Gunner, he really did, but there were certain things they disagreed on. That was normal. Everyone disagreed on one topic or another. He just wished Gunner wouldn’t be so opinionated about it. Just like he wished Gunner wouldn’t try to kiss him in public.

"I’m just saying,” he was telling him, opening a beer and leaning against his window, watching the children playing below in the park across the road, “he’s already ruined his ex-girlfriend's life. I wouldn’t let him ruin yours too. I mean, what kind of dad gets his friend to look after his kid?” Eduard just focused on his work, trying not to think about what he was saying, but he couldn’t. Logan was his best friend.

“He’s a good father. Better than mine, at least.”

“Because good dads have kids at 16. My dad had me at 18 and he was shitty, nevermind some stupid kid like Logan. But I guess you don’t understand what that’s like.”

“I know what shitty-”

“So you’re suddenly an expert on shitty parents?”

“You’ve seen-”
“C’mon, babe, you’ve got it easy. I mean, they aren’t ideal, but they got you that computer, didn’t they? And your dad didn’t fuck off before you were born?”

Eduard didn’t reply, turning his head to the ground. He had a point there. His parents were cold but at least he hadn’t grown up without a dad like Gunner had. What was he thinking, trying to compare experiences like that?

“See? You don’t know what you’re talking about. Why defend him?” He tried to ignore Gunner, but he wouldn’t stop. “He’s just irresponsible, y’know? And he keeps trying to muscle in as well. Like, he can’t see you all the time. Is he jealous or something?”

Eduard didn’t have the energy to argue back.

“How has his kid not been taken into care yet?” Gunner continued, “he can't look after her. He can't look after himself. What would he know?”

“He has his parents to help,” Eduard tried.

“Good for him,” said Gunner bitterly. “I don’t like him, though. He’s not good for you.” He began pacing the room. “He’s a bad influence, I can tell. You want to go to uni, right? Get into Cambridge? Somehow?”

“Yeah.”

“Then stay away from him, promise?”

Eduard stared at him, open-mouthed.

“Look, it’s gonna be hard enough trying to study and see me without him elbowing in. I don’t trust him. He’s loud and stupid and I don’t think UCAS are interested in babysitter jobs, so why should you have to spend time with his kid? He can find someone else to take the fall. Or maybe he’ll knock someone else up and they can get stuck with him. At least Estelle had the sense to leave him.”

“Didn’t he and Estelle break up because her family was moving back to Cameroon?” He remembered Logan being really upset about it, but they all agreed it was for the best.

“Yeah, moving to get away from him.”

“What? Because people move to another continent over that? Gunner, he’s my best friend. I’ve known him forever; you can’t just expect me to stop seeing him.”

Gunner rolled his eyes. “I’m just trying to help you. Giving you my boyfriendly advice. But fine, if you think you know better, go for it.”

“I will.”

“Just looking out for you. I’m sorry.”

Eduard supposed he’d won the argument, but he couldn’t quite shake the feeling that he’d lost. It was the guilt. It always seemed to rear its ugly head with Gunner.

He didn’t let it go. He asked, pleaded, begged and guilt-tripped at any opportunity, wearing Eduard down until he finally said he’d think about it. And then brought it up again and again until Eduard finally promised to see less of Logan, because Eduard thinking about it wasn’t enough. Wasn’t going to change things. But he knew Gunner wouldn’t be happy until he’d cut the boy from his life.
completely. It was the same as Gunner convincing Eduard to sleep with him, but this time he couldn’t just lie back and pretend to enjoy it. He either broke a promise to his boyfriend, or broke his best friend’s heart and shattered a 12-year bond that had probably saved his life.

So, ever the problem solver, he did the noble thing and ignored Logan. That way he wouldn’t break his promise, but he wouldn’t have to say goodbye to him either.

“Wanna come over?” Logan asked, sitting cross-legged on the sofa. He watched Allirea trying to fit Harry into one of her old princess dresses, with little success.

Even if Jem’s old clothes had been in any fit state to be worn, Allirea wouldn’t have touched them. She liked pretty things, and the few clothes Jem hadn’t torn to shreds and covered in dirt - her nicest dresses - were used for exploring, or painting, or doing anything mucky.

Harry, on the other hand, had to make do with Allirea’s old dresses. Not that Layla hadn’t knitted her a billion other outfits too.

“I’m sorry,” came Eduard’s voice. “I’ve got to study.”

“Again?”

“Well, we kinda learn new things each lesson.”

“I know, I know, it’s just… you’ve been busy all week. I miss you, mate.”

“Yeah, they’re cranking up the pressure. Both teachers and my parents. And my place is just… quieter. Some other time, though. Gotta go.”

“Oh. Alright, see you soon.”

After a month of barely seeing Eduard, Logan realised he was ignoring him. He didn’t answer his calls at all. At school, he never left Gunner’s side - either that or he was too busy studying to talk.

Logan couldn’t stop worrying about him, neither could he shake the feeling that he’d done something to upset him. Was it something to do with Gunner, or had Eduard started listening to and agreeing with his parents’ distaste for any member of the Cooper family.

So Logan decided to pay him a visit. He wasn't scared of Anton and Eliisabet, not since he'd been a child.

Anton wasn’t happy to see him at all, and it took all his diplomacy to be allowed to see Eduard. He looked at him like he was something he’d stepped in at the park, if Anton were inclined to ever visit such a place. But after being made to feel like the smallest, stupidest person on earth, Logan finally escaped to Eduard’s room.

He knocked on the door politely, and came in to find Eduard buried under a pile of homework, at his
desk and looking ready to collapse. He always was a hard worker. He’d always admired that, seen him as some whip-smart genius, with all his timetables and careful notes and infinite array of highlighters. He didn’t look like that now. He looked like he hadn’t slept in a week.

The older Logan got, the more he understood just why his mum was so protective of him. Right now, he just wanted to wrap him in a blanket and give him hot chocolate and tell him it was okay to just *stop* working himself to death for five seconds.

Eduard glanced at him with tired eyes, and a whole lotta fear. Then he turned back to his work.

“I’m busy,” he mumbled guiltily.

Logan sat on the bed. “Ed, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I just want to actually pass these exams.”

“This isn’t studying, this is insanity. Have you been eating?”

Eduard shrugged.

“Sleeping?”

Another shrug. “Sleep is for the weak.”

“Ed, this isn’t funny.”

Eduard bit his thumbnail. He didn’t take his eyes off his desk. “Logan, what are you doing here?”

“Checking up on you,” he gave a shrug; “I haven’t seen you in ages. I’ve… I’ve been worried, man.”

“I’m fine. Just got work to do.”

“Mate, I don’t know how much work you’re doing, but whatever it is, it’s not 20 hours a week. You’re wasting away in here.”

“I’m fine.”

“I’ve found things lost under my bed that were more fine than you.” Eduard briefly remembered the snails Logan had kept under his bed as a child in a plastic box. He’d intended to keep them as pets and study them, but all he’d really learnt was to put air holes in the containers. He’d stuffed the suffocated snails back under his bed and left them there for months, out of shame. At least he’d kept Harry alive. Maybe. He hadn’t actually seen her in months.

“Come on,” he continued, softer, “this isn’t healthy.”

“Logan, look at my face.” He swiveled his chair to face him with a stony expression.

“Wha-”

“Just look at it.”

“Okay.”

“Look at it hard. Study it. Memorise it.” He couldn’t not study it. His eyes were bloodshot, lined with bags. He looked even paler than usual. Last time Logan had seen a face like that, he’d been
shooting at it in a video game. “Now, please tell me just what about my face makes me look like I asked for your opinion?”

Logan blew a raspberry at him.

“Very mature. Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to be left alone.”

“Ed-”

“Go, before I start talking about the quadratic equation.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I would. I know far too much about it.” He gestured at his Maths textbook.

“You know a lot,” he agreed, “so much. Like why you’ve been avoiding me, for example.”

Eduard dropped his pencil. “I- I haven’t.”

“I just want to know. Genuinely, mate, I’m not mad. I just want to know. Did I do something?”

He shook his head quickly. “I told you. Just work.”

“Ed, you’re a great liar, but you’re my best friend. Don’t think I don’t know when you’re hiding stuff. Just… please, I miss you.”

“You can have other friends, why can’t I?”

“Ed, this isn’t about Gunner and that lot. You don’t have to be right here with me all the time. But you’re straight-up ignoring me! You won’t answer my texts!”

“Well maybe I don’t want to!” Eduard never raised his voice. He never even got angry. “Maybe I want to balance studying and my boyfriend, and you elbowing in at every opportunity isn’t helping! Maybe I have better things to do than waste time with some loud, irresponsible idiot who can’t even take care of himself, let alone his kid! Just… find some other babysitter, Logan.”

Logan flinched like he’d been slapped. Eduard was as horrified at what he’d said as he was.

“I’m sorry, I-”

“Oh fuck off, Eduard.” He got up and stormed out of his bedroom.

Eduard just stared at his slammed-shut door in shock. He didn’t want to fight him. He didn’t even believe himself. Why did he say that? What was happening to him?

He couldn’t even muster the energy to get back to work. He just curled up in his bed, wrapped himself in his duvet, and cried.

The summer holidays were lonely without Logan. They hadn’t gone this long without seeing each other since they’d met. Most days, Eduard holed up in his bedroom, looking through the next year’s work and getting as ahead as he could, or went out to Gunner’s to spend the day with him.
Somehow, that was lonelier. Still, he was nice - they went into town to get lunch or watch a film or get some stationery shopping done. Gunner often bought him things, if he had the money - he was sweet like that. Eduard ended up getting a part-time job at the CeX on the high street, not just for work experience but to return the favour from time to time. Things were good between them, as long as Eduard didn’t start any arguments.

Still, the incident months ago, on Eduard’s bed with the textbook abandoned on the floor, wasn’t the last of its kind. After a while, Eduard had learnt to just make the best of it - it didn’t creep him out so much anymore. Sometimes he actually wanted it. Surely that took away any right he had to fight back - Gunner wasn’t a mind-reader, after all. How was he to know?

He wanted to see Logan badly. And not just him, but Jem and Allirea and Harry and Mr and Mrs Cooper too. He missed homemade dinners and people asking about how he was feeling or what he’d been up to besides schoolwork. He missed their noise and jokes and how they cared about him. He missed being cared about. His parents were as bad as ever and as nice as Gunner was, he couldn’t exactly talk to him the way he could to Logan’s family. He didn’t trust him the way he trusted them.

But after what had happened… he couldn’t face Logan again.

It wasn’t until the school year started again that they were able to talk. He’d longed for it and dreaded it for the last six weeks. He hid away from him where he could, detouring to avoid walking past the table he always sat at. The conversation was inevitable, but he’d put it off as long as he could.

Jem was there to meet him after class, glowering at the door from where she was standing, waiting for him to step out. Although he’d managed to avoid Logan all day - telling himself he would get round to apologising at some point, he swore - there was nothing he could do against an angry, 15-year-old, flannel-butch force of nature. She grabbed him by the ear and dragged him down so they were face-to-face.

“Alright, what the fuck did you do?”

“What?”

“To Logan, idiot. What did you do?”

“Jem, I didn’t-”

“He’s been heartbroken all summer, moping around saying you’d had a fight and you hated him.”

“I-” He saw Logan hovering awkwardly by the school gate, looking quite unsure if he should intervene. Eduard wasn’t sure if he wanted him to. “Jem, don’t get involved.”

“I wouldn’t have to if you weren’t being such a huge cunt.”

“This really isn’t your battle to fight.”

“Make him fight it, then!” She pointed at Logan, who waved awkwardly. “Fucking apologise to him or I’ll break your jaw until you can’t talk at all!”

Eduard had play-fought with Jem enough to know that she definitely could and probably would. He gave a resigned sigh, stepped past her, and joined Logan at the gate.

“Can I buy you a McDonald’s?”

He blinked. “Really odd way of saying sorry.”
“Shut up and let me buy you a McDonald’s. This isn’t the place for it.”

He looked out at the torrent of kids leaving the school gates. Gunner was there, with some of his friends. He shot Logan a poisonous look, then proceeded to glare at the back of Eduard’s head.

“Nah, yeah, fair point. Let’s get out of here. Jem!”

She looked back at him.

“Me and Eddie are getting McDonald’s. You can get home alright on your own?”

She gave him a thumbs up, picked her bike up off the fence she’d left it leaning on, and rode off, Year 7s screaming and jumping out of her path. She even twatted a couple of the slower ones out of the way.

“HURRY UP, YOU LITTLE SHITS!” she bellowed, ringing her bell repetitively. Eduard couldn’t help but laugh.

“She’ll be running the Tour de France in no time.”

“It’s a surprise she isn’t already.” Logan smiled at him, and for a second Eduard could pretend everything hadn’t gone to shit, all courtesy of him.

They walked down to McDonald’s on the high street. They caught each other up on their summers - or rather, Logan told Eduard about his grandparents’ visit from Australia and Eduard tried not to think about his own dismal six weeks - but something was missing. There was a gap between them, a canyon with a rickety bridge. He was making small talk with a classmate he barely knew, not talking with his best friend. Eduard needed to fix things, and desperately.

He bought them each a McFlurry, a burger, a large fries and a drink (Coke for him, Fanta for Logan), then took a seat in a booth.

“No, you’ve got a job now?”

“Mhmm. CeX, just across the street there.”

“How is it?”

“Fine.”

“Good.”

They settled into silence. They could always do that, without any awkwardness, just enjoy each other’s company without saying a word. Now it felt wrong. It hung in the air, clanky and awkward. Logan eventually had to break it.

“Mate, are you gonna actually talk about this thing, or are you gonna buy my silence and pretend to forget it ever happened? Because you kind of said some really shitty things.”

Eduard ate a fry to stall. He didn’t know what to do here.

“Ed? Will you fucking talk to me?”

“I’m sorry. Really sorry. I just- I can’t stop thinking about what I said, and I want you to know I
“I don’t mean even a word of it and—”

“’I know you didn’t. I don’t care. I mean, fuck, it hurt, but what hurt more was that you said it. That wasn’t the Ed I know. That wasn’t you at all, was it?”

He shook his head.

“I don’t give a fuck about what you said.”

“You do.”

Logan laughed. “Yeah. Yeah, I do. It hurt like a rounders bat to the balls. I hope you know I’m super pissed off with you.”

“You have a right to be. You’re not really acting it, though, are you?”

Logan shook his head. “Nah. You wanna know why?”

“Why?”

“Because you’re my best friend. And I fucking hate you, but I love you, and that wasn’t you talking. I just want to know what Gunner did.”

“Why do you always assume it’s Gunner?”

“Am I wrong?”

Eduard opened his mouth to protest, but just sighed and sipped his coke. “He doesn’t like you.”

“No shit.”

“He reckons you’re bad for me.”

“Bad for him, more like.”

“Logan, he really doesn’t like us hanging out. I know, it sounds dumb, but he has his reasons.”

“What fucking reasons?” Logan’s voice rose. “Why’s he get to say who you can hang out with?”

Eduard couldn’t look him in the eyes. He stirred his coke with his straw. “Just… we can’t see each other anymore. You understand?”

It dawned on Logan how dangerous Gunner really was. How much power he had over Eduard for him to just give in like that. He didn’t want to know how he’d scared him into the shell that was his best friend.

“I understand. But can we not, I don’t know, sneak around? Keep it away from school, obviously, but you’re still my best mate. I don’t want to lose you over him.”

Eduard hesitated, but he nodded, swallowing though his mouth was completely dry. “Yeah. We can try.”
Learning to pretend sure came in handy at times. He could pretend to be the perfect, obedient son, the perfect, obedient boyfriend, and now he could pretend he was just visiting a relative. That was why he was taking a different bus home.

When Logan asked again, a week later, he told him he and his parents had moved. Anton wanted to live nearer to the hospital he worked at. It was fine. Nothing was wrong.

Logan didn’t buy it. Eduard could lie to his parents - he’d had to - and he’d slowly molded himself into what Gunner wanted, but he could never lie to Logan. They knew each other too well. He also didn’t like how Eduard had somehow gotten even thinner, even paler. He didn’t eat at lunch. He looked completely miserable, like he’d lost the will to live and carry on. When he asked Tino about it, the boy mentioned he’d stopped caring about handing in work or revising for exams. He said he’d even fallen asleep in Computer Science.

Of course, nothing could’ve prepared Logan for what he saw when he decided to follow him. It wasn’t easy - Logan was about as discreet as a parade of screaming elephant drag queens - but Eduard didn’t notice him until he’d shuffled through the front doors of the shabbiest hotel Logan had ever seen. The glass in the front door was held together with brown tape, the steps leading to it decorated with takeaway boxes, and when he stepped inside he found the carpet was more stamped-in gum than actual carpet. What was he doing here?

“I thought your parents made more than this? Or is this your new job?”

Eduard yelped, jumping like a scared cat and wheeling round with wide eyes. “Lo- what are you doing here?”

He shrugged. “I was worried about ya.”

Eduard was looking anywhere but at Logan. “I’m fine. I’m fine. Just… please leave.”

“Nope, no way. Eddie, come on. Talk to me. We could always talk, right?”

He glanced at his shoes. “Not this time. Please, just go.”

“Ed…”

“Logan, please.” His voice was thick, and he hid his eyes behind his sleeve.

“Do you live here?”

He froze. “I-” He bit his cheek, then turned and ran down the corridor. Logan cursed and sprinted after him.

For the first time in his life, Eduard regretted all those doctor’s notes he’d forged to get out of P.E. (if he wasn’t in the same class as Logan, it just wasn’t worth it) because he only managed to make it halfway to his room before Logan caught up.

“Eduard Kalev Mets, don’t you dare run away from this,” he grabbed his arm, and Eduard yelped.

“Get off!” He tried to wiggle out of his grasp, but couldn’t find the energy. The run had taken everything out of him and he swayed as a rush of dizziness threatened to topple him.

Then it did.

Logan caught him before he hit the floor. “Oh fuck, Eddie!”
“I’m fine, I promise,” he mumbled, “just… a dizzy spell. I’m fine. Don’t worry.”

“Which one’s your room?”

He bit his lip, mind whirring, before finally relenting and handing over his keycard. “025.”

Logan half-carried him to his room and set him down on his rock-hard mattress. He fished out a packet of sweets he’d been grazing from all day and handed them to him. It wasn’t much, but it was better than nothing, which was what he suspected Eduard had been subsiding on.

Everything he owned was either in a suitcase in the corner, or the cardboard box next to it. His keyboard was folded up and left in its box, leaning on the wall. Logan spotted the planets Layla had painted for him, as well as his rock and all his books and clothes. Every present the Coopers had ever gotten him was in that little box; his parents had never really bothered to celebrate birthdays or Christmas that way.

“Ed, please. Just tell me what’s going on. Be honest with me.”

Eduard took one look at him and burst into tears. Logan hugged him - not as tight as he usually did. He looked like he could just snap, or crumble into dust if he squeezed too hard. He let Eduard cry himself hoarse, until he had no more tears left to cry. Then they sat there in silence.

“Hey, it’s okay. It’s okay. I’m here. I’ve got you.”

“I- Gunner made this… this plan. That we’d drop out, defer all our offers, live together somewhere close by. It was stupid. It was a stupid fucking plan, and I actually tried to tell him it was. I tried to tell him there was no way. I mean, I have to go to university. It’s not optional. But he wouldn’t listen, obviously. He never listens. He had it all figured out. Every time I tried to say it was a bad idea, he just shot me down. Or got upset. He was trying so hard and I was just shitting all over it, he said. And I was just setting myself up for disappointment, trying to get into a top uni, anyway. I didn’t have a chance against the rest of the country. So I agreed. I told my parents.”

At that point, he got choked up again. Logan handed him a plastic cup of water on the bedside table. “It’s okay. Take your time.”

He took a long drink, then a moment to breathe. “I mean, they weren’t happy. Obviously. They’d be disappointed if I didn’t get into Cambridge - hell, I’d be disappointed. I mean, that’s not just their ambition. I wanted to get in too. But to not go at all, to not even apply for a place, that’s… I mean, it’s unacceptable. So they chucked me out.”

“Jesus.”

“I can just afford this place, with my job, if I work extra shifts and don't eat too much.” Or barely at all, by the look of him. “It's fine. Mostly asylum seekers and other homeless kids. It’s only temporary, anyway. Until Gunner gets us a place.”

“And you couldn’t move in with Gunner now?” Logan suspected the guy would just love to have Eduard living with him, completely under his thumb. At the very least, Eduard wasn’t there. Then again, at least Gunner would feed him. Hopefully.

He bit his lip. “He’d… it would be like I was criticizing his plan, y’know? I know how dumb that sounds. It’s not… I just didn’t know how to tell him and now it’s been weeks and he’ll get mad I’ve been lying about it. He doesn’t suspect anything. My parents don’t let him come over anyway.”

“Couldn’t you stay with your cousin?”
Eduard shook his head. “He’d tell Gunner. Or let it slip out. Or he’d find out himself and I’d have to tell him everything. And anyway, I couldn’t do that to Tino or his parents. I didn’t want to be a burden, y’know?”

“And you didn’t want to stay with me for the same reason?”

He nodded. “And, if Gunner found out…”

Logan stared at him for the longest moment. “Eddie, be honest with me. Did he hit you?”

“No.”

“Are you scared he’ll hit you?”

“He wouldn’t. I don’t think he would. But he’d be mad, if he found out I’d broken my promise.”

“He doesn’t have to know,” Logan said softly.

“He’ll find out! He’ll wear me down until I give in.” Then he added in a small voice: “he’s good at that.”

“Like getting you away from me?”

He nodded. “And letting the shit he does go. And… and kisses, in public, even when nobody knew. Course, everyone knows now. You’ve seen the walls in the boys’ toilets. And… and, uh-”

“And what?” Logan had a sneaking suspicion of what he was about to say. It made him feel sick to the stomach. Eduard didn't have it in him to say it, but the look in his eyes confirmed it all.

“I don't want to talk about it.”

Logan did. Logan wanted to know everything Gunner had done and he wanted to kill him over it. Instead, he held Eduard to his chest and let him cry on his shoulder.

“It's okay. It's okay, I'm here, mate. Do you wanna stay with us?”

“I- I can't. He'll kill me. Or you. I don't know.”

“He won't fucking touch you if I have anything to do with it. Jem too. You know she’s taken up kickboxing? And regular boxing. She’ll knock seven shades of shit outta him.”

“Are you sure it'll be okay with-”

“With Layla fucking Cooper? You think my mum’ll let you stay anywhere else if I tell her?”

Eduard laughed shakily. “I miss her.”

“And her prawn curry, right?”

He nodded, then blushed at the rumbling in his stomach.

“So stay with us! Come on. We’ve always got room for you.”

He sighed, watching as Logan got up and started packing his things.

“I don't have any other options, do I?”
“Absolutely not.”

It was a testament to just how long he’d been avoiding the Coopers that he didn’t know Layla and Logan Sr had had another baby.

Allirea was sat on the sofa, brushing Harry’s hair, whilst Harry herself ran a tiny, plastic doll’s hair brush through baby Manya’s fine, fluffy brown hair. Layla had knitted her her own blanket too, bright blue with dolphins. Manya stared up at Eduard with a bored expression, dribbling slightly.

“Hey,” he gave the three girls a sheepish wave before Layla appeared in a whirl of bushy hair and he found himself enveloped in a hug.

“Eduard!” her voice was caught between a cry and a wail, “oh thank heavens you’re okay! Logan sent me a message saying what happened and there’s some chicken in the oven so get unpacked and settled in, then you can have some proper food.”

Eduard hugged back, burying his face in her hair. “I’ve missed you, mum.”

Layla pulled away with a teary smile, holding his face in her hands. “Eddie, why didn’t you tell us? You’re always welcome here.”

Eduard looked away. “I didn’t want to bother you.”

“You silly boy,” she told him sternly, waggling a finger in his face, “My house is your house.”

And with that, Eduard was crying again. He went back into her arms, mostly to hide his face in the crook of her neck, even if he had to bend almost to a 90° angle to do so.

“I’m sorry. I just really missed you.”

She rubbed his back. “It’s okay. I missed you too, Eddie.”

He felt something brush against his leg, and looked down to find Harry clinging to his shin.

“Hello.” He couldn’t quite muster the enthusiasm he probably should have had for talking to small children.

“Eggy!”

“You miss me too?”

Harry nodded, aggressively enough to give a lesser infant whiplash.

“It’s okay. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Sit yourself down,” Layla lead him to the sofa. “Loggie will take your things upstairs. Would you like some tea? Coffee?”

“Coffee sounds nice,” he croaked. Harry climbed onto his lap and gave him a hug. He stroked her hair, turning to Allirea.
“Another Cooper, huh?” he nodded at the baby.

“This is Manya.” Allirea carefully lifted up her sister. “She was born last month!”

“She’s so tiny,” he smiled at the baby, who continued to stare at him, as babies were often wont to do. They often did it on public transport, and he didn’t care for it one bit.

“That’s because she's a baby, Eduard,” she pointed out, in her condescending 5-year-old way.

“She sure is.”

Layla came bustling into the room carrying a tray of chicken drumsticks, pasta and a pot of coffee. “Here, eat up! There are donuts waiting for when you’re done.”

Eduard thanked her, then tucked in. He tried to keep polite about it, keep his manners, but he was so desperately hungry he wolfed the whole thing down like a starving child eating properly for the first time. Which he was.

Afterwards, he spent the evening curled up on the sofa, eating donuts and snuggling up to Steveo and the babies, laughing and joking with Logan and Jem, and he couldn’t remember feeling happier. Logan snuck them each a beer from the fridge. When his dad caught him red-handed, he just handed him a big packet of crisps with a wink.

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“Do you think I should break up with Gunner?”

It had been a while since the two of them had shared a bed, but there was nowhere else Eduard wanted to be right now. It was just like when they were kids, though there was a desperation in how Eduard clung to his friend, a yearning for warmth and comfort and someone who wouldn’t hurt him.

“Absolutely,” Logan whispered back.

“But-”

“He’s abusing you. Like your parents were, but this time you aren’t depending on him for food and shelter and stuff, so do it before he starts trying to control that too. Drop him like the sack of shit he is.”

“He’s not all bad.”

“Do you enjoy being with him? Like, most of the time you're with him?”

“Course I do. He's my boyfriend.”

“Let me rephrase. When was the last time you looked at him and thought “yeah, this is a good guy who consistently makes me happy” ? Like, honestly.”

Eduard was silent for a long moment.

“That’s the bare minimum. He doesn’t love you. If he did, he’d be supporting you, not trying to control you.”
“He scares me sometimes,” Eduard admitted, “Don’t think I loved him either, not really. Not from the start. I just wanted… something. Someone, I guess. Is that bad?”

“Who cares? He’s the one that did what he did to you.”

“But if I was just using him like that, how am I better than him?”

“Did you ever make him do something he was uncomfortable with? Ever guilt him into changing? Nah. You’re just a kid who didn’t know better,” he bit his lip, “who didn’t feel like you could say ‘no’ at any point.”

“He didn’t know better either.”

“He did. You don’t do what he did accidentally. It was, well, it was all calculated, to get you on your own, break you down.” Logan took his hand, gently squeezing it. “Invite him here. That way you’ll have all of us to back you up if he tries getting pissy. It’s completely your choice, though.”

Eduard bit his lip. “You don’t need to-“

“I want to. I want to kick his ass.”

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He knew Gunner was mad at him from the moment he opened the door. He said nothing about it, though, and after a stiff greeting and a kiss Eduard couldn’t be bothered to wriggle out of, his demeanour completely changed. He put on his brightest smile as he introduced himself to the Coopers, laughing and joking until he realised not one of them was laughing along. Layla was managing a polite smile, but both Logans and Jem were looking like they were trying not to glare with too much disgust. Harry had hidden behind Allirea until both left the room.

He was starting to see the signs, all the little red flags Layla had explained to him. Even with his facade, he now looked like a monster.

In turn, Logan noticed how Eduard changed when he was with him. The light was gone from his smile, he seemed to wither. He was scared. He seemed to shrink back, to something Gunner would not see as an equal but rather his personal slave or pet.

“So,” Gunner clapped his hands, hoping to diffuse the awkward atmosphere. It didn’t work. “Eddie, what d’ya wanna talk to me about?”

“Not here,” he mumbled.

“Man, you gotta speak up.”

“Not here,” said Eduard, louder.

“You can use my music room,” suggested Mr Cooper, like they’d planned. It would be okay. This was going to work.

Eduard led Gunner outside, to the shed Mr Cooper had turned into his new music room, after giving up his old one to turn into a bedroom for Allirea and Harry. As soon as they were out of the family’s earshot, Gunner exploded.
“What are you doing with him? Staying at his fucking house?! I told you, babe, I told you not to hang around with him! He’s not good for you! Why are you so fucking useless with the most basic thing I ask you to do?”

Eduard had expected the outburst, but it made him flinch. He shrank in on himself like a telescope. He couldn’t do this. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s just, like, you don’t even care what I have to say! I’m your boyfriend and you’re showing me all this disrespect! What, do you like him more than me? You don’t give a shit about your actual boyfriend but you’ll happily spend all the time in the world with some retarded slut and his stupid family?”

Something snapped in Eduard. A sudden flash of resolve, all the motivation he needed to stand up for himself. “Yes! I like him more than you! He’s my best friend, and you’re some guy I started dating because you asked me to!” He couldn’t quite believe he was saying what he was saying, but he couldn’t stop. “He’s nice. He cares about people. He cares so much and you don’t give a shit about anyone but you. He doesn’t try to control me, or mould me, or hurt me. He’s my friend. And he always will be. You can’t change that. We’re over, Gunner. You and me, we’re done.”

He was silent for a second. He looked down at the floor. Then his eyes flicked up to Eduard, shining with tears. “Please. I can change, we can make this work, give me another chance.”

“I’ve given you so many fucking chances.”

“I love you. I love you so much, I don’t think I could live without you.”

Eduard shook his head in disbelief. He half-laughed.

“I’m being serious! If you leave me, I have nothing. I’d end up killing myself. You want that on your conscience?”

Eduard almost folded at that. What if he did kill himself? What if he really loved him and genuinely couldn’t live without him? No, Layla told him Gunner might say that.

“Then get help,” he said, “but don’t try to guilt-trip me into staying with you. It’s not gonna work this time. I know you, Gunner. And I wish I didn’t. You’re actually a pretty awful person.”

He didn’t know what he was expecting. Maybe that he’d be an adult for once and walk away. Maybe that he’d go on guilt-tripping him.

Certainly not that he’d slap him across the face.

Eduard cried out in shock. His left cheek burned and his glasses were left askew.

“How can you do this to me, Ed? I try so hard and you just-”

They were interrupted by the shed door slamming open and Logan lunging at Gunner. “DON’T YOU FUCKING TOUCH HIM! DON’T LAY A FINGER ON HIM! I WILL FUCKING KILL YOU, YOU HEAR ME? I WILL-”

Logan’s parents ran in after him, pulling him off, with Eduard’s help. Once he was breathing right, Layla took over. She grabbed Gunner by the collar of his t-shirt and pulled him down to her height.

Justly terrified, Gunner backed out of the shed and made a run for it, leaving Eduard with his family. Logan put his hand on his shoulder.

“You okay?”

Eduard gave him a look. “Were you eavesdropping?”

“No. Well, kind of.” He nodded at the window. “I just wanted to make sure he didn’t hurt you. Or wear you down again. Didn’t think he’d actually hit you with all of us just over in the house, but… wow. Sorry, though.”

“No, no, I guess it was needed.”

“Sweetie,” Layla stroked the back of his head, “want us to call the police?”

“No, that seems more trouble than it’s worth.” He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter, anyway. I’m free, right? He can’t hurt me anymore.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist. “I'm sorry you had to go through all this, baby.”

He shrugged. “All in the past now.”

Logan was going to tell him. He was going to tell Eduard he loved him and he was going to show him how a proper boyfriend treated him. He was going to keep him safe and happy and make sure no one else hurt him. He was done watching people walk all over Eduard, treat him like a tool or maggot, telling him he was worthless.

“I don’t think I was meant to be loved.”

Eduard’s voice came out of nowhere, so small in the surrounding darkness. They were clinging to each other again, partially to stop themselves falling out the bed, and partially because Eduard was still shaken over the day’s events. His face still stung, and he wasn’t looking forward to his next maths lesson, but Logan couldn’t have been more proud of him.

His words were unexpected, though.

“You are,” he whispered back, kissing the top of his forehead. “And you are loved.”

“But Gunner, and my parents- I mean, they’re my parents and they didn’t even-”

“Fuck ‘em. They don’t deserve you. You’re brilliant, Eddie. And now you’re away from all these horrible people, you’ll be able to see it. You can see why I… why we all like you so much.”

“I don’t think I’ll bother with relationships, though. Not for a while. Don’t wanna risk more of… whatever the hell that was.”

Logan’s heart sank, but he nodded. Eduard was right. Of course he was; he needed time for himself, to do things just for him and heal. “Yeah, do some self-care and stuff. Treat yourself. We’ll be here for you and help get you back on your feet. Get you into uni and you can put it all behind you.”

“I don’t have a chance at uni now,” he sighed, “I didn’t apply.”
“You can still get in, through clearing, right? I’ll help you with the application. You shouldn’t be wasting your time stuck in this town when you can do anything. Whatever you want, you can do it because you’re amazing. I mean, you’re a fucking genius. Mr Predicted-Straight-A*s, remember? You still are, aren’t you?”

He nodded, then thought about it for a long while. “Fine, but you gotta apply too.” He remembered Logan mentioning he wasn’t going, despite wanting to do marine biology for years.

“You know I can’t. I gotta look after Harry.”

“Take her with you. We can explain to the uni and you can balance it all and get help and I’ll be there with you. Like, our timetables will probably be different so we can both do the school run.”

Logan raised an eyebrow. “She’s two.”

“She not in school yet?”

“Do you not know anything about babies?”

“Apparently not. Still, you have all summer to teach me. You know, before we both go to uni.”

Chapter End Notes

We’re really sorry to Denmark fans - we actually really love him as a character but... yeah. If you want to imagine it’s not him but some random douchebag, that's fine!
Shut Up Or I'll Date You

Chapter Notes

Surprisingly few Bad Awful Things in this chapter! Don't worry, it won't last. We seem to have gone from "hit the hyperdrive chewie" speed to "a bit quicker than we update other stuff" speed but it's still Pretty Not Bad. (Also please don't mind the Birmingham-bullying, my co-author's a dickhead but I live here so I can't exactly disagree.)

Names:
Lyubov- Ukraine
Hunapo- New Zealand

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They were 18 when they got their results.

Layla drove them up to school in her car on the day. The boys were sat in the back seat, fidgeting and trying not to look at each other, or throw up. Every time they drove over a speed bump, Eduard turned a little more green. As far as Logan was concerned, Eduard had no right to be nervous. Even after his marks slipped when he was living in that hotel, he'd brought them back up with ease. It would take more than that to knock down Mr Predicted-Straight-A*s.

Still, he could empathise with his shaking hands and nibbled nails, the muscles in his body threatening to snap. Eduard would get in, no challenge at all, with his genius brain and Grade 8 Piano under his belt, but Logan wasn’t like him. He couldn’t sit down and absorb all that knowledge in one go, like he could. He was more the type to coast by on what he could and hope for the best. That had worked out pretty well for him at GCSE, but at A-level most of his teachers were a little tired of his shit. Not to mention A-levels had been harder than anything he’d ever done before. It had almost taken the fun out of biology. There was a part of him that hoped he wouldn’t get into uni, just so he wouldn’t have to do what was probably the hardest work possible.

But the thing about living with Eduard was that the guy forced you to try and get on his level, to actually sit down and study. The instinct to get home and immediately start working wasn’t so beaten into Logan as it was to him, but when Eduard was revising, he always felt he should be too. It wasn’t an ideal way of working, not permanently - when Eduard burnt out, he burnt out hard - but at least it came in handy in the lead-up to exams.

Even better, Eduard actually taught him to study the way he did. He’d talk things through with him even when he had no idea what the textbook was going on about, and get around his dyslexia with doodles and diagrams on his flashcards. He suspected Eduard wanted him to get into university more than he did. He didn’t blame him- in the months after he moved in, the colour slowly came back into his face. All that summer, all that time avoiding Logan, he’d been homesick. He didn’t want to be so far from him again.

He found Eduard’s excitement about university a little infectious. At first, he dreaded it a little, but Eduard pointed out he’d be happier doing, as he put it, “stuff with fish”, that he’d have him with him every step of the way to help him out, and that he could do better work afterwards. It was the latter that really persuaded him. He wanted to give Harry the best life he could. Not only to spite everyone
who thought she would have little in the way of a future, but to give her everything she could ever need.

Layla stayed in her car while the boys made their terrified way into the school hall. They spotted Tino and Berwald in the corner with their own results. After Eduard told him what Gunner had done, Tino had decided to completely ditch the guy and cut him out of his life. The act caused a rift in the group, with Berwald taking Tino and Eduard’s side, and Kjetil staying with Gunner, even defending the guy. It hurt Eduard - he thought they were friends - but he was happy with his little group of four.

“Hey!” Tino bounded over, waving his results in their faces. “All Bs! Not bad, huh? Ber got a few As too!”

“Congrats, guys,” Eduard smiled nervously, trying not to think of every possible mistake he could’ve made in his own exams.

“You’ll come visit us in Birmingham, right?”

“Eeh, Birmingham? I dunno. It’s kinda stinky and scary. And the accents are bad.”

“First of all, the accents are hilarious. Plus they have a good Christmas market.”

“Is that the only attraction?”

“Pretty much.”

“I’ll come over at Christmas, then. Bet it’s nothing on Tallinn.” Every few Decembers, they went up to visit their grandmother in Estonia. It was best they didn’t go any more frequently than that - Eliisabet and her sister were far from being on good terms and the same went for Anton and just about the whole family, his own wife and son included. On those holidays, Tino and Eduard tended to stay out of their family’s way, playing games on Tino’s laptop in their shared room. The only real highlights of the trip were the Christmas market in Tallinn and each other’s company.

“Biggest outside Germany, actually.”

“Did a Brummie tell you that?”

Tino laughed and punched his arm. “I’m sure it’s great. We’ll have to see.”

“Yeah, alright, come on, let’s get this over with.” Logan didn’t look happy at all. In fact, he looked like he was on the verge of throwing up; it was the same expression he’d worn after having his first jagerbomb.

Eduard put his hand on his back. “I’m sure you did great.”

“Easy for you to say. Little genius.”

“You’ve been working really hard. I’m sure you got it.”

Logan just shrugged, making his way to a row of tables. Logan stopped at the one bearing the sign A-G whilst Eduard continued down to H-M. He found his name, and picked up the envelope with shaking hands. This was it. The moment he’d been building up to pretty much all his life. Cambridge didn’t accept anyone through clearing, but there were several closer universities he’d applied to that
were more than happy to accept him. He whittled the choices down to ones that would also take Logan, and accepted one in the next town over.

He and Logan had already sorted out their accommodation: a two-bed flat whose rent would be paid for with some combination of student loans and wages. There was also a dining room that could easily become a third bedroom for Harry. The boys had already visited, planned where everything was going to go, and been out shopping for a whole new set of kitchen equipment. Eduard was going to have his own room again, a place to live away from parents, and he could go to uni too. So he could have both; Gunner really knew nothing.

Of course, everything depended on his exam results. Which would be fine. Surely? He’d had his fair share of getting the shit kicked out of him by life; couldn’t something just go right for him?

He almost tore the envelope as he opened it, his hands were shaking. He wondered if he’d throw up right in front of the entire sixth form.

He looked down at the paper.

Maths, Further Maths, Physics, Computing.

Four A*’s stared back at him.

It took a full minute for it to sink in, then a grin spread across his face and he did something that was a cross between a dance and a bounce, then spun on his heel to find Logan, hunched in the corner, looking down at his own results with utter heartbreak.

Oh… oh no.

“Sheep?” he said softly, walking over and placing a hand on his arm. Was it worse than he’d hoped? Of course it was; Logan looked on the verge of tears. And suddenly, everything was crashing down. Weren’t they going to uni together? No, Logan could retake and join him in a year. No wait, he couldn’t live on his own; he’d never have enough money.

Logan said nothing and handed him the results.

Biology: B

P.E.: A

Geography: C

Eduard blinked. “Wait, these are good.” They were all higher than his predicted grades. The geography teacher had given him a predicted grade of E! What the hell was he so sad about?

Logan burst out laughing.

“You bellend!” Eduard slapped him on the arm, “you utter twat! I thought I was going to have to leave you behind!”

Logan pretended to collapse against the wall, looking betrayed. “You would just leave me? And go off on your own?”

“Without a second thought, if you’re just gonna be dead weight.” He nudged him. “Glad you can come with me, though. It’d be lonely without you.”

Logan grinned. “We’re gonna have so much fun! That is, if you managed to get good results. It’s
kinda on the fence. Could go either way.”

Eduard laughed, rolled his eyes and handed him his results. He looked at them and smiled proudly. “What did I tell ya? You probably got the highest results in the school!”

Eduard smiled. He could’ve gotten into Cambridge easily, then. He told himself it didn’t matter, that as long as he was going to uni, it was fine, but he’d desperately wanted to go. It was where Stephen Hawking had gone!

“You’re too good for Cambridge,” said Logan, reading his mind.

“How’d you figure that out?”

He shrugged. “Come on, it’s full of posh pricks with weird clubs and initiations. Could you imagine having to live with future politicians?”

Eduard laughed at that. “Okay, you have a point.”

“Uni’s gonna be way more fun, with us going together.” Logan nudged him gently.

“Loges, we’re going there to study, not party all the time.”

“I know. And I’m hardly gonna be partying with a toddler in the house. Or staying out late all the time. But there are societies and stuff we can join, and we’ll still be living together! God, I can’t wait.”

Eduard smiled at the thought. He’d enjoyed studying with Logan in the weeks before their exams. They could do that all the time at uni, getting out the alcohol when Harry had gone to bed and coming up with different, stupid, ways to remember everything. “Yeah, me neither.”

Just as Tino and Berwald were congratulating him, Eduard saw Gunner enter the hall with Kjetil, and stiffened. He tried not to look too terrified as he ducked behind Logan, because he didn’t want to give the bastard the satisfaction of seeing him like that, but he liked the protection of the others. Logan, touched his arm, everyone crowding around and making sure Gunner had no chance of seeing him.

“I thought he was expelled,” said Tino, raising an eyebrow. Although Layla had not convinced him to go to the police, Eduard had gone to the head of sixth form, with Logan to back him up, to ask to be moved to a different seat in maths. Of course, after finding out, Gunner had been called in. With no choice but to admit he’d abused a fellow student, he’d been kicked out.

“Must’ve let him sit his exams,” Logan replied, and Eduard nodded.

“Yeah, he was in my maths exam.” Eduard was surprised he’d done so well in that one; Gunner had been a few rows in front of him, and he’d struggled to hold his pen he’d sweated so much. But he’d done it. Gunner was insanely lazy about his schoolwork, but Eduard was standing tall with his 4 A-levels and a future.

Gunner hadn’t defeated him.

“We’re off,” said Logan, “mum’s gonna wanna know how well we did, and go home and bake a cake.”

Tino licked his lips. “I might pop over later then, if that’s okay with you.”
Eduard smiled. “She’d be happy to have you. You too, Ber.”

“We could have a few drinks to celebrate!” cried Logan, “and, you know, because we’re going to be in different parts of the country and it might be a while before we hang out again.”

“Sounds fun,” Eduard clung to his shirt, “but can we get outta here first? I don’t feel… excellent. With him here, I mean.”

Eduard’s friends formed a ring around him, ushering him out of the hall without Gunner seeing. As soon as they were out of the school and Layla was in sight, Eduard and Logan rushed over to her.

“So?” she asked anxiously, hands clasped together.

“We passed!” cried Logan, “by a long shot!” He handed her his results and Eduard followed. Layla scanned them both, and pulled both of them into a hug with a squeal. Eduard was certain he felt his spine snap.

“Oh my god I’m so proud of you! My special, smart boys!”

“Guess I’ve set the bar now,” said Logan, “ABC, see if my sisters can beat that. On second thought they probably will.”

“I’m not having my kids compete,” Layla told him, “you’re all smart and I’m proud of you all, whatever you get.”

“Even me?” asked Eduard.

She gently pulled him down to her level and kissed the top of his head. “Of course, son.”

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“What if I became a wildlife presenter?” Logan sipped at his beer, lying upside down on the slide. He coughed and spluttered as beer went up his nose. The others laughed, Eduard almost choking as his own pint went down the wrong hole. Logan rolled off the slide, coughed until he was purple in the face, and collapsed on the grass.

“I think people would watch you make a tit of yourself,” Eduard agreed.

“What about you?” asked Tino. “What do you want to be?”

Eduard shrugged. “Something with computers, I guess.” Even though he loved astrophysics, his mother had put him off actually following a career in it. Computers it was. Even if his parents hadn’t pushed computers on him since he was tiny, there wasn’t much else he was good at. Or enjoyed.

“You can do anything you want,” Tino nudged him gently, “you make sure to do something you actually enjoy.”

“I know. It’s not because of my parents. We don’t even talk anymore. I just like computers. What about you?”

Tino shrugged. “I still have high hopes for forming a band. Surely there are gonna be enough people on the music course into metal.” He nudged Berwald. “What about you?”

He shrugged. “Childcare?”

“You’d make a good teacher,” Tino agreed. Berwald was a tall, intimidating man, but he was kind
and fair, and commanded a great deal of respect. Eduard could see him being a good teacher. And one that wouldn’t take any shit. He just hoped Berwald never had to deal with an annoying know-it-all who kept correcting him. It was a wonder Eduard hadn’t driven any of his own teachers insane.

Logan pulled himself off the grass and joined them, in plastic chairs scattered across the patio. “Well, whatever we end up doing, I think things are gonna be alright from now on.”

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The night before he left, Eduard called his parents. He wasn’t totally sure why. It just felt right to at least tell them where he was going. He went out to the back garden, knowing any of the Coopers would discourage him if they caught him. They wouldn’t stop him, of course, they’d just tell him what every ounce of common sense in him was already telling him. That they weren’t worth the trouble. They were still his parents, even if, as far as they were concerned, he wasn’t their son anymore. But with every ring, Eduard considered aborting mission just a little bit more.

“You’ve reached the mobile of Dr Eliisabet Tarkas, PhD. Leave a message after the tone.”

His heart sank. Of course they wouldn’t answer him. What had he expected? Still. Worth a shot, right?

“Hello, mum. It’s Eduard. Obviously. Nobody else calls you mum.” No one else had had such bad luck. He cleared his throat awkwardly. “Anyway, I, um… I wanted to let you know I’m going to university after all. Not Cambridge, but I’m going. I broke up with Gunner and applied through clearing, and I got straight A*s so I’m in. I’ve been staying with Logan the last few months. We’re going together. We leave tomorrow morning. I think now I’m not your son anymore, I can get away with saying his family is the only one I’ve ever had. Sorry. No. No, I’m not, actually. I’m right. Anyway. See you. Or not. Bye.”

He hung up and stuffed his phone in his pocket.

“Parents?”

Eduard jumped. Logan was stood behind him, leaning on the doorway between the kitchen and the back garden.

“I- just a message. They didn’t pick up. I know, I know, it’s a stupid idea, I just-”

Logan stepped out into the garden, joining him. “Hey, I get it. You’re allowed to call your mum and dad.”

“Former mum and dad. You don’t think it’s a terrible idea?”

“It’s the worst idea. But it’s not my choice, is it? You do what you need to do.”

“Thanks.” Eduard sat on the swingset, creaky from years of sitting around in the back garden. “Just catching them up on everything.”

“Just telling them how well you’re doing without them?” Logan joined him, trying a little swing of his own, but quickly deciding against it as it groaned concerningly. “Think they’ll be less inclined to throw you to the curb now you’re going to uni?”

“Probably. I hope so. Or… I don’t know. I shouldn’t hope so, not really. I’m not sure they’re worth the trouble.”
“Mate, there’s no “should” about this. You feel how you want to.”

“Still. It’s kinda dumb.”

“Yeah, well, it’s about time you were kinda dumb.” He punched his arm gently. “Fucking genius. You need knocking down a few pegs.”

They both chuckled, swinging back and forth gently. Eduard looked at Logan. The light of the kitchen’s back window brushed him with gold. He closed his eyes when he laughed, the corners of his eyes and bridge of his nose creasing as his shoulders trembled. He glanced back at Eduard. He averted his eyes, then looked back up at him. They shared a smile.

After a long moment, Eduard broke the silence. “Did you know my mum introduces herself as “Dr Elisabet Tarkas, PhD” on her answerphone message? It’s like she’d implode if she went too long without mentioning it.”

Logan snorted. “What a bitch.”

He grinned and leaned back, pulling on the ropes. “I think she’s overcompensating for something. I’m assuming it’s the state of her marriage.”

They both burst into laughter, the kind of laughter that never really needed anything all that funny to prompt, but could last forever. The kind of laughter that, once it gradually faded to slow panting, left them both unsure as to what exactly was so funny, but certain that the other was quite possibly their favourite person on earth.

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“We’ll miss you,” Layla covered her boys in kisses, standing outside a car completely laden with everything they could possibly need for living alone, from bedsheets and notebooks to a giant box of beer. Harry was already strapped into her baby seat, eating raisins and gurgling happily. It was eight in the morning, so Logan looked exhausted, trying his best not to act too grumpy as his parents took pictures, handed him a tin of fudge, asked a billion times if they were sure they’d packed everything (they had; Eduard had made an inventory weeks ago) and started sobbing at their big, grown boys going off to uni by themselves. Mr and Mrs Cooper promised they’d be over to visit soon, and Logan and Eduard promised to be good, keep their place tidy, and be wise with their money. Layla also made Logan promise to do his share of the housework and not leave Eduard to cook everything just because he happened to be better at it. He couldn’t help beaming at that, even when Logan stuck his tongue out at him.

Just as Eduard was about to get into the car, he caught a middle aged couple power-walking up the road.

“Well, that’s weird and ominous,” Logan commented.

“They came.” Leaving the door open, Eduard swallowed and walked up the pavement to meet his parents. Layla stood behind him, glaring up at them, but staying quiet.

Elisabet and Anton stood there in the middle of the pavement. Eduard stared them down.

She nodded at him politely. “Eduard.”

He addressed them each the same way. “Elisabet. Anton.”

“Are you leaving?”
“Yeah. Make it quick.”

They exchanged a look, then Anton spoke. “We came to see you off. Just to say goodbye.”

“Why? Why now?”

Anton’s mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. He wasn’t used to Eduard being so bold. Neither was Eduard. “We realise our decisions may have been… rash.”

“Rash!?” Layla raised an eyebrow. “You kicked your child out! He was homeless!”

Eduard turned to her and smiled. “I’ve got it handled, mum, give me a moment.”

Layla was about to protest, but nodded and stepped back, ready to start throwing fists if they did anything. And she would. Eliisabet still had a tiny bald spot from where she’d yanked out a clump of hair; Eduard had gotten in trouble for smirking at it as a child.

Right now, Eliisabet looked… shocked? Remorseful? Eduard didn’t know - he’d never seen that expression on her - but she didn’t seem too happy about Layla usurping her as Eduard’s mother.

Eduard smoothed his shirt and took a breath. He started speaking in Estonian - this was a matter between him, Anton and Eliisabet alone. “Why did you come here? After you threw me out? Why do you make an effort when you clearly don’t care what happens to me? I could have been living on the street, or dead, or been abducted, but that was alright, was it? Because I wasn’t going to uni?”

“We just…” Anton cleared his throat. “Your mother and I just wanted what was best for you. We didn’t want you throwing your future away over a boy.”

“You didn’t want me doing anything with a boy.”

Eliisabet huffed. “That’s nonsense-“

“Oh, really? So you’re saying if Gunner was a woman, you’d have done the same thing? You’re saying you didn’t scoff about “this whole bisexual thing” when you thought I was upstairs? Or look at me like I’d just whipped my dick out at the dinner table whenever I brought him up?”

“Don’t be disgusting!”

“Am I wrong, Eliisabet?”

She didn’t reply.

“Funny thing is, you didn’t seem to have so much of a problem with how Gunner wouldn’t let me see my best friend. Or how I wasn't going to uni because he'd bullied and guilted me and tried to control me. Or how that evening, when you caught us together, what we were doing was in no way consensual.”

“You shouldn’t talk about those things lightly, Eduard.”

“I’m not! Gunner abused me!”

“Don’t exaggerate,” Anton scoffed.

Eduard blinked at him, almost in shock. “Exaggerate?”

“People disagree, miscommunicate, it happens. That’s just the way relationships are sometimes.”
He shook his head. The past few months had been spent flip-flopping around in his head, alternating between playing down what Gunner had done, worrying he had exaggerated the level of abuse, telling himself that it wasn’t that bad, and telling that part of him - the part that spoke to him in Gunner’s voice - to shut up. “Like you’d know anything about that.”

Eduard was about to disappear into the car, but Anton spoke up.

“Wait!”

Eduard, despite himself, stopped and turned back to them.

“Before you go, I thought I’d give you this.” He took an envelope from his coat pocket. “We started saving it, when you were a child. There’s quite a lot here. Just to tide you over.”

He took it off him. “Thanks.” He didn’t even look at it, he just handed it over to Logan without a second thought. He didn’t want their bribes, and Logan was the one with the little girl, after all. “You can go now.”

Anton nodded, apparently accepting defeat. He reached over and gently squeezed his arm. “Good job on your marks, Eduard.”

Eduard didn’t reply. He just turned his back on them and got into the car, and if he saw them again it would be too soon. As they went their separate ways, Eduard touched his arm where Anton had squeezed it. It was too little too late and everyone knew it, but he wondered when Anton had last touched him, or told him he'd done a good job. His arm was almost tingling.

Logan sat behind him, next to Harry. “Ed, there’s a lot of money in here. Like, a shit ton.”

He nodded. “Don’t spend it all at once.”

“You’re giving me all of it?”

“Every penny. He’s trying to buy me off. Classic Anton move. It’s the only reason I have a PlayStation. Get yourself and Harry something nice.”

Logan glanced down at the envelope, nodded, and stashed it away. “Ready?”

“Yeah.” He leaned out the car window. “Bye mum, bye dad!” He waved to Mr and Mrs Cooper, just to really drive it in to Anton and Elisabet’s retreating backs. He wasn’t talking to them, and would never again think of them as his parents.

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“Here we are, then,” Logan flopped onto the sofa, “our own place.”

“I wish we had our timetables already,” Eduard sighed as he pinned up his corkboard next to the TV, so they would have to look at it and know exactly what they should be studying instead. Logan gave a whine at the sight of their blank revision timetables.

“Okay, can I make a rule where we don’t talk about work during freshers week?”

“Even when we get our timetables? Don’t we need to organise who’s looking after Harry and when?”

“Okay, one exception. But besides that, we’re signing up to societies, making friends, and exploring.”
“But no partying,” Eduard warned him, “and don’t try and drag me to any clubs.”

“Please, Eddie, I’m a responsible father now. I’ve never seen an alcohol in my life!” He said that as he unloaded beer into the fridge.

“Uh huh.” Eduard watched him pack the fridge, found another box of Harry’s toys, and took it into her room. She was running in circles, squealing at having her own bedroom. When she saw him, she bolted over to hug his legs, messy hair flying everywhere. She had the same hair as her grandfather, Eduard had noticed: long and dirty blonde and sticking out everywhere.

“Someone’s happy,” he said, setting the box down and ruffling her hair. Her dolls were already laid out neatly on a little shelf, and her arts and crafts things were in a box next to a coffee table Logan had shoved next to her bed to act as a desk. “Do you like your new room?”

“Yes!” She pulled a pile of drawings out of a box, along with a lump of bluetack. “Help?”

Eduard put up all her drawings, as per her specific instructions, to brighten the room up (with their budget, it was hardly new, and the walls may have been white at some point, but right now they were decidedly grey). She then made him ‘help’ (do by himself while she supervised) with making the bed and hanging up her clothes. By the time he’d finished making her room look perfect and walked back out into the main living area, he found Logan had unpacked the kitchen and was covering his room in superhero and action movie posters.

“Should I have left these at home?” he asked when Eduard joined him. “I mean, they’re cool for a teenage boy’s room, but what if I bring someone home and they get freaked out staring at Wolverine?”

Eduard wouldn’t blame them one bit. “It’s your room, man. Wait, ‘someone’? Not sticking to girls then?”

Logan shrugged. “Yeah, gonna be out and proud. You can do that at uni, right?”

“I guess? Uni’s supposed to be more accepting than high school.”

“Good. I will date boys! I will date anyone and everyone!”

Well, by that logic, Eduard supposed it was only a matter of time before they dated too. There was hope. He was happy to let his best friend be a complete ho and get it out of his system while he got over his traumatic fear of dating people, though.

“You can’t date everyone, Logan.”

“Shut up or I’ll date you.”

“Is that a promise or a threat?”

Logan may have blushed. “Yes. I’ll date the shit outta you, whenever you’re nice and ready. Like, a friendship date or something. If you’re ever feeling lonely, we can go out and have a laugh. No homo.”

“‘No homo’? Really Logan? Anyway, I’m pretty sure that’s what some people would consider ‘hanging out together’.”

“Yeah, that.” He smiled. “I’d love to hang out with you a lot.”
“The money was for you and Harry,” Eduard commented, watching Harry run around in her new pikachu onesie. “Have you just bought stuff for her?”

Logan shrugged. “She doesn’t get new stuff often; it’s all Allirea’s old crap. Thought I’d treat her. I’d rather the rest go towards rent, or, like, emergency funds.” He certainly had treated her, not that Eduard wouldn’t do the exact same; he loved Harry like she was his own kid. He wondered if it was too early for Harry to have her own computer.

“And that bag of stuff that’s clearly for me?”

Logan shifted. “Just… well, I saw them and thought you’d like them.”

He passed Eduard the bag.

“DVDs?” He smiled.

“Yeah, you had to leave all yours behind so I thought you could start your own collection.” He’d thought about it. Any DVDs he’d owned were back in Anton and Elisabet’s house, besides the one Empire Strikes Back special edition he’d stolen out of spite.

The rest of his presents included a new, fluffy turtleneck, slippers, a t-shirt reading “I hope you like ‘Han shot first’ rants because that’s kinda my thing” (definitely intended to bully him), a cookbook of his own, and a colour-changing mug.

Eduard tried not to tear up at the sight.

“I love you,” he whispered, then coughed awkwardly. “You know. As a friend. A homie. My bro. My brrr…ead slice.”

“Your bread slice?”

“Shut up, I’m emotional!” He buried his face in his turtleneck. “You’re too nice.”

“Yeah, well, you deserve it. You deserve to just… have people be nice to you.”

Eduard nodded, not quite sure that to say to that. It felt weird, like he was being put on the spot. Like he was delicate and needed pity and he didn’t like it.

“Everyone does,” Logan added, “don’t think too much of it; that’s what friends are for.” He squeezed his shoulder.

Eduard nodded. “Right, so if you don’t mind, I’d like to take some of that money to get you something. Logan looked at him, then hesitantly handed over the envelope. “Fine, one small thing. But the rest has to go into a saving account.”

“Deal.”

Eduard didn’t buy him one small thing - he bought him a full rugby kit, despite knowing nothing about rugby other than Logan loved it and had joined the university rugby team, and that every member of that team could probably tear him in half. At least the guy at the shop had had the patience to explain what a gumshield was and didn’t laugh at him for not knowing a thing about sport as a concept. He even got the… erm… Australian rugby kit. Not the All Blacks - they were the
South African team or something; he'd forgotten what Logan had said about them. What was their name? The Wallabies! He felt like he’d heard Logan mention that before, but any talk of rugby tended to turn his brain to static.

All he could honestly say on the subject was that Logan looked very good in a rugby kit. A lifetime of actually getting out and playing sports had really bulked the guy out, and even the weird, gross green and yellow colours didn’t stop him from looking good, and from showing off the muscle he’d acquired over the past few years.

Maybe it had been a mistake, Eduard realised, because he wanted to melt into the ground at the sight of the shirt stretched against his boobies. Pecs. They were pecs and Logan didn't like it when he called them his boobies.

“Is it too tight?” he asked.

“No, it’s great! Means no one can grab onto me.” Logan was now rubbing his butt through the material, admiring it in the mirror.

Eduard absolutely wanted to grab onto him. And kiss him. And let Logan do whatever he wanted to him. “Anyway, got, err, got studying to do. In my room. Alone.”

“We haven’t had a lesson ye-”

“I have to study!” And he disappeared into his bedroom for a very long time.

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“Sorry I'm late!” Logan squeaked as he cowered under the glare of his lecturer. 20 minutes late. His second lecture too, but rugby practice last night had completely destroyed him, physically, and he was struggling to move his limbs. And his lungs. And as if things weren't already bad, he had Harry strapped to his chest, slightly covered in chocolate sprinkles.

“That toddler must be a genius if she's doing a degree in marine biology at her age,” came Mr Kirkland’s dry reply.

“I couldn't find a babysitter,” said Logan, sinking into the nearest seat, “it's just for one lesson; she'll be good as gold!”

Mr Kirkland didn’t look happy about it at all, but decided to go back to his powerpoint instead. Logan hissed at Harry to be a good girl, and not make noise, and tried to take notes. Eduard promised to go through all the course’s powerpoints with him too, but he still wanted to try and make his own notes. And learn. Luckily, there were plenty of diagrams to tide him over.

Everything went well, until about five minutes before the lecture ended, when Harry got up and exclaimed she had ‘done enough learning’ and the class completely lost it.

…

Logan rarely knocked on Eduard’s door - after sharing a room for the past few months, it felt weird. Eduard didn’t mind. In fact, he quite liked their little open door policy, provided neither of them were jacking off. Which they often were. Logan barged into his room and sat on his bed.

“Hey, wanna go get a drink?”
Eduard glanced up from his half-finished Visual Basic project. From where Logan was sitting, he could only see colourful lines of nonsense. It was bizarre to him how that could translate to some game. Eduard really was a genius. “I’ve got to do stuff.”

“When’s it due?”

“It’s not. I’m doing my own thing.”

“You’ve been working all week, Eddie. It’s Friday evening and it’s the Christmas holidays soon. Come on. I’m getting my mate to babysit, we can go get a few drinks. It’ll be fun.”

He opened his mouth to protest, but then didn’t. “Alright. Fine. But nothing too loud.”

“It’s cool, I know a little pub that’s having an open mic night. No noisy clubs, I promise.”

Eduard narrowed his eyes at him. “I’m not performing either.”

“Never said you had to. We can just get a drink and chill. Hang out. Take the piss out of people. But if you do, that would be really cool.”

Eduard raised his eyebrows.

“Worth a shot. You have a good voice.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.”

Logan huffed dramatically. “Guess I’ll have to make do with your shower singing.”

“Sorry about that.”

He shook his head. “Nah, nah, it's sweet. I mean, it's nice. Your voice, that is.”

“Again, Logan, it'll get you nowhere. Now get out.” He gently shoved his shoulder. “I need to get changed.”

“What? You look fine, just come as you are!”

“We're having a night out; I'm dressing smart. Go. Get your babysitter friend here. I wanna catch all the pretentious ukulele hipsters.”

A while later, they left the flat, Logan almost floored by the December cold before he'd even stepped outside. He was wrapped up in as many layers as he could get away with, but still started shivering within seconds. Eduard rolled his eyes, and made sure to pick at his own thin jacket in plain view.

Logan nudged him playfully. Should he have mentioned this was a date? Well, it wasn’t. Except it was. He’d implied it, quite forgetting Eduard was completely dense about these kinds of things and he should’ve explicitly stated he liked him instead. Except that sounded scary. Still, they were going out, having fun, and what happened would happen. The atmosphere was so beautiful in the run up to Christmas, and Eduard had really come out of his shell. Sure, he’d not made any friends, but he contributed to discussions in his seminars, and smiled more. And sure did love to nag Logan about keeping their flat tidy, and not drinking milk straight from the bottle.

He still had a way to go, though. After Gunner, he’d retreated away a little. It was like the tide had gone out. He seemed so much more anxious and closed-off. He was getting better, though, bit by bit. Logan, of course, took every opportunity to build him up, compliment him, let him do things on his own to build his confidence.
Bit by bit, that spark was coming back.

“After you,” Logan held the door to the pub open for him, and Eduard laughed at the gesture sweetly.

Most of the performers were mediocre at best. Eduard was more focused on his drink than the music. Still, he watched politely, giving each of them a chance and offering his generally cynical commentary to Logan. He elbowed him in the middle of some poorly-written breakup song.

“Whoever that guy’s singing about, I neither envy nor blame her. I’d break up with this guy too, on account of his beard at the very least.”

Logan snorted, almost spitting out his beer. “God, it’s terrible. It looks like pubes.”

“It does! Or like a really threadbare carpet stuck on with those shitty glue sticks from school.”

“He should come to us for metaphor-writing tips.”

“They’re similes, you dumbass.”

Logan rolled his eyes. “Whatever.”

Pubes-beard stepped off the stage, replaced by a tall woman in a pale blue jumper and a denim jacket.

She adjusted the strap of her guitar, then leaned into the mic. “Evening. Thanks for coming out. Is that a thing people say at these, or is that more a big concert thing? I don't know. Thanks for coming out regardless, I guess. I'm Lyubov Shevchenko. Any Slavs in the crowd? No? Alright, call me Lou, then.”

Eduard chuckled. She seemed nice.

“I should probably shut up and sing something. Hope you enjoy.” She strummed the opening notes of a soft, sad melody. Something old. 60s.

“I've been out walking,” she sang, “I don’t do too much walking these days.”

For once, Eduard had nothing to mutter to Logan under his breath. She was genuinely a good singer - her voice was soft, tinged with her Eastern European accent. Her hips swayed just barely to the music, but she wasn't dancing, not really, just keeping the gentle rhythm. The tacky disco lights played on her face, changing the colours of her white-blond hair. Logan looked to Eduard, expecting some snide comment. Instead, he was transfixed, tapping the beat on the floor with his foot and mouthing along to the words. As the song came to an end, he leaned over to Logan.

“She’s good.”

“And an absolute jugasaurus rex.”

Eduard punched him. “I’m talking about the song here!”

“But they are huge.”

Eduard had to agree with him there. Not that he was looking. “A little. But that voice, though.”

“Oh, yeah. She has really big… musical talent.”

“Oh, shut up! She's a good singer!”
Seeing an opportunity to make Eduard try to be less of a reclusive hermit for once, Logan nodded over to where she was sitting, vodka in hand, chatting to a bartender. “Go tell her.”

“What? No, she'll think I'm being a creep.”

He shrugged. “Don’t be creepy, then. Just... go up, say you enjoyed her music, and maybe ask some questions about herself. People love talking about themselves.”

Eduard did not look happy about that at all.

Logan nudged him. “Come on. You haven’t made any friends here yet.”

“Harry and I have become quite good friends, actually. Now that she’s two and able to hold a conversation. Sorta. She told me how scary Spiderman was yesterday.”

“You need friends other than me and my daughter.”

“That sounds false.”

“Eddie, go talk to her and I’ll buy you a drink.”

Eduard bit his lip. Ha! He’d got him there! “And by drink you mean, like, ten shots?”

“Ten? That what it’ll take to get you to talk to Lou?”

“Yup. And it’s Lyubov. Technically.”

“Not all of us are Eastern European. Go.” He nudged him in her direction. “I’ll get you your drinks.”

Wow. He hadn’t expected that to work. He didn’t even want that much, he just wanted to see how far Logan would go. He awkwardly shuffled towards her, rehearsing some sort of greeting in his head. Why had he let him convince him this was a good idea?

She spotted him awkwardly standing beside her, waiting for a break in the conversation. This was already going wonderfully. Luckily, she didn’t seem to take offense. She turned to him and smiled. It was a warm sort of smile, or maybe Eduard was just blushing.

“Can I help you?”

“Sorry to interrupt, I just wanted to, uh, compliment you.” He gestured at the stage vaguely. “On your voice, that is. It’s nice.”

Her smile went from warm to bright - it lit up the whole bar.

“Thank you so much! I’m glad you liked it.”

“I’m glad my roommate dragged me here.” He glanced up at Logan, who gestured at him to carry on. “Lyubov, right?”

“Yeah. Good memory. Most people over here stick to “Lou”, I’ve learnt to embrace it.”

“I’m Estonian, I get it. When people pronounce “Eduard” like “Edward”, I just don’t bother correcting them anymore.”

“Ooh! Estonia’s beautiful. Nice to meet you, Eduard.” She shook his hand. Her hands were warm.
He leaned on the bar. “Where are you from?”

“Born in Ukraine, raised between here, Russia and Belarus. My family’s a mess like that.”

“It results in a very pleasing accent. It works well with the song.”

“Thank you! The, uh, the original singer was German. You could really hear it in her voice. I tried to sort of incorporate mine in the same way.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “I don’t know if it works, but I like singing in my accent.”

“It works. It’s really beautiful.”

“Your voice is lovely too. Your talking voice, I mean. Soft.”

“Thanks. I used to have an accent when I was little, a really strong one, but it sort of faded. I used to hate it, kids used to take the piss out of it, but now I kinda miss it.”

“You can kind of hear it. I mean, you don’t sound 100% English.”

“Well, that’s a relief. Mind if I sit? Only until my roommate comes over to interrupt, I promise.”

“Go ahead,” she laughed.

Eduard took a seat at the bar next to her. He saw her glance at his arm, still scarred after all this time.

“Pasta-making accident,” he offered by way of explanation.

“How’d you manage that?”

“I was a little kid,” he shrugged, then decided to change the subject before she questioned why a little kid was making pasta. “How long have you been singing?”

“About as long as I can remember. I’ve been playing guitar since I was about 8, maybe 9. Do you sing?”

“Not properly, but Logan has to suffer my shower singing. Apparently it’s good, but I think he’s just being nice. I also play piano.”

“I’m sure it’s wonderful. How long have you been playing?”

“7 years. Logan’s dad got me into it, and then I started getting lessons.”

“So you and him go way back?”

“Oh, yeah. I barely remember not knowing him. He’s my best friend. Speaking of, what’s taking him?” He glanced over his shoulder. “Oh, he’s found someone to chat up. Of course he has.”

“Which one’s he?”

“The huge, loud Aussie.” He pointed him out. “He’s hitting on the little goth guy.”

Logan let out a booming laugh, taking a slug of beer.

Lyubov’s eyebrows shot up. “You two seem… an unlikely pair.”

Eduard shrugged. “You know how it is when an extrovert finds and adopts an introvert. Full disclosure, he had to bribe me to even attempt a conversation. I don’t normally do this.”
“Does that make me special?”

“I think it probably does. Can I get you a drink? It’s on Logan. I wanted to see how desperate he was to get me talking to people, so I asked him to get me ten shots for it. I definitely don’t need that many. Can I interest you in another five vodkas? All you have to do in return is convince Logan I completely nailed this encounter.”

She threw her head back and laughed. “That sounds tough. Make it six.”

He grimaced. “Oh, you drive a hard bargain. You’re a woman after my own heart.” He stood up. “Come on.”

Logan looked up when they joined him. “Hey! You’ve made a friend!”

“Apparently so. Logan, Lyubov, Lyubov, Logan.”

“Good to meet you.”

She took a seat at Eduard’s side. “Good to meet you too. Thanks for forcing him to talk to me. Honestly, I’m struggling to make many friends.”

“So’s he.” Logan shook Eduard’s shoulder. “Fucking loser just does homework and plays video games.”

Eduard elbowed him.

“Sorry, sorry. Bad wingman.”

“You are not my wingman.”

“I think you’re doing a good job, wingman.”

Eduard hushed her. “Don’t encourage him, Shevchenko.”

“Got to keep him sweet if he’s buying me shots.”

Logan raised an eyebrow, amused, and pushed the shot glasses towards them. “So you like music and drinking? You and Eddie’ll defo get along.” He wasn’t jealous. Not at how they smiled at each other, or how even mentioning music seemed to trigger the most in-depth discussion he’d ever seen Eduard have with anyone. Not at how Eduard’s eyes lit up when she mentioned some folk musician he vaguely liked, launching them into a heated debate over her best album.

Never, in all his life, had Logan not been the centre of a conversation, but here he struggled to get a word in edgeways. He didn’t even have time to feel weird about it, he was so proud of Eduard.

When they stumbled out of the bar at a reasonable hour (for students, at least) he found he couldn’t get a word in once again. Eduard couldn’t stop rambling about his new friend.

…

After that evening, Eduard and Lyubov were common fixtures in each other’s flats. She was immediately enamoured with Harry, and vice versa, except Harry’s insistence on calling her “Lubey” made Logan laugh far more than was appropriate. She offered to babysit at every given opportunity, which was something of a relief when Eduard and Logan had class at the same time every Thursday afternoon.
When she wasn’t trying to steal Logan’s children, she hung out with Eduard. They were always together in his room. Logan ached at the thought, his imagination going as wild as it did. He could see Eduard kiss her in his mind’s eye, see her in a bitter parody of every sappy little fantasy he’d had of Eduard, where she stood in his place every time.

In reality, they’d sit together and work in silence, or chat about nothing, or attempt duets together on her guitar and the keyboard in the corner of Eduard’s room. Logan had to admit, Eduard was right about her voice. She sounded beautiful, and they sounded beautiful together. He didn’t stand a chance, and yet he wasn’t sure they were even dating yet. He could hold out hope they were just friends. Somehow, that was worse. The jealousy still ate him alive, but the not knowing was what really stung.

It wasn’t until they went home for Christmas that he got anything like a straight answer. They were sat together on a freezing train platform, waiting for their way home.

Out of the blue, Eduard turned to him. “Do you think it’s a bad idea to be in a relationship? For me personally, I mean?”

Logan shrugged. “You’d know better than me.”

“But I don’t know. Like, say, hypothetically, I’m into someone.”

“Lou?”

“I- what? No, she’s just- yes, it’s her, shut up. And if you're going to nickname her, use Luba instead.”

“Now you know I could never do that with a straight face.”

“What are you? 12? Anyway. Say I’m interested in her, romantically speaking, right? Is it then a bad idea to, like, pursue her? Given my history?”

“Not if you’re ready. Are you?”

“I don’t know! I mean, I haven’t even told her about Gunner, or my parents, or any of that. She thinks I’m just some normal, well-adjusted guy.”

“Eddie, she’s seen you rant about how George Lucas killed Anakin’s character until you cried, whilst eating a block of uncooked ramen.”

“Okay, mostly-adjusted. And I don’t want her going into this without knowing what she’s getting herself into, but at the same time I don’t want to tell her, y’know?”

“Why not?”

“Well, she worries a lot. I told her I skipped breakfast while we were out and she bought me a sandwich on the spot. I don’t like people worrying about me, and she shouldn’t have to deal with all that.”

Logan thought about it for a moment. “Look, why not - if you feel up to it - ask her out, and if things start to get serious and you want to tell her, go for it?”

“But then she’ll have to deal with all this when she thought she was just getting into a normal relationship. I mean, what if it’s too much for her, but she feels like she can’t say anything about it in case she sounds all selfish so she makes herself deal with it anyway and she ends up resenting me
over it but she still can’t say anything so we’re just trapped in this one-sided hell of a relationship with her tiptoeing around me so I don’t—"

“Ed, you’re spiralling.”

He sighed and leaned his head on his shoulder. Logan stroked his hair. “Sorry.”

“Is it really that you’re worried about, or is it something else?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Ed…”

“I’m not an easy person to be in a relationship with,” he admitted, hands tangling together in his lap, “Or even to like. I mean, because of that, but just in general, too.”

“Did Gunner tell you that?”

Eduard didn’t reply.

“Ed, he’s full of shit.”

“But he’d know, though, wouldn’t he?”

“Fuck off he would! He couldn't tell his arse from his mouth.”

“But it’s true.”

He put his arm around his shoulders. “Ed, listen. Anyone would be lucky to have you. You’re amazing. You’re kind, and you’re smart, and you’re funny, and you have unbelievably soft hands and you make excellent bread. Also you’re incredibly hot.”

He shrugged and stared at his knees. “I like her. And that kind of scares me. Like, I think just being with someone, that scares me. But if I’m not ready now, what if I’m never ready?”

“You will be. I promise. You’re not in any rush. Take things at your own speed.”

“I really like her, Logan.”

“I know.” He ached a little.

“Like, I look at her and I want to make her happy, and all that. She makes me happy. I’m with her, and things are nice. But I’m gonna fuck it up, aren’t I?”

“Maybe. So what? People fuck up. But then you pick yourself up and go on, live your life. At least you’ll be able to say you tried.”

Their train pulled into the station.

“Maybe so. C’mon, let’s go.”

The conversation was over, but Logan knew full well he’d done nothing to soothe his anxieties. Eduard took his seat and took a packet of M&Ms from his bag, looking out of the window as the train started moving. He had that expression he always had when the gears of his brain were going at top speed.
Logan stole one of his M&Ms. “So. You and Lou, huh?”

He smiled at just the mention of her name. “Isn’t she great?”

Logan nodded, and his heart silently imploded. “Yeah. She is.”

Despite all evidence leading to the contrary, Logan still held onto a selfish shred of hope that Eduard wouldn’t end up with Lyubov after all. That he’d chicken out, or she’d reject him. He hated that. Eduard clearly loved her, and he deserved someone he clicked with the way he clicked with her.

All throughout their trip home, he tried not to think about it. That proved easy enough. He was kept busy decorating the tree, helping with food, catching up with his sisters and parents, and then, as they arrived, aunts and uncles and grandparents and cousins.

Eduard made himself useful, but he tried to fade into the background. He made the mistake of telling Allirea they celebrated it on the 24th in Estonia, inspiring her to pester her parents (very ineffectually) to celebrate it early.

It beat Christmas with his grandmother in Tallinn, but he wasn’t used to that many people under one roof, even after all the times he’d visited Logan in the holidays, meeting them if only for a brief while. He’d never properly been a part of it. It was a little overwhelming.

Still, they all seemed to like him. Logan’s extended family, for the most part, were as nice as his parents. One uncle - Layla’s brother - even bought him an old Han Solo action figure last-minute, having found it in the dusty little vintage shop his brother-in-law visited from time to time after Eduard had mentioned his collection to him. Aside from that, there were clothes from Layla, new sheet music from Mr Cooper, a book from Jem, and a box of chocolate from Allirea, suspiciously opened and missing a few. Logan bought him a pack of pens, even though he didn’t understand his enthusiasm for stationery, and Eduard in return bought him rugby socks, even though he still didn’t understand his enthusiasm for rugby. Tino and Berwald came over to drop off presents too - fancy coffee from the Christmas market in Birmingham for Eduard and a packet of fudge for Logan (chilli-flavoured, to stop Eduard stealing any).

Once they got home, things settled back into place. They went back to studying, and raising Harry together. They worked on assignments and Logan began revising for his exams (Eduard had been doing so since September), and the topic of Lyubov was dropped.

Logan had no way of knowing if Eduard had said anything, but he couldn’t see any change in their relationship. Not until one February morning when he watched him walk her to their door. She was wearing yesterday’s jumper and Eduard’s gloves. He put his arm around her shoulders and kissed her, just once, so quick he could have blinked and missed it. He said something to her, leaning so close he didn’t need to raise his voice above a whisper. Whatever it was, it made her laugh. Her lips touched his cheek, and she disappeared out of the doorway. He lingered there until she was out of sight, then turned around to see Logan.

“Oh! Morning.”

“Morning, Eddie!” Logan hoped Eduard didn’t pick up on the crack in his voice. If he did, he didn’t comment on it. “So, you and Lou… you… you’re together then?”

Eduard beamed. “Yeah! I asked her out two weeks ago; keep up.”

“You literally haven’t changed how you act around each other. Until that cheeky kiss.”
“Well not everyone wants to traumatis[e] their roommates with… noises.”

“Headphones, Eddie.”

“Just wait til I’m out!”

“You’re never out!”

“Stop trying to bone the entire university!”

Logan laughed. “No. At least you can get your revenge now.”

“You know I’m way too prude for that.”

“But you can if you want, that’s all.”

“I’ll save you the trauma. And I’ll save her the embarrassment.”

“Shame.”

“Logan, are you implying you’d want to listen to us?”

Logan just grinned, wiggling his eyebrows cheekily. He didn’t like to outright lie. Eduard was nervous.

“Never happening.”

“You know I’m just messing with ya, right?”

“Why don’t I believe you?”

“That’s your problem.” He tried not to look sad as he smiled at Eduard. “Anyway, you and Lou. Lyubed. Edbov. You really like her, huh?”

Eduard smiled into his jumper sleeve. “Yeah, a lot. She’s really, really great.”

An invisible hand squeezed at Logan’s chest. “Do you love her?”

Eduard shrugged. “Bit early to say. But I do like her a lot.”

…

Eduard took the time to put a coffee cup in his girlfriend’s hands and a kiss on her nose, even as he rushed out of the house in a hoodie he’d stolen off her to an early lecture, with his own coffee in a travel mug and a slice of bread in his hand so she wouldn’t fuss about him skipping breakfast.

“Are we meeting for lunch later?”

He nodded. “Course. See you then, Shevchenko. Make sure Logan doesn’t burn the place down without me to stop him.”

“No promises.”

“Fair.” He stuck out his cheek. “One more for the road?”

She kissed it gently, just before he swept out of the flat. “Bye! Love you!”
“Love you too!”

She smiled at the closing door, sipping her coffee. The coffee Eduard made was strong enough to permanently cure a whale’s narcolepsy, but she had acquired a taste for it, though it needed a sugar or 5.

Logan came in a few minutes later, getting Harry ready for pre-school. Though he’d managed to get his daughter dressed without too much fuss, she was having trouble finding her hairbrush.

“Go check the bathroom while I get your breakfast.”

Harry nodded and left the room, Lyubov watched Logan bustle about the kitchen, doing his best to not look at her. He did that a lot, when she was looking at him. And when he thought she wasn’t, he was watching closely. Especially whenever she was near Eduard. It was like he was judging her, waiting for her to do something wrong.

It put her on edge.

“Logan, can I ask you a somewhat frank question?”

“Shoot.”

Lyubov sat on the kitchen counter she had been leaning on. “Do you have a problem with me?”

He blinked. “No. No, of course not.”

“I get the intense feeling you either don’t like me or don’t trust me. Is it some “bros before hoes” sort of thing? Because, I mean, I get it, but you know Eduard thinks the world of you, right? I mean, he never stops talking about you. I’m not about to steal him away or anything.”

Logan glanced down at Harry’s cereal, trying not to look too guilty. “It’s not that. Nice to know, though, I guess.”

“So it is something? You do, in some way, not like me?”

“I do like you, I just- I don’t know. I get protective of him.”

“He’s a grown man, Logan. He can make his own decisions.”

“It’s not… it’s not that. Look, if he hasn’t told you yet, I shouldn’t tell you either.”

“Look, I agree totally, don’t get me wrong, but you know Ed. He doesn’t talk about serious stuff. The most personal he’s got is telling me he doesn’t talk to his parents anymore. He won’t even talk about exes- oh, it was his ex, wasn’t it?”

Logan nodded. She really was quick on the uptake. But was it his place to say? This was Eduard’s life, not his. But maybe, if Lyubov understood… “I’m still not going into detail, it’s really not my place. But it was bad. Emotional abuse, sexual abuse, he slapped him once.”

“He?”

“He didn’t even tell you he was bi?”

She shook her head.

“Fuck. I shouldn’t have said that.”
“It doesn’t matter to me. I won’t tell him you told. But Jesus, that explains a lot.”

“What? That he’s such a twink?”

“Not the bi thing! Just… y’know, I knew something was up with him. I just put it down to him being, I don’t know, eccentric, and socially awkward, or maybe anxiety or something. He apologises over every little thing, he asks me if it’s okay with me if he talks to you, or anyone really.” She wiped her eyes on the back of her hand. She always cried easily. “I didn’t realise it was something like that.”

Logan put his arms out. “C’mere.”

Lyubov hugged him tight. “I’m sorry for getting like this. I just… I love him. I really do. The thought that someone could do that to him…”

“I know. It really makes you wanna start ripping some guy a new arsehole, doesn’t it?”


“I know.”

Logan decided, then and there, that he didn’t want to fight her over Eduard. The fact that they were in love with the same man didn’t change that she was perfect for him, or that ultimately, they both wanted him to be happy. If anything, he felt like she was his ally in loving and appreciating Eduard. She wasn’t Gunner. She’d never hurt him. And it was about time he moved on anyway.

…

They met at the cafe for lunch as planned, sipping americanos and sharing a portion of chips, each with a mediocre toasted panini.

“How was class?” Lyubov asked, feeding him a chip.

He bit it out of her hand. “So-so.”

She was studying him, looking closely at his face. Instinctively, he assumed he had something stuck there and wiped the corner of his mouth. She didn’t look away.

“Sorry, did I… did I do something?”

She shook her head. “No, no, of course not. Just thinking.”

“Oh? What’s on your mind, Shevchenko?”

“Nothing really.”

“Thinking about nothing?”

She nodded. “Don’t worry about it.” The second she said that, she realised that made it very hard not to worry about. “I just talked to Logan this morning.”

“Oh? What about?”

“Nothing- nothing important. It just kinda stuck with me. You know how it is.”
Eduard looked sceptical, but didn’t pry. Lyubov gave him a strange smile and stroked his cheek. She kept glancing at him, when she thought he wasn’t looking, the same way she’d been complaining about Logan doing.

“Want another coffee?” she asked, “I know it’s not as strong as you like, but-”

“I can get it myself.” Eduard tried to get up, but Lyubov took his hand.

“It’s fine! I want to pick out a cake anyway.”

Eduard watched her pretending she wasn’t watching him, eyes narrowed. There was something familiar about it all.

He ate his panini in silence. Mr and Mrs Cooper had been the same, when he came to live with them, after…

She sat down and handed him his coffee, stirring it for him.

Eduard sighed, taking the spoon out of her hand. “Logan told you what happened, didn’t he?”

Lyubov didn’t look at him, for once. “He didn’t mean to, and I didn’t want to pry. It just sort of… came out.”

Eduard didn’t like how his stomach sank and his hands trembled.

“He didn’t want to say anything,” she added, “I just… well, I guessed something was up. He’s very protective of you.”

“How much do you know?”

She bit her lip. “How much is there to know?”

“Just the… um…”

“The ex?”

“Yes.”

“Ex boyfriend?”

He winced. “Yes. Gunner.”

“Hey, it’s okay, I love you. I’d never judge you for something like that. I do like the womenfolk, Mets.”

Eduard smiled weakly, but didn’t look her in the eye, instead focusing on breaking the remains of his panini into little, stale crumbs. “And everything else? That you just heard?”

“No, never.”

“How much about him did Logan tell you?”

She shrugged. “He was abusive.”

“Right.” Eduard sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. “Well, just so we’re on the same page, he pressured me into sleeping with him. Repeatedly. He tried to stop me talking to Logan and he
tried to stop me going to uni. Both almost worked. When I told my parents I wasn’t going they threw me out. I broke up with him- Logan helped- and applied through clearing. So everything worked out fine, you don’t need to worry.”

“Eddie…”

He tried to brush off her sympathy. “Does this change anything?”

She smiled at him sadly. “Of course it doesn’t. You’re still the same guy. And a pretty amazing same guy too.”

“So you’re not looking and acting like I’m fragile all of a sudden?”

Now it was Lyubov’s turn to wince. “I’m sorry. It's just… I really love you, and, well, you didn't deserve to be treated in such a way. You didn’t deserve any of that.”

He looked away, squirming.

“I just want to, you know, treat you like you should be treated.”

“You don't have to… well, I know you worry, but I'm not fragile. I mean, I’ve been through a bit of stuff, but it’s in the past. I’ve moved on from it.”

Lyubov didn’t believe him, that much was for sure. She didn’t take her eyes off him.

“I’m fine now,” Eduard insisted.

“Ed—”

“Please , I don’t want you to worry about me more than you already do. I’ve dealt with it all, and this is my new start.”

She nodded. “Yes, yes of course. Can I just say I think you’re very brave?”

He shifted uncomfortably; “um, okay.” There was an awkward silence. Eduard stirred his coffee. “You don’t… you don’t think I’m…” He shrugged.

“Don’t think you’re what?”

Another shrug. “Like… you went into this thinking I was a normal guy, with normal problems and none of this… cowshit. I understand if you didn’t sign up for this.”

She touched his hand. “Ed, I love you , all of you. I’m not about to leave you because of this. I want to stay with you.” She rested her hand on his.

“Even though—”

“Yes. Even though everything. We’re here for each other.” She smiled at him, and Eduard couldn’t help smiling back.

...

Eduard had hoped he could make some breakfast in peace. He wanted some coffee and toast and then get some early studying done. He didn’t sign up for this.

“You must be Eddie.”
He turned to see who he assumed to be Logan’s latest thing. It dawned on him that he’d never seen Hunapo’s face. He had, however, heard their voice. A lot. Which was why they needed no introduction.

Hunapo was wearing a rugby shirt - All Blacks - but they seemed a little small and skinny for a rugby player. They had a bright smile, though. “Heard a lot about you. How you doing, bruh?”

Eduard floundered. Nothing quite like seeing someone for the first time after hearing them get the depths of their butthole explored every few nights. “Yep.”

“What?”

Eduard nodded and grasped around in the fruit bowl for an apple. He bit into it to stop himself talking. It was bitter as cat’s piss and unusually difficult to sink his teeth into and—oh my god he had just bitten into an onion. For some unknown reason, he decided he might as well stick through with it now that he’d started. He recovered halfway from his initial shock, then took another bite. Why was he continuing with this? Why couldn’t he stop? What had his life come to and how did he get out of this situation?

Hunapo nodded slowly. “Cool. What’re you studying?”

He nodded and gestured towards his onion. “Apple.”

“What?”

“Computer Science. I’m doing Computer Science.”

Hunapo narrowed their eyes, not quite sure if they should laugh or run. “You're an odd one, aren’t you?”

“I'm sorry.”

Logan chose that absolutely perfect moment to walk in, wearing nothing but his underwear, and wrap his arms around Hunapo’s waist, kissing their neck immediately. “I see you’ve met my friend Eddie. You down for another round?”

They tilted their head to look at him. “You know I am.”

Logan looked up from Hunapo’s neck at Eduard. “Oh, hey Eddie. We need more milk.”

Eduard gave him a thumbs up, absolutely mortified.

…

Hunapo stuck around longer than the others, and Eduard came to discover more about them, as much as he’d rather pretend they didn’t exist and couldn’t talk. Or shout. Or - fucking - yowl.

They’d met through rugby. They’d had a massive rivalry that was only partially caused by Hunapo being a kiwi, and mostly by the fact that they and Logan were the most stupidly competitive pair of idiots imaginable. They were the first openly trans person either of them had known, and thus had an incredible amount of patience when it came to explaining just what agender was. And, at first, trans in general.

Hunapo was tiny, with a mess of curly hair, and Eduard was fairly convinced Logan was dating a hobbit. They also loved films, particularly indie comedies, and Eduard almost hated that they had
something in common. Besides music and computers, his third true love was film, though he was more a sci-fi man altogether. After Logan’s present, he was in the process of filling his bookshelf with collector’s items: limited edition box sets, out-of-production Star Wars action figures, a few old comics. Hunapo actually seemed quite interested in his collection. They were more of a Lord of the Rings fan, but instead of arguing over which franchise was better, the two united to subject Logan to both as often as possible. Eduard really liked them - he couldn’t help it - no matter how much he wanted to be jealous.

Hunapo also dragged Eduard along to DnD sessions with their friends, and he loved it. He was good at pretending now, and Edbard went on many hilariously wayward adventures with Kahurangi the screaming halfling and various other characters their group had made.

He wondered what it said about his social life that he considered DnD sessions as going up in the world, now that he had enough friends to actually join in with it.

…

Eduard was never going on a double date again, not if Logan and Hunapo’s idea of a date consisted of long walks in the woods. In the cold.

Though Lyubov seemed to be enjoying the country air, Eduard just sulked and tried to find phone signal. She put her arm around his waist and her head on his shoulder.

“Put your phone away, it’s lovely out here.”

“My feet hurt,” he grumbled.

She rubbed his back. “You chilly as well?”

“Course not. I’m Estonian. Fire can’t kill a dragon.”

“Speaking of which, we could totally go LARPing here,” Hunapo looked around.

Logan looked at them, “Huh?”

“Live Action Role Play? Like, DnD but with more dressing up and running about.”

“Fucking nerd.”

“So I could become Edbard in real life?” Eduard perked up at that.

Lyubov bit back a laugh. “Edbard?”

He blushed. “My- my character. He’s not even a bard; he’s a wizard.”

“Maybe you can make a new character,” suggested Hunapo, “I wanna be someone new. Maybe an orc or a dwarf. Oooh, maybe half orc and half dwarf…” They winced. “…a dorc.”

Logan snorted. “Suits you.”

“You look more like a halfling, though,” said Eduard.

“I do not!”

“Genuinely feels like you’re speaking another language.”
“A halfling is another word for hobbit,” Eduard explained before Hunapo could stop him. “Except you can’t say hobbit because of copyright.”

“You’re defo a halfling, then.”

Hunapo scowled. “Well I wanna be something different.”

“You’re short enough to be a dwarf,” Logan reasoned, “but are you strong enough?”

“I can take you in a fight! Square up, shitlips!”

“You could be an orc, Loges,” said Eduard, before another play-fight broke out. “Or a half-orc at least.”

“Wow!” Logan pretended to reel in horror, “because I’m ugly?”

“No? Because you’re so big and strong. Anyway, I’m gonna be Wizeduard. Who is a bard.”

“You’d make a terrible bard,” Hunapo snorted.

“I play music!”

“But where’s the charisma? The seduction?”

“I can be seductive! Shevchenko, back me up here.”

She tilted her head. “Hmm, I don’t know. I recall when we met you bribed me into talking to you.”

“That is not how that interaction went.”

“Bribed me with drinks Logan was buying to bribe you into talking to me, no less.”

“I can’t believe you’d do this to me. My own girlfriend.”

She grinned and put her arm around his waist. “Poor boy.”

“What would you be anyway?” he asked.

“I honestly have no idea.”

After Eduard and Huna took it in turns to explain the different DnD races and classes, Lyubov decided on a druid elf named Khrystyna, who was Wizeduard’s girlfriend. And that was how Eduard managed to enjoy exercise for the first time in his life: running around the woods pretending to play the lute and go on an increasingly stupid quest to try and defeat a monster a wizard accidentally summoned and was then eaten by. The monster was apparently somewhere in the woods eating any living being that wandered in, and when they came face to face with it, Wizeduard seduced it just to spite everyone who said he had no charisma.

Hunapo stated the invisible dice they were using didn’t roll high enough, so he was subsequently eaten.

... 

Eduard knew what was coming as soon as he saw the ring.

He didn't even have time to be upset, because Eduard couldn't believe his friend could be that stupid.
“Twice in a row.

“Be honest, man,” he sat across from him at the dining table, “do you need me to explain how to put on a condom?”

“They were on the pill!” cried Logan.

“I was joking! So Huna’s pregnant, then? Fucking hell, man.”

Logan shrugged. “Maybe. We’re not sure yet. But, well, we’ve been together a while now. And we’ll be graduating next month.”

“You don’t have to get married the moment you finish your education.” His phone buzzed. Eduard took it out of his pocket, scowled, and deleted the message.

“Who’s that?” asked Logan.

“Don’t change the subject. You and Huna, huh?”

“Yeah. You think they’ll say yes?”

He nodded, finding a sudden interest in the coffee granules he’d left on the table that morning. “For sure. Hopefully. Unless they think it’s too soon, which it probably is.”

“I dunno; I think we’ve been together long enough. And what about you? Are you and Lyubov moving in together?”

“Nah. We’re thinking of moving close to each other, though. When we graduate.”

“Why not? You’ve been together loads longer than Huna and I.”

“Yeah, but you and Huna fucked the day you met and I didn’t even hold her hand until we’d been dating for a week. We’re taking it slowly.”

“Mate, you’ve been together like three years.”

“Two and a half,” he corrected, “We’re going at our own pace.”

“Snail’s pace?”

“Fuck you.” He flicked coffee granules at him.

“Hey, you go at your own pace. I get it. But I think she’s really good for you.”

“You do?”

He nodded. “She loves you.”

“Think I love her too. But I don’t know if I want to marry her yet. Do you even want to get married yourself?”

Logan thought for a moment. “You know what? I actually do this time.”

Eduard hated how that crushed him. He loved Lyubov! He wasn’t supposed to feel anything for Logan anymore! He’d buried everything, squashed his feelings down until he could pretend they weren’t there, but every time Logan kissed Hunapo before surprising them with a tickle, or looked at
them like they were the most precious being in the universe, there was that prickle of jealousy, the one Eduard either overthought and guilted over, or ignored completely.

He just wanted to get over him.

Things would be so much easier if he could.

“Then you should ask them,” he said, defeated, “go ask and get married and do that whole family thing. Get your happily ever after. You deserve it.”

…

Eduard hadn’t quite known what he’d been expecting, but he knew what he’d hoped for: that Hunapo would say ‘no’ and that would be the end of it. He didn’t want them to break up, despite his feelings, because he knew better than to try and pretend they weren’t a good couple.

And that was what really hurt: Hunapo was better for Logan than he could ever be, and Logan deserved Hunapo instead of him.

Chapter End Notes

The song Lyubov sings is These Days by Nico.
A Bottle Of Your Finest Cyanide

Chapter Notes

Hi! We're back! And with another marathon chapter. A very sad, marathon chapter. Warnings for explicit abuse, physical, emotional and sexual, drug mentions, death and injury. It's That Chapter. Still, hope you enjoy!

...

Leandro - Romano
Lars - Netherlands
Reilly is my cursed OzNZ lovechild. Max is Finn's.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Eduard was 21, he watched his best friend, the man he loved, get married to someone else.

He spent his graduation trying to celebrate, and stop staring at Logan and Hunapo hugging and smiling and that ring on their finger glinting in the summer sun. Logan’s grandmother’s ring, that Eduard had wished could be on his hand instead.

Mr and Mrs Cooper were there too, with the girls, Jem having completed her own first year of uni. Layla was sobbing as she held onto him, whilst Logan was talking to Mr Kirkland, holding Harry to his chest.

“At least you won’t have to deal with him anymore,” Eduard said to the man he’d recognised as Logan’s long-suffering lecturer, once Layla had disappeared to fuss over Hunapo.

His gown was too short for him, coming just above the wrists and ankles. Layla had offered to alter it, but he told her it was fine. She was busy enough with her ‘real’ family, and it always felt weird asking her for help, even though she would do anything for him, and vice versa.

He’d left Anton and Eliisabet a voicemail telling them he’d graduated with a first. They hadn’t replied, let alone shown up to the ceremony. Not that he’d been looking out for them. They weren’t in his life anymore, and he hadn’t missed them these last three years.

“No, just like Mr Jones won’t be dealing with you correcting him all the time,” Mr Kirkland smiled as he said that, though.

Eduard laughed, torn between self-conscious and proud. “Alfred’s often wrong.”

“I know, but his ego is fragile. Any longer with you, so I hear, and it’d be gone.”

“Guilty as charged. I’m sure someone’ll take my torch soon enough.”

“There’s always one.”

“Now you can find a boss to do that to instead,” said Logan, “in some… computer company.”
“That’ll get me fired, Logan,” Eduard sighed dramatically, “I guess my days of being an overconfident little shit are over. How will I manage?”

“You’ll always find a way to be an overconfident little shit,” Logan nudged him.

“So will you,” said Hunapo, having escaped Layla’s arms, and was now clinging to Logan’s waist. And Eduard, with a sinking stomach, found his pleasant conversation ruined.

Eduard tried to be enthusiastic about his new flat, he really did.

He was living alone now! No more Logan polishing off the last of the bread he’d made himself, or noisily fucking Hunapo in the next room! No more having to watch gruesome nature documentaries when he was trying to eat. No more Harry waking him up in the morning banging on pots and pans, no more babysitting duty!

No more Harry and Logan.

Once Eduard had moved all of his stuff out, he sat in his kitchen and stared for a long while at his new microwave. He was doing well for himself, he thought. He’d managed to find a job fairly quickly, at a software company. He had high marks and extracurriculars under his belt, not to mention his native language and a few others besides. He was as smart as he’d ever been, despite everything.

And yet he stared at the microwave.

Maybe he should call Logan. He’d make the place a little less silent, at least. But he was busy, probably. With his pregnant fiancé and 5-year-old daughter. He had bigger things to worry about.

Maybe he should call Lyubov instead. She only lived a block away. His keyboard was lying unused in his room - they could duet together like they always did, put some coffee on, cuddle up in front of a film, maybe. But she’d already helped with moving in, he didn’t want to bother her more. She deserved a break from him, anyway.

He could call-

No. No, he could stare at the microwave. Let time pass him by until he had work to go to, not bothering anyone by constantly being clingy.

Just stare at the microwave.

The doorbell went off.

He shook himself out of his microwave trance and got up to answer it. He opened up the door and froze at the sight, hand clamped tight around the doorknob.

Gunner Densen looked back at him with a hopeful smile.

He was older, of course. Same meticulously untamed hair, same eyes, but he didn’t look like a kid anymore. Eduard had a lot of questions buzzing around in his head- How do you know where I live? What are you trying to do? What’s with the cake tin? - but only one came out.
“What are you doing here?”

“I live around the corner. I, uh… I saw you moving in. I couldn’t believe it at first; it’s been ages, but… I don’t know, I wanted to welcome you. So, uh… pastries.” He held out the cake tin. “For you. Homemade.”

Eduard stared in disbelief.

Then he shut the door in his face.

He paced around the kitchen, heart racing. He didn’t know for how long. Maybe he cried, maybe he didn’t, who knew? He sank into his seat, tried to catch his breath for a moment. He focused on the microwave.

Gunner. Around the corner. He knew where he lived, he wanted to welcome him, maybe to be back in his life. Not a chance. No.

He went back to the door and looked through the peephole. Gunner was out of sight, but he could be anywhere. He could be just around the corner, or in the corridor, just out of sight. He could be right in the goddamn elevator, on the stairs, wherever.

He cracked the door open and looked either way, like he was crossing the road. No Gunner. Just a cake tin on his welcome mat, and a scrap of paper on it.

E,

I’m sorry if I hurt you. I could have been a better boyfriend, I know. We were kids and we were stupid- me especially- but I understand if you never want to talk to me again. I’m a terrible person but I really do want to make things right. You were the best thing that ever happened to me and not a day goes by when I don’t regret what happened to us. I want to be better.

G.

Eduard leaned against the door frame and turned the sheet around. An address and a phone number.

Call when you need me. You can keep the cake tin too! Call it a housewarming gift!

He took both into his kitchen. He read and reread the letter. And then he ripped it up and threw it away. He wasn’t quite sure what to do with the pastries, though. He didn’t want them, and he didn’t want to return them, but it felt like a waste to throw them away. He opened the tin. They did look good. Perfectly brown, pecan nuts on top. Fuck him for remembering his favourite.

Hunapo stepped into Harry’s new bedroom with a cup of tea in either hand. The wood floor was covered in tarpaulin and masking tape for the time being, just while Logan was painting the walls. Harry was at their side, sucking her thumb and watching her daddy paint the walls light yellow. She was getting bigger every day. Her hair only seemed to get messier. Layla had had to teach Logan how to plait it for her but he was quickly becoming a pro. If the aquarium job fell through, he could always become a stylist.

“Good progress.”

“We can start moving the furniture in by Thursday, I reckon.” Logan hopped down from his
stepladder and took one of the mugs off Hunapo’s hands. “Thanks, mate.”

“Happy to help. Want me to do some?”

“No. You’re pregnant. Your job is to rest and look pretty. You’re only doing half of it.”

“Fire me then.”

Logan laughed and kissed them gently. Harry made exaggerated vomiting noises.

“Sorry, lemon.” He crouched down to her height. “You like the new house?”

She nodded. “There’s a cat in the garden!”

He gasped. “Really?”

“She’s huge!” She spread her arms as wide as they’d go to demonstrate. “And she’s got orange hair, like a punkin! And she let me pat her!”

“That’s amazing!”

“Yeah! She was really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really fluffy. Can I help painting, peas?”

“Don’t see why not.”

Hunapo winced. “Logie, are you sure that’s a good i-“

“It’s fine! You’re a smart girl, aren’t you, lemon?”

Harry nodded. “I’m very smart.”

He chuckled and handed her the paintbrush. “Here. Don’t put too much on the-“

She plunged it handle-deep into the bucket of paint.

“…brush.” He took it off her and scraped it off the sides. “A bit less than that. Like so. And you only need to dip it in just at the end. See?”

“And then you put it on the wall!”

“Yes! Clever girl! Go on, give it a try.”

She painted the wall haphazardly, mostly just stabbing it with the brush.

“Good technique.” He took the paintbrush off her before she did it any damage. “You’ll have paintings up in the Louvre in no time.”

She furrowed her eyebrows and indignantly put her hands on her hips— which is to say, barely south of her armpits. “Why would I put my paintings in the loo?”

Hunapo had to duck out of the room to laugh.
Eduard didn’t realise he’d been ignoring his phone for a whole week until Lyubov came to his door. She didn’t look angry, not really. She didn’t do angry. She just looked worried. When he opened the door for her, she stood there, looking closely, studying his face. Just for a moment. And then he let her in.

She walked past him into his flat. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah.” He wasn’t sure if it was a question or a pleasantry.

“You haven’t been answering your phone.”

“Busy with work.” Eduard was a good liar. You didn’t grow up with his parents without growing a mile-wide cunning streak.

“Babe, have you been sleeping?”

“Course I have.”

“You look tired.”

“Will you stop worrying about me?”

“Well, you’re not bloody doing it, are you?”

Eduard bit at a hangnail. “There’s nothing to worry about. I’m fine. Just working hard. I work from home a lot. I lose track of time. Sorry for not calling, I guess.”

“You guess?”

He sighed. “Sorry for not calling. You want some coffee?”

Running a hand through her hair, she sighed and sat down. “Sure.” Eduard busied himself filling the kettle. “I just… Ed, sometimes I can’t tell if you’re isolating yourself or you just don’t like me.”

“Lyubov, of course I like you.” He switched the kettle on and rested his hand on her shoulder. “I… you’re amazing. You’re kind and funny and you always bring twice as many bags to the supermarket as you need and you have an amazing voice, and somehow it sounds even better when you sing in the shower.”

She smiled down at the table, fingering the grain of the wood. “Your bathroom has good acoustics.”

“And you notice things like that.” He kissed the top of her head and got back to making the coffee.

“So you agree you’re isolating yourself.”

“No! I just… have lots of work.” He dumped grains into the filter.

“Nobody works as much as you do.”

“I’m not isolating myself.”

“I’m not blind. Tell me what’s wrong.”

The kettle finished boiling. He made her her coffee. “Nothing.”

“Is it about Logan and Huna?”
“I-I-“ Had she guessed? Did she know? God, he was an awful boyfriend. Why was she still with him?

“He’s your best friend. You’re scared he’s gonna drop you now he’s getting married. My mum hasn’t spoken to her best friend since she was her maid of honour. Like, thirty years ago. She told me. It happens.”

He was silent for a moment. “What do you know?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just… butt out, Lyubov. I’m not your goddamn pity project. Okay?”

“Of course you aren’t! You’re my boyfriend! I don’t like you not being happy!”

“You don’t like not having someone to make you feel better about yourself.”

“Eddie, please-“

“What? Am I wrong?” He slammed the two mugs onto the table. “I don’t need you to hold my hand. You just want someone to take care of.”

“Yes, you’re wrong. Jesus, is it so hard for you to get that people care about you?”

“Stop trying to analyse me!”

She shot to her feet, face to face with him. “Then stop isolating yourself!”

“I’m not! I don’t have to be with you every second of the day!”

“I just want a little confirmation you still exist sometimes!” Her voice softened. “Ed, I love you, but I swear… sometimes you’re like a total stranger.”

“Well maybe I should be.”

“What?”

“Maybe I should be.” For a moment, there was clarity. “Maybe you should go, Lyubov.”

“Are you…”

“Yes, I’m breaking up with you. Just… get out. Okay?”

“Eddie-“

“Please.”

She squeezed his arms. He just stepped back.

“Eduard, you’re not in a good way. You’re saying things you don’t mean.”

“I mean it.”

She sighed. She wasn’t one to lose her temper. Especially not at him. She always did tiptoe. In the silence of his kitchen, he could hear her count under her breath in Ukrainian as she turned away from him. один, два, три, чотири, п’ять. He wished she’d yell at him like he deserved. Burn the bridge for him.
Instead, she just turned back and looked at him like a disappointed mother. “Ed, you’re acting like a
dick.”

“Maybe I am a dick.”

“You’re not. You’re a really sweet man, and you’re not acting like yourself.”

“Maybe you got the wrong idea of me, then.”

“I didn’t. Fuck’s sake, I know you. You’re Eduard. You’re repressed, and tense, and socially
anxious, if not straight up inept, and stubborn, and you can’t talk about your feelings. But you’re not
mean.”

“Just get out of my goddamn flat, Lyubov.”

She looked like she was about to say something, and then she didn’t. She stood up and walked out,
leaving Eduard on his own. He stared across the table at the microwave and tried not to cry.

“You’re bringing Lou, right?”

Eduard winced at that. Right, wedding plans. He was involved, was he?

He turned to face Logan and shrugged.

“I’m assuming you’re going together, right? Maybe she’ll catch the boo-kay.”

“Bouquet. And I guess we can, as friends.”

“Oh? Oh… oh my God I’m so sorry, Eddie!”

He waved him off. “It’s fine, it’s fine. We just… we went our separate ways.”

“Things seemed to be going well between you!”

“Yeah. I don’t know. I guess I might not have been as ready for a relationship as I thought. Also I
kept using lines from mum’s romance novels and they grossed her out,” he joked half-heartedly.

“Mate!”

It got a laugh out of both of them, a real one. Logan, as gross as he was, liked to pretend those books
didn’t exist. “It’s fine, though. Everything’s fine.”

“When?”

“A few days ago. A little before Halloween.”

Logan blinked. “Mate, we’re well into December.”

“Oh. That’s more than a few days ago.”

“You should have said something. We could’ve… I don’t know, had a night off to take your mind
off it. It’s really been that long?”
“Guess so. I’ve sort of lost track of time, sorry.”

Logan studied his face. He was trying to smile, but not succeeding. His eyes didn’t quite look at him, out of focus, distracted by something. When they were little that meant the gears in his head were going at top speed, thinking about computers or circuits or the facts in his big books. Nowadays, that just meant Eduard was in a bad way. Stuck in his own head. He didn’t have such an active mind anymore. Logan always worried about him - it was always just there in his mind’s periphery - but Eduard couldn’t stand being fussed over. He was independent to a fault. He seemed to believe that hiding things made it easier for everyone else. Instead, Logan felt like he was watching his best friend fall apart and all he could do was watch.

He’d been like this a while. He couldn’t be sure when it had come about- or at least, when it had got worse- but he’d estimate about when they graduated. Maybe living alone was taking its toll on him. Maybe, for some bizarre reason, he missed having school work to do. He wasn’t sure. But he felt that familiar feeling, like a stone in his chest, that Eduard was growing apart from him.

He wasn’t sure what he could do to help this time.

“We’re still friends, though,” said Eduard, “and we’ll be alright by the wedding, so invite her. It’d feel weird, the four of us not being together.” He tried to smile.

“We’ll see how you feel a little bit down the line, okay?” he added her name to the list of guests, pencilling in a question mark. “Now, the big news of the day.”

Eduard couldn’t help being nervous wondering just what the hell Logan was about to say. Hunapo couldn’t get pregnant again, could they? Two at a time? No, of course not. Call yourself a doctor’s son, Eduard.

“There’s something I want to ask you,” he smiled nervously.

Eduard stopped working. Where was he going with this? He was getting married! And as much as Logan telling him he- it would’ve been a thirteen-year-old dream, but he would never do that to his friend.

And he wasn’t sure he would want to be around Logan, either.

“Will you,” Logan clasped his hands together, “be my best man?”

“Logan, are you-” he processed what he’d said, better, but certainly not fun, “oh, yeah, yeah sure.” He swallowed. Being involved in the wedding. Making a speech in front of so many people.

“Course I will.”

Layla sternly told Logan he couldn’t wear a t-shirt and jeans to his own wedding, and drove him and Eduard into town to get rented suits. Australian weddings weren’t as formal as elsewhere, but, at the very least, Logan needed to look smart.

This was not helping Eduard’s feelings in any way, but he was happy to watch Logan model various outfits.

Hunapo proved a little tricker to dress, and for a good few weeks, no one was entirely sure what they
should wear, least of all Hunapo themselves. Eventually, after much discussion, Layla presented
them with an outfit she’d made specially: wedding dress on the bottom, tux on top. The dress part
was also made to accommodate their ever-increasing baby bump. When presented with the outfit,
Hunapo hugged Layla and didn’t let go for a good five minutes.

They’d started staying in more as they’d gotten bigger, partially because of pregnancy discomfort,
but mostly because they couldn’t stand being referred to as female. Eduard tried his best to put his
feelings aside and keep them company while Logan was at work, if he had the time. And wasn’t
feeling too sad about the whole thing.

The two of them mainly watched the same old films, occasionally branching out, and eating
whatever strange combinations of food Hunapo was craving. Eduard was glad he could never get
pregnant, he decided as he watched Hunapo pour hot sauce on pavlova whilst crying over Boba
Fett’s death.

Still, that wasn’t as horrifying as when they’d tear up and ramble about how excited they were to get
married, how much they loved Logan, and how excited they were to be a parent. Not just to little
Cooper-Davies (or Davies-Cooper, as they insisted) but Harry too.

That hurt Eduard most, he had to admit. He’d always considered Harry his daughter, in a way. For
six years, he’d kid himself that he and Logan were raising Harry together, that she saw him as her
second dad. The fact that he was little more than a glorified uncle was something of a cruel reality
check.

Eduard sat at the bar, watching Logan and Hunapo dance together. Most of the guests were dancing,
if they weren’t chatting or getting drunk. Not the way Eduard was getting drunk. They were getting
drunk to dance badly or horrify Manya, Harry and Allirea. Eduard was getting drunk in the hopes
that he would stop being sad at his best friend’s wedding. This wasn’t about him.

Even Harry asking to dance on his feet couldn’t cheer him up. He forced himself to step onto the
dancefloor for her sake, but as soon as she got bored and went to get herself more Pringles, he went
back to the bar.

He’d talked to Hunapo’s parents, Brett and Kaia Davies, and it really explained a lot about Hunapo.
They were lovely, if a little eccentric, both in film. Kaia was an indie director and Brett was a
screenplay writer. They’d won a few local awards, back in New Zealand, and talking to them almost
made him forget why he was so unhappy.

Except he could see Hunapo in both their faces.

He joked that he was drinking for Hunapo too, which was his excuse out the way and, after an in-
depth discussion about cinematography, he congratulated them and got back to destroying his liver.
He didn’t want Brett and Kaia having to spend their whole evening trapped in conversation with him
when there were so many more interesting people in the room.

People who were actually happy.

Hunapo still had crumbs on their face from where Logan had slammed them into the wedding cake,
and Logan had icing on his lip from where they’d returned the favour. He’d even gone to the trouble
of writing his own vows; Eduard had never seen him go to the trouble of writing anything. He
tended to keep things stored in his head, where he would often forget it. He loved them. And they loved him too. They deserved each other.

Eduard had done his own writing too, of course. Best man speech. He cleared his throat with a glass of wine, stood up, and tried to be happy for them. He told the guests his stupid anecdotes. He told them how Logan beat up a boy who called him names when they were seven and how he had to go to A&E when he jokingly dared him to set fire to his hair when they were fourteen. A slice of it. None of the important stuff. He wasn’t fond of the idea of telling a load of strangers how much they’d really been through. How he kept at his side when he was at his worst. How he found him living in a shitty hotel room and just about saved his life. Logan knew all that, and that was enough.

Lyubov had tried to talk to him several times, and, as long as she didn’t ask Eduard how he was feeling, they got along fine. It was also a relief to apologise for how he’d treated her and make up. He’d been putting it off for far too long. She forgave him, of course she did. They were friends again, and when conversation turned to music, it was just like old times. He’d missed her.

But Lyubov had gone home early, and Eduard was left alone with his sad, sad thoughts.

“You did good up there,” Logan slapped his back, pulling him into a hug. “I know that can’t have been fun so… well done.”

“I thought it was sweet,” added Hunapo, on his other side. Great, just what Eduard needed.

“Glad you liked it. It doesn’t really scratch the surface. I mean, Logan, mate, I love you. You’re my best friend. I… I would ignore me right now, I’m kinda drunk. Just… look after him, alright, Huna?”

“I will. Promise.”

The happy couple wandered off to talk to some cousin. Eduard watched them from his barstool. Logan squeezed them around the waist and kissed the top of their head. He quickly turned his attention towards the bartender.

“Get me a bottle of your finest cyanide, please.”

“What?”

“I said vodka. Doesn’t have to be your finest. Just… whatever’ll make me forget things. Your most nail-varnish-remover-y vodka, please.”

Several drinks later, the party was still strong and Eduard still hated himself. He watched them all dancing and kissing and chatting. Not one person in the room was alone. Even the photographer was chatting up some friend of Hunapo’s. Hunapo themself was pinned against a wall, making out with their husband. Their face was between his hands. They could have been one person right there, a single entity. They pulled apart for a moment. From across the room, he couldn’t see their faces, but he knew how Logan was looking at them. Like they were the most beautiful thing on earth. Like the whole venue could collapse around them and Logan wouldn’t even notice.

Eduard didn’t know how he felt. He was bitter, sure. But Logan deserved them. He really did. They made him laugh. And they were a good person. A happy one, too, without all the baggage Logan would have to deal with if he’d ever dated Eduard. Like Lyubov had had to deal with. He and
Logan— that was a dream. That was a dumb fantasy from when Eduard was a kid. It was never going to happen. He’d always known that, really. Some people just aren’t the kind you can love, and that was the way it was. So what?

He got the bartender’s attention.

“However many bottles of whatever, please. I gotta go.”

“I mean, I should’ve seen it coming. We were never meant to get together.” He almost spilt champagne on the backseat of the cab, earning a glare from the driver that turned to a look of sympathy when Eduard started sobbing. “But now… he’s… he’s married and happy and- and-” He punched the seat next to him. “And I’m gonna die alone. I mean, why would anyone love me? Why would he love me? Have you met me? I had this girlfriend once. And, fuck, she was so lovely. You know those people that are like, really, really lovely? Bitches next to her. She was… inordinately lovely. And I loved her, but I was shit at it. And she deserved better. And anyone would deserve better. And he deserves… fucking Huna, I guess. Lovely Huna. And their lovely… lovely husband. Lovely, lovely, lovely.” He downed more of his champagne. “And I don’t deserve shit. Don’t deserve any of them. I don’t even deserve you.”

“Thanks?”

“I should’ve said something. Before he went and got actually fucking married. But- but he would never feel that- that way about me either, right?” He hiccupped. “I’d just destroy our friendship and- and- and that means everything to me.” Eduard finished the bottle and held it in his arms. “He means ev-everything to me. You think I’m unlovable?”

“I’m your taxi driver, mate.”

He pulled his phone out of his pocket, and stared at it blankly, the gears in his brain in overdrive.

“You think I should get over him?”

The cabbie shrugged. “Why the hell are you asking me? I’m just driving your drunk arse home.”

“Oh yeah. Thanks, man. I appreciate it. You’re nice.”

“You’re paying me.”

“Yeah. But still. You seem nice. What’s your name?”

“Leandro.”

“You ever been in love, Leandro?”

“Uh, I guess. I dunno. It’s fuckin’ complicated.”

“Word of advice, Leandro Taxiguy,” he slurred, “Don’t bother. It’s stupid. Love is stupid and he likes other people ‘cause you were too much of a bitch to tell him. Dunno why I bother. Probably if I ever get married it’s gonna end up like my parents anyway. All… doing the same sudoku puzzle in two different copies of the same paper and sleeping in two different beds. Ha! Staying together for a kid you don’t even like.”
“Do you need a tissue? Or… a therapist, maybe?”

“Fuck therapy, I have…” He gestured vaguely at the empty bottle. “Ha! Nothing, ‘cause it’s empty. Wait.” He pulled a whole other bottle out of his bag, this one of vodka, and started chugging it. “I’m a master thief.”

“Did you steal that?”

“No.” He put his legs up on the seats next to him. “I was the best man. I’m allowedaaaaaaaaaaa the drinks.”

“I don’t think that’s a rule.”

“What are you, a wedding?” Eduard looked at his phone. “Hey, can we turn around? I- I’d like to go not-home right now. Somewhere else.”

“Err- sure.”

“I have the address here, somewhere. Be-before I decide it’s a bad idea.”

Of course it was raining. It always was at times like this, and other times because, well, that’s England for you. Eduard just let it soak him, running down his face and turning his suit to lead. Yet he was still so drunk he had to lean against the door frame to stop himself falling on his face. Like when he didn’t realise there was a closed gate in his way.

He rang the doorbell before his common sense told him to run away.

Gunner answered the door. He looked a little tired, but his eyes lit up when he saw Eduard.

“Eddie! Hey, what brings you here so-“

And all at once, Eduard’s lips were on his and his arms were around his neck and he was forgetting and pretending and could almost kid himself into being happy.

Gunner stumbled back, the wind knocked out of him, and grinned. “I missed you too.”

“I knew you’d come round.” Gunner held him close, almost possessively. Eduard was too drunk and sad to care. He couldn’t tell Gunner exactly why he was here - that he was just using him to get over Logan, and the guilt told him to not concentrate on Gunner’s behaviour. He was too sad to care anyway.

It was warm, in his arms, just what Eduard needed after being out in the cold and rain. The sweat on his shoulder froze on his skin, and he buried himself in the duvet. If he closed his eyes, he could pretend he was in Logan’s arms, and that made him feel terrible.

So he pretended to not feel terrible.
“I still love you,” said Gunner, kissing his forehead. “I never stopped loving you. All this time, when we were apart, I felt so horrible. I… I fucked up badly. It’s not gonna be like that this time round.”

Somewhere, in the deep, hazy recesses of his mind, Eduard was still scared of Gunner, screaming at the rest of him to run and get out of there. But it was buried, under the misery and self-loathing and maybe he didn’t care what happened to him. Didn’t care that Gunner was probably lying. It was a distraction. It was a pair of arms to hold him. And really, whatever he did, it was what he deserved, wasn’t it?

“I’m not gonna let you go this time,” Gunner continued, “it’s just gonna be me and you and it’ll be good, I promise.”

Hunapo gave birth to Reilly a few weeks after the wedding.

This baby was a lot healthier than Harry had been, loud and chubby and a whopping 8 pounds, compared to Harry’s 4, despite Hunapo and Laura being about the same size. Which Hunapo made perfectly clear in various threats to Logan.

Eduard stayed outside for most of the birth, letting Mr Cooper doze off on his shoulder. At some point, he popped home for some sleep, seeing as Hunapo had been there for 14 hours with little in the way of babies to show for it. Eight hours later, he was back and Hunapo was still giving birth. After 24 hours of blood, sweat, tears, and something called an episiotomy, Logan had stopped threatening to throw up, and passed Hunapo their new baby.

They’d already decided on Reilly Kaia Davies Cooper for a name. As Kaia managed to show up to the birth, coming all the way from New Zealand, she got to have a grandchild named after her, a rule both families could agree on. Mr and Mrs Davies had been staying with them for a few weeks, keeping Hunapo company while Logan was at work, telling them what to expect. Though, judging by Hunapo’s face, nothing could’ve prepared them for Reilly.

Everyone felt a lot more confident holding this one once they’d been washed, checked, and wrapped up in more of Layla’s knitted blankets to keep out the February cold.

Harry, in particular, adored the new baby, constantly rambling about how much she loved her sister, kissing their forehead at every opportunity, and showing them all her toys. As far as she was concerned, Reilly was the best baby ever, despite the constant crying and pooping.

Eduard, however, decided there were enough people in Reilly’s life and they wouldn’t be needing him as much as Harry had.

Gunner really had cleaned his act up. Same cocky grin and spiky hair, but he’d grown up. Mellowed out over the last few years. He genuinely seemed to care about Eduard this time round. He was affectionate, but kept the affection indoors. Even when his self-loathing faded itself into the background with the rest of it, he found Gunner was actually not all that bad. Hyperactive, sure, but he was a sweet guy, really. Had he always been this nice? Maybe he’d just been more sensitive as a
“How was uni, then?” They’d both silently agreed not to talk about what happened in sixth form. That was behind them.

“Fine, yeah. I stayed with Logan and Harry. It wasn’t Cambridge, but I think I would’ve been out of my depth there.”

“Probably. Bunch of posh people.”

“Yeah. And it was good to have friends there.” He still sort of regretted missing the deadlines sometimes, but he supposed he’d still be under his parents’ cruel spell if he had gone.

“You had that girlfriend, right?”

“Lyubov. Yeah.”

“Why’d you break up?”

“Wasn’t working out.”

“Well-” He nudged him affectionately. “You’ve got me now.”

“That I do.”

“Can I ask you something?” Hunapo gently lowered baby Reilly into the same moses basket that had carried every other Cooper, and let them sleep off their tantrum. They looked at the banana-covered highchair and decided to postpone dealing with that shit.

Reilly had only gotten more boisterous as they got older, and, at nearly a year old, they had only gotten more powerful with the ability to walk. Logan was terrified. Harry had never been this much of a handful, and he had to appreciate that. 16-year-old him would not have survived raising Reilly.

When he complained to Layla, she told him Reilly was nowhere near as bad as he had been, but she tended to be biased towards her grandchildren.

Logan looked up from the newspaper he’d been pretending to read in the hopes that Hunapo wouldn’t make him clean the high chair. “Yeah, sure, what’s up?”

“You… and Eddie, huh?”

He raised an eyebrow. “What about us?”

Hunapo played with their hands, sitting down next to him. “You’ve always been close, right?”

Logan thought about it. Until recently, yeah, they had. Best friends. Like brothers. But Eduard seemed to be avoiding him now. Had ever since the engagement. Logan didn’t know what he’d done, but he remembered the last time it had happened.

“Do you… like him?”
“Course I do. He’s my best friend.”

“No, I mean, you know, romantically speaking?”

Logan blinked. “I, uh…”

“It’s okay if you do. I’m not gonna get jealous about it. I just wanna know.”

He pushed his hand through his hair. “Look, okay, we’re married now, I should be honest. Yeah. I do sort of have… feelings for him. Kind of. Somewhere.”

Hunapo raised their eyebrows.

“Fine, I’ve been in love with him since I was twelve. I thought he was straight for years so I never brought it up, and I only found out he wasn’t because his shitty boyfriend outed him, and then when they broke up I couldn’t say anything because he was taking a break from relationships- I mean, you can’t blame him, Gunner was a real asshole- and by the time he was ready, bang, Lou’s in the picture. But none of that matters. Like, you’re my spouse, you don’t have anything to worry about. You come first, always. I mean, he doesn’t even feel the same way.”

“He knows?”

“Well. Not exactly. But he probably would have said something by now.”

“Eduard would have said something? Same Eduard who sprained his wrist and didn’t tell anyone until your mum noticed? That Eduard?”

“You… you make a fair point.”

“And also the Eduard who left our wedding without saying goodbye?”

“Most people dislike going to weddings straight after a breakup.”

“They broke up in October.”

“After being a thing for almost three years,” Logan pointed out.

“And you’re his best friend. And he left without a word. Put two and two together, babe.”

“He’s… distant, sometimes. He gets sad, he isolates himself, it’s nothing personal. He’s been bad lately. Since… oh, fuck. Since we got engaged.”

“See?”

“Well- I mean- so what if he does like me back? You’re the one I married. I’m obviously not gonna do anything. I mean…” He gestured at them and Reilly.

Hunapo laughed and kissed his cheek. “It’s fine with me if you do.”

“Wait, really?”

“Course. I’m not the jealous type, you know that. And, hey, maybe I fancy him a little myself.”

Logan’s eyebrows shot up. “How much dick do you need?”

“A constant supply. And he’s nice.”
“He is nice. Do you think we hurt him?”

“That’s not our fault.”

“Yeah, but… yeah, you’re right. Still kinda feel bad.”

“Yeah, me too. But it’s fine. I mean, how were we to know?”

He nodded. “I really missed him. So, you think the three of us could be a thing? If he was cool with that.”

Hunapo smiled, “I hope so.

—

“Is he actually gonna be down for this?”

Hunapo shrugged. “Man, I don’t know. It’s Ed. Who’s to say?”

Logan nodded. “Mr Sexual Repression himself. He got more action with his hand in uni than I’ve had with people my whole life.”

“Didn’t he have a girlfriend for most of it?”

“Yeah, but he’s awful at initiating anything. Like I said. Mr Sexual Repression. You’d get it if you met his parents.”

“I’m not sure I wanna, from what you told me,” Hunapo sipped their milkshake, stroking Reilly in their pushchair. Both parents were praying Reilly wouldn’t decide to projectile vomit all over the nice cafe they’d gone to. Again. Every time they went out, as if on cue, Reilly would either vomit, poop everywhere, or scream the place down.

“I’m not sure you do either. Eddie cut them off for a reason.”

Hunapo nodded and glanced down at their shake. “Sounds like a fun upbringing.”

“Yeah, spent as much time as he could round ours. Not that I minded, of course. Speaking of, hey Eddie!” He spied Eduard from across the cafe and waved. Eduard gave a simple nod back, making his way towards them.

“Afternoon,” he mumbled, “what’s up?”

Logan smiled at him. “Not much, just wanna catch up. Busy?”

“Oh? Yeah- yeah very busy. With work. Lots of work.” He pulled up a chair. “Sorry for not… calling, or texting or anything.”

Logan smiled a rather sad smile at that. “It happens. Glad to catch up now. So, how have you been? How’s life and stuff?” Hunapo raised an eyebrow at him.

“Good, good. Work’s going great. How’s, uh… marriage?”

“Great.” Logan remembered him leaving the wedding early. Maybe he shouldn’t get into it, no
matter how much he wanted to take the opportunity to shower Huna in praise. “We’ve got routine and everything, it’s wild.”

“If he snores too loudly,” he confided to Huna, “Just flick him in the face until he stops.”

“I think,” Logan pointed out, “That can be construed as “waking me up”.”

“Stops you snoring, though.”

“That it does.”

“By the way-” Eduard wiped his glasses on his cardigan. “-uh, I’ve started seeing someone. In a romantic way.”

Logan and Hunapo exchanged a quick look.

“Have you, now?” Logan forced a cheeky grin. “Do tell.”

“Uh… well, he’s a… he’s a guy. Cop. He lives not far from me, and, uh…”

Logan couldn’t help but worry. He may have been awkward, but surely he was capable of telling him about his new boyfriend without all the stammering. He hadn’t been like this with Lyubov.

“It’s Gunner.”

Logan dropped his fork on the floor, too stunned to bother picking it up again.

Hunapo blinked. “Sorry, what?”

Logan was a little less polite about it. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“I know, I know, but… hear me out, okay? He’s different now. He’s better.”

“Are you fucking nuts?”

Hunapo rested their hand on Logan’s arm. Better they all avoided making a scene. “Are you… sure?”

Eduard frowned. “Come on, don’t… don’t worry about it. He’s better. He’s… good. We met a little after I moved into the flat. I had no idea, but he was living right there all this time.”

Logan and Hunapo exchanged glances. “Yeah, what a coincidence.”

“And obviously,” he continued, “I was a little wary at first, for… obvious reasons. But he’s nice. He bakes. He brought me pastries.”

Logan sighed and stirred his coffee. “Bad people can bake.”

“He’s not a bad person. He did bad things, and then he changed. Can you just trust me on this, man?”

“It’s not you I don’t trust, it’s him. I mean, can you honestly say you trust him after what he did? Can you say you feel comfortable around him?”

“Well, if I didn’t, would I be moving in with him?”

Logan didn’t think it was possible to be more terrified. There were a lot of things Eduard had done
just because Gunner had told him to. “Yes!”

Hunapo glanced between the two nervously. Eduard glared at them both, lips tightening when Hunapo put a hand on Logan’s arm to calm him. “Well you’re wrong! Please, can’t you just be happy for me? Things are going well for me and it might not look perfect, but we can’t all have a perfect life.”

Logan blinked. Right, the jealousy. If Gunner found out about that, he was scared to think of what could happen to Eduard. “Ed-”

“He’s changed, and it’s good enough for me.” With a final scowl, he got up and left without ordering, leaving Logan and Hunapo in stunned silence.

“Maybe he has changed?” Hunapo reasoned, holding Reilly close and burping them. They bounced them softly when the baby showed signs of crying, and - the moment they seemed on the verge of sleep - put them down so they could argue in peace. Logan didn’t look too keen on peace, though. He paced the nursery, hands behind his back, storms in his eyes.

“Can you at least take your shoes off if you’re gonna walk all over the carpet?” said Hunapo when he didn’t reply.

He kicked them off. They hit the wall one by one. Reilly whined. “You weren’t there last time Gunner was around. He’s a monster.”

“People change. I mean, they were what, 17, when they broke up? He’s an adult now. He’s probably grown up and learnt how to be in an adult relationship.”

“He forced him into sleeping with him, Huna! You can’t just come back from that!”

“I- okay, yeah, maybe he forgave him too quickly. But he might not be in as much danger as you think, babe.”

“You didn’t see him! You didn’t see what he did to him!” Logan ran his hand through his hair. “He wouldn’t talk to me. He wasn’t… allowed to talk to me, or anyone, or have a life outside Gunner and his parents. You know, his shitty, emotionally abusive, straight-up neglectful parents? Poor guy was caught between these three monsters and trapped. When he and Lyubov started dating, he was so fucking scared. He thought he’d fuck it up, or… I don’t know. Get hurt and abused again. But I was there. I saw what happened to him. Gunner really fucked him up, Huna.”

They grabbed him by the shirt and gently dragged him out before he woke up Reilly. “I know. And… and I know he’s done some awful things. But Ed’s a grown man, Logan, capable of making his own decisions. If he thinks he’s changed-”

“If he thinks he’s changed, he’s being jerked around, and if Gunner thinks he’s gonna get away with it, he’s a dead man.”

“All I’m saying is… have a little faith in Eddie. Okay? He’s a smart man. He can look after himself.”

“That’s not the problem! Gunner has a lotta power over him!”
“Had. He had a lotta power over Eddie as a kid, but he’s an adult now. He’s less naive. He knows what to look out for!”

“So, what? You’re saying this is a good thing? That we just let that cunt back into his life?”

“Yes. No.” They pinched the bridge of their nose. “I don’t know. But I want to believe he’s changed. The alternative is kind of... too scary to think about.”

“Well, fucking think about it! You have to think about it! I can’t not think about it!”

Hunapo bit their lip. “Is there anything we can do about it, though?”

“Kill Gunner and hide the body,” said Logan immediately, like he’d already thought the whole plan through.

“What? No! He’s a cop; you think you can get away with something like that? Or... that Eduard would forgive you?”

Logan rolled his eyes. “Killjoy.”

“You can’t murder anyone. Or do anything to get yourself arrested. Please.”

“But what do I do?” Logan ran his hands through his hair.

Hunapo looked at the ground. “I don’t know. I don’t think there’s anything we can do, and it scares me, so... we just gotta keep him in our lives, look out for him. But, ultimately? There’s nothing else. I’m sorry, Logie, I know this means a lot to you.”

“Course it fucking does. He’s my best friend, and he’s gonna get hurt.” His face crumpled. “He might die.”

“He’s not going to die.”

“But he could!”

“Yeah, him and everyone. Gunner isn’t going to kill him.”

“I really don’t want to take that chance.”

“Look,” said Eduard, straightening out Gunner’s collar, “if you want to convince Logan you’ve changed, you’re gonna have to spend time with him, get him to like you.”

Gunner nodded, but he didn’t look too happy about it. They’d had this conversation several times now, but this was the longest one so far, and the five minutes spent going back and forth in the hall were making them late.

“Come on, babe, you’ve been putting this off for months. I can’t keep making excuses for you. It’s not making you look good,” Eduard pouted, “it’d make me really, really happy.”

Gunner gave a whine. “But he scares me. I’m not comfortable around him. He tried to kill me.”
“You deserved it,” said Eduard bluntly, though his heart spiked. That was the first time either of them had mentioned that. “You hit first.”

He sighed. “I guess, but- man, I don’t like him.”

“Well, he doesn’t like you either, and we need to change that. Dinner together will help that. I’m sure you’ll get along if you give him a chance, you’ve got loads in common.”

Gunner rolled his eyes. “Fine, but you owe me one.”

That stopped Eduard. Where had he heard that before? “I don’t owe you for making an effort with my friends,” he replied shakily, “we aren’t doing this. You don’t ‘owe’ things in a relationship. But if that’s how you feel, I can go alone.” He turned to leave, but Gunner grabbed his wrist, yanking him back and slamming him against the wall.

“No! Don’t go without me!” It hurt. Gunner’s nails were digging into his skin.

“Okay, okay, I won’t. I’m sorry.” He tried to prize him off, scratching at his hand, but he held firm. “Let go.”

Gunner dropped his hand like it was burning hot and stepped back. “Fuck. I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Eduard rubbed his wrist. Jesus, he was like a living, breathing, clamp.

“I didn’t mean it.” He hugged Eduard and buried his face in his shoulder. “I’ll go to your thing. I’m sorry.”

“Gunner, I-”

“I don’t know my own strength.” He pulled away. “It was an accident. I won’t do it again.”

Eduard sighed. “Do you promise?”

“Yes, swear on my life! It’s not gonna happen again. Sorry.”

“Fine, fine, I just- can I go to the bathroom, quickly, before we go?” He wasn’t going to cry, but he needed to stop trembling or Logan would get suspicious.

“Go ahead.”

Eduard rushed upstairs. It wasn’t until he turned on the tap to get himself some water that he saw his wrist- red and covered in marks. Maybe he needed to put on a jumper.

It was actually Hunapo that noticed.

Logan and Gunner were doing most of the talking at dinner - or rather, Logan was interrogating him - leaving Eduard and Hunapo to mostly watch from the sidelines and make sure Logan didn’t punch him while Harry ate her food and looked bored about the whole thing. They’d started off mostly sure they were right about Gunner. Eduard seemed okay with him. He didn’t strike them as scared at all.

But then his sleeve rode up as he was eating.
They said nothing as Eduard pulled at it. They acted casual, wiping Reilly’s face to keep their eyes from drifting to his hand for a closer look. One glance towards Logan confirmed he’d seen nothing as he served dinner, and maybe that was best, for now. They could talk about it afterwards, and find a way to help Eduard and get him outta there.

There was no telling how badly things would go if they brought it up over dinner.

“I take it all back,” Hunapo muttered, leaning against Logan as they washed dishes together. Behind them, Harry was teaching Reilly how to wrestle.

“Girls, no!” Logan prized them apart. “Come on, Harry, I told you: Reilly has little bones! They break easy! You have to be gentle with her.”

Harry nodded, stooping down to give Reilly a hug. “Sorry, Rukka.” Reilly dribbled on her in response.

“Now go play nicely,” Hunapo told them, and Harry carried Reilly off into her room. Logan turned back to them.

“What do you take back?”

“Everything about Gunner and Ed. All of it.”

“How come? I mean, you should. Gunner’s awful; even Harry seems to remember. But why?”

“Did you see Ed’s wrist?” Hunapo gestured in the general area. “Bruised. I don’t trust that.”

Logan almost dropped the plate he was washing. “I’m gonna kill him.”

“No, I’m gonna kill him and I’m not gonna do it quickly.”

Hunapo rubbed his arm. “Babe, we can’t just… kill him. We should call the cops, or something, or-”

“He is the cops! And, chances are, all his little cop buddies will protect him and make sure he can track Eddie down again.”

“Even Eddie’s cousin?”

“Tino’s one guy. A good guy, who hates Gunner’s guts, but Gunner has that slimy charm. He’s good at getting people to like him.”

Hunapo nodded, defeated. “Yeah. He bakes his fucking pastries.”

“We have to kill him.”

They touched his shoulder. “No, we really don’t. There are other ways we can fix this.”

“Like what?”

“Get him out of it.”
“And if we can’t?”

Hunapo didn’t have an answer for that.

Eduard didn’t bother planning another double date again; it didn’t seem worth the fuss. As far as Gunner was concerned, he’d won them over, and there was nothing left to do. He did, however, not get in the way of Eduard seeing Logan, which was enough for Eduard to try and bury every little nagging doubt and worry. If Gunner was okay with him being friends with Logan, then that meant he’d changed for the better.

As he kept trying to explain to Logan when they did hang out.

Eduard flinched at the sound of screaming children, throwing themselves from soft wall to soft wall and occasionally into each other. Logan had had to pull Reilly away from something they’d found on the floor and tried to eat five times now. Eduard took a moment to thank Lyubov for using birth control all three years they’d dated.

Logan filled the kids up with pizza and sent them back into the caged, padded battlefield to get lost in the ballpit before handing Eduard his own greasy slice, eyes fixed on the tape around his glasses. “So,” he began, “you gonna tell me who broke your glasses?”

Eduard winced. “No one. I sat on them when I was looking for them. Happens all the time.”

“Not with you,” he commented. “You’re extra careful with your glasses. Always have been.” Eduard got horribly anxious when he couldn’t see. It made him feel powerless.

“We all have accidents.” Eduard squirmed in his seat, loss of appetite only partially caused by the disgusting pizza.

Logan watched him closely. “You seem to be having a lotta accidents lately.”

“It’s like I can’t see or something.”

“But you can. That’s why you wear glasses.”

“I might need a new prescription.”

Logan put his hand on Eduard’s. “Eddie, is Gunner hurting you?”

“No,” he replied quickly. Logan sighed.

“Would it… make Gunner more comfortable - you know - if I didn’t come round as much?” Eduard nodded shyly, pulling his hand away. Not that Logan cared about Gunner’s feelings; he just didn’t want Eduard punished over it. “But we have to meet up regularly, still. Make sure you’re not having any more… accidents.”

Eduard looked at him in alarm, unable to breathe, but when Logan held his gaze, he just sighed and nodded.
He had a half hour or so of safety. Gunner had his friend over. Or his drug dealer. Or… whatever the hell Lars was.

“Where were you?”

“Out.”

Gunner scowled. “You were out?”

Eduard nodded. “I had to go talk through some work stuff.”

“You work from home.”

“Yeah, but-“

“But?”

“I’m sorry.”

Gunner glanced at Lars. If he thought anything of how he was talking to him, he didn’t show it.

“We’ll talk about this later. Get us some beers.”

Eduard nodded and scuttled off to the kitchen and got them their bottles.

“These are too warm.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Get us some colder ones, you fucking idiot.”

“We don’t have any in the fridge, these were out on the counter.”

“Well, whose fault is that?”

“I-I didn’t know we had any.”

“Yeah, ‘cause you were out again when I bought them. Stop going out so much.”

Eduard nodded. “Sorry. Do you want me to get you some more?”

“No, it’s fine. Just get out of my fucking sight.”

He didn’t have to tell him twice. Eduard hid himself in the bathroom and waited for Lars to leave so he could get the being-knocked-around part over and done with. He could hear their conversation if he was quiet- or at least, he could hear Gunner’s side of it. Lars had a softer voice.


While Lars told him, Eduard sank onto the toilet seat and breathed. He was right. He was an idiot. He deserved whatever Gunner had coming for him.

“Oh, come on, that’s a ripoff. Not even a discount for your poor old pal?”
Eduard knew for a fact that it’d come out of his money. Gunner knew his PIN. Gunner was a spider, with a web that spanned Eduard’s entire life. Every little secret exposed, and every escape route blocked off.

“What if I make it worth your while, huh?”

It wouldn’t be the first time.

“Oh, come on, like that little whore has room to talk! Where d’ya think he was? He won’t mind!”

It was more like Eduard didn’t have the energy to care anymore. Lars could have him.

When Gunner found him, he barely resisted: threw his hands in front of his face, shuffled away to hide behind the sink. It was enough to make sure Gunner didn’t stop after the one punch.

It was a slow process, but by the time Reilly was 3, Eduard had been beaten, guilted and manipulated into cutting Logan out of his life. At least Hunapo was allowed to visit. On occasion.

“That’s one big bruise you got there,” Gunner commented one day, sat on the sofa, drinking a beer. “Logan do that? Nasty guy, isn’t he?”

Hunapo glared at him, scratching their leg with a trainer. “It was one of the kids at work. Being a rugby coach is rough and children are rougher than they look. And they love tackling me.”

Gunner nodded, not taking his eyes off them, daring them to ask about the purple bruises - almost handprints - on Eduard’s throat, just above the hem of his turtleneck. Hunapo held his gaze until he looked away, then turned back to Eduard.

“What do you want to borrow this time?” he asked.

Hunapo glanced at his shelf. Over the years, he’d built up a DVD collection to be proud of: special editions, director’s cuts, all with his figurines and other nerdy merchandise woven in. Eduard wasn’t a materialistic person, but he had his prized possessions. He loved his collection, and his keyboard, and the computer he’d built himself, as if they were his kids.

“Gladiator?” they asked, letting Eduard take the DVD off the shelf for them. He got irritable when anyone touched his collection. “I like a bit of Russell Crowe.”

“He’s handsome,” Eduard agreed, handing Hunapo the DVD. “But remember, if you lose it, or you break it, I kill you.” Hunapo could never tell if he was joking or not.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of her for you.”

“You said that about The Matrix.”

“And I’ll have it back to you the second I find it, swear to god.”

Eduard gave them a stern look. “I can’t believe I’m letting you borrow anything else.”

“It’s because we’re friends, and film brethren. And I won’t lose this one, I promise!”
It was a few hours of safety.

Gunner was fucking Lars, again, over at his place like it made a difference. It meant he had the bed to himself, maybe for the whole night. He could catch up on sleep and not worry about anything. For now.

He wondered if Gunner had ever hurt Lars, or was he just special. Easy to bully. Lars had a choice, though. He was choosing to stay in Gunner’s life, and Eduard doubted it was from self-esteem issues. Maybe he just liked that he bought weed off him.

He wrapped the duvet around him, scratched and picked at his arm, but his skin still crawled. It was hard to find peace here, in this bed. It was Gunner’s favourite place to hurt him. And he didn’t even see it that way: not hurting, just taking what he was owed.

He heard the door open, and shut his eyes tightly. So much for getting sleep.

Gunner staggered into the room, not bothering to be quiet. That usually meant trouble for Eduard. He continued to fake sleep. It never worked, but his body couldn’t not do anything to defend himself.

Gunner ran a hand over his thigh.

“Not working late, huh?” he slurred in his ear, “what- what a coincidence. Though you’d get the bed to yourself?”

Please, please not tonight. He’d already been with Lars; was that not enough for him?

A wandering hand proved otherwise.

“Nice to see you waiting here for me.” He kissed his neck. “Come on, I know you’re pretending. It hurts me, when you ignore me. Avoid me. D’you not like me?”

“Gunner, please, I’m tired.”

“Not what I asked.” He fiddled with the buckle of his belt, then the waist of Eduard’s trousers.

“Please-”

“You’re my boyfriend; it’s what you do. Now shhh. Just lie down.”

The fact that Eduard was sobbing, burying his face in the pillow, in pain, it didn’t matter to Gunner. The fingers grabbing at his hair matched the feeling of cockroaches on his arms. He’d long since learnt to give up on fighting back. It was easier to do this without the bruises.

And when it was over, he made sure to keep his crying as silent as possible.

“He’s not looking good, not last time I checked,” Hunapo confessed, glancing around to make sure
that bastard wasn’t listening in. After dropping Reilly and Harry off for their first day of the new school year, they’d decided to pop round and check on Eduard, having not heard from him for two weeks or so. Gunner’s flat wasn’t even in sight yet, but Hunapo didn’t trust him to not be sneaking around. He put them on edge.

They heard Logan sigh on the other end of the line. “Huna, what are we gonna do?”

“I don’t know, Logie. I can’t talk to him without Gunner being there; we can’t just bust him out without Gunner retaliating, and presumably getting us arrested; and I really don’t know what calling the police would do. Maybe we should talk to Tino.”

“Yeah, he should know. He’s just as reckless as me, though. And he really, really cares about Eddie. Maybe we can both kill him.”

“Nobody’s doing any murder.”

“Spoilsport. No one would miss him.”

“No murder! Do you want Reilly and Harry growing up without a parent?”

“No, but I want Eddie to be safe.”

“So do I. We’ll think of something that doesn’t involve committing crime. Or, at least, a crime that isn’t as bad as murder. If you end up punching him a couple times, I’m not gonna stop you.”

“I would be physically unable to stop myself.”

“Pity. Look, I gotta go. Talk to you later. Love you.”

“Love you too.” He hung up.

Hunapo rang the doorbell, stepping inside the moment Eduard opened the door, before he could make any excuses to not let them in. “Eddie! Long time no see! How are you?”

He bit the inside of his cheek, trying to discreetly clutch his stomach. “Fine. Why are you here? DVDs?”

They smiled brightly. “Can’t I pop round to see my friend?” Eduard shrugged.

Hunapo had always pinned Eduard as a very well-dressed man. He liked looking smart, even when he had nowhere to go. He had more button ups than Hunapo had clothes in total. But now he was in a baggy jumper, the only effort put into his appearance apparently being to cover his skin. Of course.

“You don’t look so good, bro,” they said, “didn’t think you could get paler, but… when was the last time you went outside?”

“Just now when I let you in.”

They rolled their eyes. “And before that?”

Eduard shrugged. “How’s Logan? And the girls?”

“Good, good, back at school.” Eduard blinked at that, like he couldn’t believe it was September already. “Oh, and about the ‘girls’ thing, Reilly told us they’re agender too. I don’t know if they’re just copying me or not, but we’re respecting them. They really got upset at the idea of growing up into a girl, though.”
“Oh, err, good for… them?”

“Them, yeah. How’s work?”

Another shrug. “I… mostly work from home now. It’s easier.”

They nodded. No need to pry further. “Gunner home?”

“No, he’s at work.”

Hunapo nodded. So they were safe to stay for a bit.

“Coffee?”

“Yes please.” They wandered into the sitting room. It was decidedly barer than they remembered, and it took a moment for them to realise why. “Where’s your collection?” They wheeled round once they’d taken in the empty shelf, staring at their friend in horror.

Eduard couldn’t even bring himself to shrug, barely twitching his shoulders. “It was taking up room, and we needed the money, and I could just download things I want to watch instead of being old-fashioned.” His eyes bore holes in the empty shelf for a moment. He looked a little dead behind his glasses.

Shaking himself out of it, he disappeared into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee and get away from Hunapo before they got too invasive. They didn’t seem to notice, following him in anyway.

“You’re a mess,” they commented, sitting on the counter and putting their hands on their knees. “Gunner’s really knocking you about, huh?”

Eduard flinched. “It’s not like that. He- I tripped. Fell down the stairs.”

“That how you cracked your ribs?”

He nodded. “I’m- I’m clumsy.”

“That what he told you to say?”

He acted like he hadn’t heard them.

“Eddie, please, I’m scared for you. We all are!” He shrank back at the noise.

“Huna, I’m fine. You should… you should probably go.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

He handed them their coffee. “I don’t need help.”

“Have you even gone to the hospital for that rib?”

“My rib is fine.” Eduard just wanted them to drink the coffee and go.

“Why are you clutching it, then?”

“I banged it on the door handle, just before you got here.”

“He really got you throwing out excuses on autopilot, huh?” Hunapo sipped their coffee, noticing Eduard didn’t make one for himself. Had Gunner ruined his favourite drink for him too? They
noticed red blotches on his pale white hands.

“It’s not an excuse.”

“Eddie, please talk to me.”

“I’m fine, really!”

“You’re not. And I’m not sure I’m comfortable leaving you here. With him. He’s killing you, bit by bit.”

“I’m alive. I’m perfectly alive. Stop fussing over me.”

Hunapo slid off the counter and put a hand on his arm.

“Get the fuck off me!” He leapt back from Hunapo, like they were about to maul him. His eyes were wide, chest heaving despite the pain. Then there was the fear. “Sorry! I’m sorry! I-I didn’t!”

“It’s okay. It’s okay.” Hunapo tried to smile. “Just let me get you outta here. Gunner’s broken you down into this… this shadow. It’s terrifying.”

“I’m not a shadow. We’re fine. He’s a good guy, he’s just…”

“Just?”

“I don’t know. But you should probably go now. Sorry.”

They necked the last of their coffee. “It’s okay.”

“Sorry about the DVDs as well. I can send you the link to the place I download from if you want, it’s dodgy but it’s not malware.”

“Nah, I’ll figure it out myself. Thanks, though.”

Hunapo didn’t want to leave Eduard, and Eduard didn’t want to be alone, but it was inevitable. After one last attempt to convince him to leave, he saw them out. Eduard closed the door and collapsed against it, trying to calm his trembling hands. He’d blown it. The last person he’d been allowed to see, and he’d upset them with his stupid fear and cowardice. Hunapo wouldn’t come back now. They’d probably given up on him now, and wouldn’t bother visiting again.

“So we’re all in agreement, then?” Logan glanced from Hunapo to Tino to Lyubov and received three nods in reply. “We gotta get him outta that house and away from Gunner.”

“He’s just… sucking the life outta him,” Hunapo sighed, “all the humour and personality. He’s not allowed a film collection anymore. It’s crazy.”

Lyubov nodded. “Music too. I went round to duet with him, and all he told me was that they’d sold the keyboard before he shut the door on me. I don’t think he’s allowed to see me either.”

“Guess I’m only allowed round cause we work together,” growled Tino, “fucking hate the guy. Getting everyone else at the station to agree is a long process, though.” He kicked one of Reilly’s
Hunapo scratched their chin. “What if we went over with hidden cameras, got Eddie out and told
Gunner we know what he’s been doing. You know, make him flip out on us, and posted it online.
That way there’s no covering up?”

“Maybe,” said Tino, “but it’s illegal to film someone without their permission. Not as illegal as
beating the fuck outta your spouse, though, so go for it.”

“It sounds risky,” Lyubov piped up, “what if it goes wrong and Gunner hurts Eddie? What if we
can’t get him out of there? What if he’s been completely brainwashed by him?”

Logan winced at that. “But what choice do we have? Should we just leave him there, under that
cunt’s spell, getting beaten time and time again until it’s too late? We have to act! Please! We can’t
lose him!”

Tino nodded. “You’re right. We’ll need time to plan properly, but I’m done waiting. We’re going to
save Eddie.”

Gunner’s mum was actually nice. She seemed to really like Eduard, think he was good for her son.

Her one flaw, though, was that she refused to see Gunner’s own ones.

It had been a while since Eduard had gone outside, since Gunner had taken him on an actual honest-
to-God date, and it threw him. Had he gone back to pretending he was sorry for his behaviour? Or
was this some new, twisted way to hurt him?

Eduard had paid, of course. The restaurant looked too expensive for his budget, but it gave him an
excuse to work late and earn the money back.

Gunner’s entire family was here, it seemed. Besides his dad, of course. Not that Eduard would dare
point it out. He was starting to think the man had the right idea after all. But what was Gunner
playing at? There had to be some other motive here. He’d avoided hitting Eduard in the face for a
month now, so he’d planned this well in advance.

Gunner stood up, tapping his glass and waiting for the chatter to simmer down. Next to him,
Eduard’s stomach sank.

“My wonderful family,” he began, “I’ve gathered you here today to let you know how happy I am,
thanks to this wonderful man here.” He gestured at Eduard. He couldn’t remember the last time
Gunner had referred to him in a positive manner beyond tight. Fuckable. He was scared.

“And that’s why, I’d like to ask a very important question.” Gunner got down on one knee and
pulled out a box. “Eddie, will you be my husband?”

Eduard stopped working. The whole family was staring at him with bright smiles. The people at the
tables next to them were glancing over curiously. It seemed the whole restaurant was staring at him.
Waiting. Judging him for taking so long. A few of them were filming, Gunner’s mother included.

Once again, ‘no’ was not going to be an option for him.
He nodded sheepishly, and tried to look happy. “Yes, yes of course!” He didn’t sound too flat, did he?

People clapped. Eduard plastered a smile across his face. He was making an effort. It would be rude of him to ruin it.

Gunner wrapped his arms around him, jamming the ring onto his finger. Did he pay for that too? He kissed his cheek, and Eduard had to use every shred of resolve to not throw up in his mouth.

So this was it. He was trapped with Gunner forever now.

Eduard didn’t even look at his black eye in the mirror, focusing on mustering up the strength to brush his teeth. Apparently he’d been avoiding him for too long, and it made him mad. It was a delicate balance, working into the early hours of the morning and sleeping in his office for as long as he could, and not making Gunner suspicious.

He’d miscalculated, and made Gunner suspicious. Idiot.

He brushed his teeth, and checked his phone like the morning paper.

Voicemails from Logan always scared him. It always meant trouble, having to choose between ignoring him and taking a beating. But Gunner was at work. He could risk it, right?

It was a few hours old, accompanied by 10 missed calls. He pressed play.

“Eddie, Eddie? Ed, oh God, please answer!”

Eduard’s hands were shaking; he’d never heard Logan this distressed before.

“It’s Huna and Reilly! There was a crash and- oh God- Huna’s…. They’re… they’re- fucking hell. Reilly’s holding on but it doesn’t look good. I’m at the hospital now! If you get this I… Jem’s looking after Harry and I… I can’t be alone right now. Please, Eddie, you’re my best friend. Please. I miss you. Please pick up.”

A cold chill washed over Eduard. For a good five minutes, as he replayed the message over and over, his brain refused to process it.

Then it hit him like a brick the face, and he thought he would be sick. Then he thought he would cry. In the end, he did neither, pulling on the first clothes he could grab and bolting out of the house.

Logan Sr was outside the hospital to greet him, grim-faced and looking tired, and for once, older than his years. He hugged Eduard as soon as he saw them, and the barrier broke. Eduard was sobbing on his father’s shoulder, and he was certain Logan Sr was doing the same. Neither spoke for a long while, could’ve been hours, just crying outside the hospital, ignoring everyone around them.

“So it’s true, then.” Not a question. No answer needed.
Logan Sr nodded, and broke down again. Eduard rubbed his back. Huna was dead. He didn’t want to believe it, and on some level, he still didn’t. Hunapo was a good friend, but he couldn’t even begin to imagine how Logan was feeling.

“And Reilly?”

“Still holding on,” said Logan Sr, “they’re a tough little kid, but it could go either way.”

“Where is he?”

“Logan?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry I couldn’t get here earlier, I-”

Logan Sr waved his hand, “doesn’t matter, my boy. You’re here now, and I know Loggie really needs to see you right now.” Eduard let himself be lead inside, Logan Sr wrapping an arm around his shoulders. He lead him through painfully bright corridors, past rushing medical staff, and considerably slower patients.

Layla and Logan were by Reilly’s side, both inconsolable, clinging to each other with blotchy faces and puffy eyes.

Eduard couldn’t conceal a gasp at the sight of Reilly. They’d always been the louder of Logan’s children, more lively, always running about and getting into trouble. Meeting them had always made him appreciate just how good a baby Harry had been. Harry had never tried to put everything within reach in her mouth, or just make a dash towards a busy road. He’d always felt guilty for not being there, but Logan had Hunapo now.

He winced at that.

Reilly looked so small now. Broken. Their hair wasn’t sticking up everywhere, and it was odd to see them so silent, almost frozen as they slept on. Their face was obscured by a bulky, plastic breathing tube; tubes and wires snaked in and out of their body; and they were purple with bruises.

When Layla saw him, she pulled him into a crushing hug. He tensed. She pulled away, looking concerned for a second, but there were bigger things to be concerned about. He knew she would bring it up eventually, though. Even after all this time, Layla was fiercely protective of him. When he was a kid, that was comforting. As he grew up, it was a little patronising. These days, he couldn’t muster the energy to care either way.

“So glad you’re here,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry.”

“We’ve been so worried about you.”

“I’m sorry.”

She gave him a sad smile.

“What- how did- how did it happen?”

Layla glanced at Logan to tell things himself. He didn’t say a word, or even look up from Reilly.

“Drunk driver,” she whimpered. “They… they didn't stand a chance.”
Eduard had no idea what to say to that. He sat next to Logan and put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing slightly. He didn’t respond.

Eduard felt so powerless. There was nothing he could say to help, nothing he could do. Hell, he was still reeling from it all, and, any time now, it would hit him for real. Hunapo was his friend. He cared about them so much and-

It hit him.

He was never going to see Hunapo again. Logan had lost his partner, maybe his child, and if Reilly survived, they’d be growing up without a parent.

He didn’t realise he’d started crying until Logan put his arms around him. They held each other close, and even though being touched made his skin scream, he let Logan cling to him.

It was late. It must have been something like morning by now. Past midnight. It wasn’t light out yet, but it was late. Logan was in bed, but he wouldn’t be getting to sleep any time soon. He could always make himself pass out in places Eduard could barely conceive, but how he could properly get to sleep after all this, Eduard had no clue. The whole place was still. Just him and Jemima in the kitchen. The calm after the storm. All the chaos slipped away to leave calm.

And a whole other kind of fear.

He’d be asleep, hopefully. Or maybe not. Maybe he was waiting for him. Primed to pounce with accusations and insults and blows. He’d probably earned it anyway. Served him right for… whatever it is he’d done wrong this time. Talked to Logan? Left the house without permission?

“Crazy night,” she muttered. Maybe to him, maybe to herself.

“Yeah.” What more was there to say?

“They were pregnant again,” said Jemima after a long moment, “gonna call this kid Max cause it was conceived in front of Fury Road.”

Eduard winced. ”Fuck. It just… it keeps getting worse.”

“You’re a good friend, you know. He deserves a friend like you. I think he needs one right about now.”

“He has other friends.”

“You aren’t his other friends.”

Eduard shrugged.

“He misses you. A lot.”


“Ed, I’m not stupid.”
“Didn’t say you were.”

She didn’t go further into it. Maybe she could sense Eduard didn’t want her to. Maybe she just didn’t want any more depressing shit thrown on top of this evening. She didn’t need to. Everyone knew. Nobody had asked about Eduard’s black eye. Whatever excuse he’d come up with, they all knew it was a load of shit.

He’d seen how Layla looked at him, though. She wanted to help, but what could she do? He didn’t want her to face Gunner, because she would. Then again, even though she was getting older, she could still probably take him on. But then he’d get in trouble.

She sat on the counter in silence. There wasn’t a bed for him. There was the futon, but Jem was sleeping on it, and Reilly’s bed, but that was a little on the made-for-a-small-child side. He couldn’t stay all night. He had to go home at some point.

“Do you want me to check on him?” He was just making excuses now.

“He should be fine.”

He gave Jemima a look.

“You know what I mean.”

He nodded.

“Get yourself home, Eddie. You look tired.”

He was overstaying his welcome. She was being polite about it, but he was. He got up and got his shoes on. Jemima almost hugged him at the door, but when he flinched she made do with an awkward handshake.

He shoved his hands into his pockets. “Will you look after him?”

“I’ll try. Might need a hand though. I mean… he needs all the help he can get right about now.”

Eduard nodded. He wouldn’t be much help anyway. “I’ll try.”

He shuffled home, feeling like he was walking up the steps to his own execution.

He tried to ignore how his hands trembled as he fumbled with his keys. Please be asleep, please be asleep, please. He just wanted an easy time of it. He’d deal with Gunner’s wrath in the morning. Please. Just let him be asleep.

He opened the door as quietly as possible, peering through the gloom. There was a dim glow coming from under the sitting room door, and his heart sank. He’d have to be extra quiet.

He closed the door as quietly as he could, sneaking towards the stairs.

“Eddie?”

He froze. Eduard’s brain was torn between running and staying stock still.
“Eddie? You home?”

He didn’t sound angry, but you could never tell with him.

Against all better judgement, he stepped away from the stairs and into the sitting room. He knew better than to keep him waiting.

Gunner was waiting for him, sprawled out on the sofa.

“So where did you get to, then?” he asked cheerily. It was a different kind of cheery to normal, one Eduard had learnt to identify, and dread. He was absolutely furious.

“Huna was in an accident,” he admitted, “they didn’t make it. Reilly’s fighting for life at the hospital.” Reilly had taken to Gunner about as well as Harry had, but Gunner didn’t seem to loathe Hunapo like he did Logan. Maybe he would have sympathy. Show mercy. It was a good reason to break his unwritten rules, right?

“Oh, Eddie,” he got up, looking upset, “oh that’s terrible. I’m so sorry.” He put his hands on Eduard’s shoulders, and Eduard tried not to flinch. “I’m so, so sorry.”

He punched him in the stomach.

“And so will you be,” he whispered in his ear before picking him up by the hair and throwing him into the coffee table.

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“H-hey, Eddie? How you holding up? I haven’t got you in trouble, have I? Thought I’d give you an update. Reilly’s still holding on. Doctors said they’re not gonna walk again, but they’re gonna pull through. Still have to stay in hospital for a few weeks, and then there’s physio to do, but they’re gonna be okay. I- I can’t believe- I thought they were… Anyway, the funeral’s on Wednesday; I’ll send you the details. Please… I hope you’ll be there. Huna thought the world of you… anyway, text back when you can. See ya.”

Even if he could talk, Eduard would not have dared reply. As it were, he lay on his bed, unable to move as the voicemail played, trying not to cry at the sound of Gunner fiddling with his jeans and the swelling of his broken jaw. And the silent screaming of his broken ribs. Broken everything, it felt like.

Gunner listened to the voicemail with a snort. “That’s enough of that.”

Then he leaned over and blocked Logan’s number.

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Logan assumed the worst when he didn’t hear from Eduard for the next few days, but there were bigger things on his mind. Worse things. Everything was a mess.

His bed felt so much bigger than it ever had. Like the sea. He lay on his side, facing the wall. Away from the empty space. Shrödinger’s cat, right? If he didn’t look, Huna was both there and not there.
He resisted the temptation to turn and check. He could kid himself like that.

It was like that night, a couple weeks ago. They’d had some argument. Who cares what about? He’d lain down the same way. Shrödinger’s cat. If he didn’t turn around, Huna was both looking back at him ready to apologise and turning away the same way he was. He knew, of course, that they were as stubborn as he was. That really, what was the likelihood they were going to give in, especially when, really, if he was being honest with himself, which he wasn’t, it was kind of Logan’s fault?

It was like that. Except if he looked over his shoulder it was all real and they were gone. And if he stared at the wall, maybe they were looking back at him.

What had they even been arguing about?

The funeral was… whatever. It was a funeral. People in black. “I’m sorry for your loss.” Even Harry not saying much, looking rather lonely without her baby sibling. What had he been expecting?

Well, for one thing, he’d been expecting Eduard.

He gave his eulogy. When he wrote it, he put in his jokes. Of course he did. Hunapo didn’t want a serious eulogy. They all felt forced. They were just words. His dyslexia still fucked with the writing of it. And the memorising of it. And the reading of it. He would have improvised, but he needed something to hold onto. Either way, it was a shit eulogy. He looked out over the faces. Not an Eduard in sight. A thought came to him that made him trip up his words more than he already had.

Not him too.

Not him. He’d lost Hunapo, his spouse, his goddamn soulmate. He’d almost lost Reilly. He couldn’t take losing him too.

But he feared he already had.

Chapter End Notes

Again, really sorry about Gunner. And again, if you wanna pretend he's just some random guy, that's fine. I'm more or less seeing him as a random dickhead, rather than my sweet boy Denmark.
Hi! We're back! With more sad shit! But we're well over the hill, and nearly at the end. Only two chapters and an epilogue left! Warning for more violence and hospital stuff. Also Happy Paddy's Day.

Logan had become a widower at 28. Eduard was sure that was the age he would die.

Logan didn’t hear from Eduard in a week. The long hours he spent at Reilly’s side, stroking their hair as they slept, gave him time to think about it. And Hunapo. Eduard and Hunapo. The loves of his life. Could he have lost them both within days of each other?

“You know, I never thought, out of us, Huna would be the first to go,” said Lyubov, drying her eyes. Logan glanced up from Reilly’s sleeping face, eyebrow raised.

“Not that I thought about it,” she added quickly, “just… well, I always assumed—”

“You can say me, it’s fine.” Logan didn’t like this conversation very much.

Lyubov made a face. “Well, I thought there might be a chance you’d get a sports injury. Or maybe an STD. No offence.”

“I was with Huna since fresher’s year!”

“You expect me to believe you two of all people never organised a threesome?”

“Bold of you to assume we stopped at three.” He decided not to mention his perfect threesome involved his dead partner and Lyubov’s maybe-dead ex boyfriend. Or that they’d almost tried to make it actually happen. Until then, the conversation had been a good - if weird - distraction from all that.

They fell into silence as Logan stroked Reilly’s hair. It was coarse, like his, and curly, like Hunapo’s. Their face was all Hunapo, though, and it hurt, looking down at them. The bruises were fading now, yellow kisses on their cheeks. The hospital’s sheets were thin, completely failing to cover up the worst part of it all. Their legs were cut off a little above the knee. They’d been completely shattered. It was the only option.

The police still couldn’t find who did it; they’d driven off after crashing the car and destroying Reilly’s family and life. Nobody had seen the number plate. All Logan could tell them was that it was blue.

All he could remember was Hunapo fiddling with their seatbelt as they pulled out of the school car park, and a second later, their unseeing face inches from his, sprawled out on the hood. Somewhere behind him, Reilly had screamed. He still heard it, raw and boiling, like they couldn’t even process the amount of pain they were in.

It lasted hours.
He looked back up at Lyubov.

“I’m going to get him outta there,” he said.

“You are? You going to go with the plan or-”

“Fuck that. I’m going over there and I’m doing to Gunner whatever he’s done to Eduard. Right now.”

“You sure that’s a good idea?”

Logan shrugged. “No. But I’m not gonna wait.”

She hesitated, then nodded. “Alright. Go raise hell. Get him back.”

He hadn’t set foot in the place in years, and, until a week ago, he hadn’t seen Eduard in almost as long. He’d heard the horror stories, from Hunapo and Lyubov and Tino, but nothing had prepared Logan for what had come shuffling into the hospital ward.

And, chances are, he would be in a worse state now.

Gunner’s bike wasn’t locked up to the fence. That was how Huna could always tell if Eduard was alone. Taking that as some sort of reassurance, he knocked at the door and braced himself. No answer. None of his calls to Eduard were going through. But he had to see him.

When they were eight years old, Eduard had been grounded for a month. He couldn’t remember why. A bad mark, or maybe he’d talked back to his parents. Or maybe even used Australian slang by accident; that was usually enough to make his former dad nearly evaporate in rage.

Why couldn’t Eduard ever get a break from these kinds of people?

It was, at the time, possibly the worst month of Logan’s life. After a lot of missing him, he had managed to climb in through his bedroom window. They’d hidden together for hours. His parents never came to check on him, even when Logan heard the clinking of plates and cutlery from downstairs. Eduard didn’t seem bothered that they were eating dinner without him, and had for a few days now without saving him any, just glad he wasn’t still locked in that cupboard in the dining room. Once his parents had found out he was claustrophobic, it became a favourite punishment of theirs’.

There was one open window upstairs. Maybe it could have fit him if he climbed up there. He was strong, he could pull himself up on top of the porch and then it’d be easy. But he was very aware that he was not, currently, eight years old. He wasn’t sure how sturdy the roof was, but he was not a light man.

But he had to get to Eduard.

He tested one of the beams holding it up, elbowed it as hard as he could. It didn’t wobble. That was reassuring, but he wasn’t out of the woods yet.

He took ahold of the drainpipe and tried to pull himself up, but only succeeded in tearing it down. He attempted - quite ineffectually - to put it back.
“What am I doing?” he muttered to himself, “Fix your own fucking drain, you slimy cunt.”

He tried again, just about managing to get a grip on it, but he couldn’t pull himself up. He fell down again and again, until he decided he needed another approach.

Wide window to the living room.

Big decorative stone on the ground.

Hardly subtle, but it wasn’t like it mattered. Gunner wasn’t home. He threw it through the window. The glass shattered easily and he took a moment to applaud himself on his arm. He used the drainpipe to bat away the stubborn shards of glass still fixed in the window pane and stepped inside.

Their house looked so normal. He didn’t know what he’d been expecting. Darkness and broken crockery and the distant screams of the tortured. Fire and brimstone. He walked through the room silently. Gunner wasn’t home, but he still listened out for him, still clutched the drainpipe - though he wasn’t sure it would be much use in a fight - as he tiptoed up the stairs and checked every room he passed, opening each door as silently as he could until he found the bedroom.

Eduard had his back to him. He was lying so still. He didn’t turn his head to look. Logan wasn’t quite sure if he could. He wasn’t quite sure he was breathing. He lay there perfectly still. A statue. A corpse. Logan dropped his drainpipe.

“Eddie?”

He tensed. Logan let out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding.

“Eddie, it’s me.”

He was silent for a long moment.

“Logan?”

“Logan.”

“Can’t be here.” His voice sounded wrong.

“Neither should you, to be honest.”

“Go.”

“Not without you.”

He still hadn’t moved. Logan stepped around the bed and sat down next to him on the floor, face to face. He was covered in bruises and dried up blood and his mouth was slightly open. He was missing at least one tooth. His lip was burst. But worst of all was his eyes. They looked right through him. The whites were red, filled with blood, and his glasses were nowhere to be seen. He looked a little dead. But he was alive. And he was here. That was all Logan could ask for.

He didn’t touch him, remembering how he’d frozen up at the hospital, but he gently rested his hand on the mattress next to him. “I missed you.”

“Go home.”

“Come with me.”
“Can’t. He’ll-“ Eduard winced. It was hurting him to talk.

“I won’t let him.”

“No.”

“When’s he coming back?”

He shrugged.

“Can you move?”

He shrugged.

“Can I help you up?”

He hesitated. Then he nodded and let Logan prop him up on the bed’s headboard. He grimaced as tears streamed down his cheek. One of his arms fell limply next to him, at an angle, and from Eduard’s whimper, Logan guessed several of his ribs were broken.

“Where are your glasses?”

He nodded toward the bedside table.

Logan picked up the mangled remains of his glasses. Only one lens was still intact.

“When’s the-“

“Face.”

“What?”

Logan glanced back at him. Sure enough, there were little shards of glass embedded in his skin. He flinched when Logan tried to touch a particularly big piece, the size of his thumbnail, but Logan took it out of his cheek gently.

“Jesus Christ.”

Eduard refused to look him in the eye. “Should start using contact lenses,” he whispered, trying to smile.

Logan just looked down at the piece of glass in his hand. Covered in blood. Some of it dried, some of it straight out of Eduard. He’d cut deep. Right through his cheek.

“When did he do this?”

“After Huna. On and off. Mostly on.”

He was going to kill him. He was going to kill Gunner with a goddamn drainpipe if he had to.

“What day is it?”

“Thursday.”

“How long-“

“A week. A week and a day.”
“The funeral-“
“Doesn’t matter.”
“I’m sorry.”
“It’s okay.”

Eduard took Logan’s hand. “Should’ve been there.”

“Don’t like to think of what he’d have done if you’d gone.” Logan rubbed his hand gently, tracing circles with his thumb. There was a ring on his finger. He looked between it and Eduard’s face and joined the dots.

He nodded. “About a month.”

Logan tried to slip it off his finger, but he clenched his hand into a fist.

“Can’t take it off.”

Logan glared at the ring. “I’m not leaving without you. You’re not coming back here.”

“He’ll find me. He did it before. He’ll kill me. Both of us.”

“He’ll kill you if you stay here.”

“He’ll stop once it’s out of his system.”

“Except it keeps coming back into his system. He likes hurting you, and he’s gonna find another non-excuse to do it. And then what?”

Eduard shrugged. “I don’t know, he’ll probably shove me in a microwave or something. Who cares?”

“I care!”

“Care about something else. I can’t go.”

“Please. You’re my best friend. I love you.”

Eduard blinked at that, face unreadable for just a moment.

“Just go before he comes back. I’ll be fine.”

“You have your own glasses lenses in your face.”

“Deserve it.”

“For what? Being a good friend? Losing someone you cared about?”

“Being a terrible fiancé,” he mumbled, “not s’posed to leave without telling him. He-“ Eduard faltered. “He was worried.”

“Sounds like he’s the terrible fiancé,” said Logan.

The rattling of keys in the front door made Eduard squirm and close in on himself, and Logan look for a weapon. The drainpipe would be too light to do the damage he was hoping to inflict. The lamp!
It had sharp, metal corners and would hurt him more!

“Hide!”

“Not a fucking chance.”

They could hear him downstairs. Footsteps. Footsteps. Then muffled shouting.

“Ed! What the fuck did you do to my window?”

He was coming up the stairs. Eduard was frozen on the spot. Logan snatched the lamp off the bedside table and stood between Eduard and the door.

He looked back at him, some vague attempt at reassurance. He’d never seen him so fucking scared in his life. Eduard shook his head, but Logan stood his ground.

The door burst open and Gunner stormed in.

“What the fuck are you playing at, you-“

He blinked.

Logan punched him across the face.

Gunner went flying, smacking into the wall and, for a moment, he seemed to forget where he was as he processed just what the hell had happened. Then he got back up. He made a start towards Eduard.

“Ed, you fucking-“

Logan punched him again. And again. He couldn’t even be bothered using a weapon; he just wanted his fists in Gunner’s face.

“Don’t talk to him!” he yelled, “Don’t you fucking look at him, you piece of shit! I will end you!”

Gunner wiped blood from the corner of his mouth.

“He’s more than your fiancé! He’s a human being, not a goddamn punching bag!”

Gunner shoved him away. “He’s fucking dead, is what he is!” Eduard whimpered, and Gunner shot a glare his way. “I’ll find you. You know I will. He can’t guard you forever, and when he looks away, I’ll get you. I’ll fucking destroy you-”

Logan punched him in the stomach. “You’re never seeing him again!”

He glanced at Eduard. He was paralysed. Every shout and hit had him flinching like he was on the receiving end. Logan grabbed Gunner by the hair and charged out of the room into the hallway, kicking the door shut behind him. He didn’t let go of him before he’d smashed his head into the wall. It wasn’t the only bruise in the plaster.

“You enjoying this?” He punched Gunner in the throat. “Not fun, huh? Not so brave when a bigger guy does the same to you, fucking shitcunt! Bet you feel really fucking powerful now!”

He threw him to the ground, kneeling straight on his chest. Fists flew at his face, leaving burst lips and what would quickly become black eyes. Gunner tried to push him off, grab at him, but Logan
wouldn’t budge. He grabbed his throat and squeezed, throttling him like a jar with a stiff lid. His thumbs dug into his throat as Gunner gasped for breath. He was going red. Logan was aiming more for purple. He wasn’t even totally sure what he was saying to him exactly. Profanities, presumably. Everything was a little red.

He kneeled on Gunner’s barely-conscious body, grip tight, frozen. A voice was wrapped around his fist, a voice he’d loved with all his soul. A voice with the worst accent but the biggest heart and brain.

But now wasn’t the time for that voice. It didn’t belong in a place like this.

He was going to kill him. He promised himself he’d kill Gunner, make sure he wouldn’t hurt Eduard again.

But he’d also made a promise to Hunapo.

He let go of his throat and stood up.

“A better human being than you told me not to be an idiot. That’s the only reason you’re alive.”

Gunner just tried to get his breath back.

He kicked him in the ribs for good measure, then went back into the bedroom.

“Are you alright?”

Eduard shrugged. Logan rummaged round for a suitcase and began throwing clothes and anything else that looked remotely important to Eduard into it. Then he grabbed a laptop from the bedside table and put it in a rucksack. He couldn’t pack the desktop, but he could at least get the essentials. He didn’t know what Gunner would do to Eduard’s stuff. Then he helped Eduard into a jacket and hat.

“How can you walk?”

He nodded. Logan helped him up slowly. He was limping, clutching his side as his eyes swam with tears.

“Just my ankle,” Eduard muttered, “pushed me down the stairs.”

“I’ve got you.”

Eduard just nodded and limped onward, Logan acting as his crutch. He paused in front of Gunner’s body.

“Ed?”

Eduard stamped his good foot onto Gunner’s stomach, half-leaning on Logan. He landed kick after kick, over and over, until he collapsed forward, too quickly for Logan to even catch him. He crumpled like a puppet with cut strings, hitting his head on the wooden floor.

Logan pulled him up and onto his back. He was fragile, but at least he was too unconscious for it to hurt him. He could call an ambulance, but he didn’t want to wait for one. He wanted Eduard - and frankly himself - out of this house as soon as possible. Gunner was on the ground. He wouldn’t be getting up for a while.

He carried Eduard out of the house and bundled him into the car, tilting the seat back for him. It was
a rental, of course - he’d had to scrap the old one after the accident. It was in pieces. The new one was pretty fancy. Much quieter, much faster, and the radio actually worked. He hated it.

As he strapped Eduard in, he grumbled something.

“You awake?”

No reply. Apparently not.

Logan started the car. He made his way toward the hospital and away from the house. Eduard came to at some point along the way.

“Logan?”

“You alright?”

“Where are we going?” The total lack of answer to Logan’s question was probably justified.

“Hospital.”

“We have to go back.”

“No.”

“He’ll hurt you.”

“He’s not doing shit.”

Eduard didn’t say anything, but he definitely didn’t believe him. The two of them just sat where they were and stared at the road. The silence was excruciating.

Hunapo was dead. Eduard could have been. Reilly was never going to walk again. Gunner had broken Eduard down into some shell of himself, over six whole years. In the light of day, he looked even worse. There was blood in his hair. Clumps of it had been torn straight out. His skin was all white and red and purple. The glass in his face still shone in the light. He should have done this a long time ago. Years ago. He should never have let Gunner near him in the first place.

The road began to blur.

It was his fault Eduard was… could he still…

Logan's pulled over as his face crumpled, and he rested his forehead on the steering wheel to sob. He should've acted sooner.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Eduard’s voice was as wobbly as his. “It’s okay, I know.”

He rubbed Logan’s back. He could feel his hand shaking.

“I should be getting you to the hospital.”

“It’s fine. Take your time.”

He had a point. He’d been living with who knows how many injuries for a week now. Probably some of them for more, from before Huna died. A few minutes probably wouldn’t do much.
Neither was sure how long they sat there. Eduard always cried so silently. You wouldn’t even know he was crying if you looked away. Logan sobbed until his throat felt raw, halfway to screaming, but Eduard just stared at his knees, his shoulders trembling. He put his hand on Logan’s shoulder and just barely squeezed it. He quieted a little. His cheek rested on the back of his hand.

Everything was crashing and burning. Hunapo was dead. Reilly would never walk again. Eduard was a shell. But he had his hand on Logan’s shoulder and Logan had his cheek on his hand. When everything else was going to shit, they could still hold onto that. They had each other and he’d never let go of him again.

Logan reached over and took a bottle of water out of the glove box. He held it out to Eduard, but he shook his head.

“You sure?”

He nodded. Logan took a long drink himself. He half-emptied the bottle.

“Fuck.”

“What is it?”

“Nothing. Just… everything. All of it. Fuck.”

Eduard nodded. “Yeah. Fuck.”

“I should… get you to the hospital. Sorry about the… y’know, the delay. I just need a minute”

“I can handle it.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Eduard’s good hand touched Logan’s face. He thought for a second that he was being affectionate. It took a moment for him to realise he had a scratch there. Gunner fought back hard.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, “He… that doesn’t look good.”

Logan shrugged. “I wasn’t expecting him to go easy.”

“No. He doesn’t really do that.”

Logan grimaced. “I missed you.”

Eduard nodded. “Sorry.”

“Not your fault.”

“Except it is.”

“It’s not.”

Eduard sighed. He didn’t believe him, but neither of them had the energy to get into it right now. Logan started the car and got back to driving.

“How are the kids?”

Logan almost laughed. It was so normal of him to say. Like they’d bumped into each other on the street.
“As to be expected. Harry’s piece of shit school wouldn’t give her more than a day off for the funeral, so I’ve been calling in sick for her instead. I mean, fuck’s sake, it’s only Year 6 SATs. She just lost a parent.” He immediately felt embarrassed, complaining about this to Eduard’s face after all he’d been through. “Anyway. She’s at Tino’s.”

“You and Tino talk?”

“Yeah. A lot, actually. He really cares about you. We all do.”

“All?”

“Me, him, Lyubov, Hu-” He paused. “Huna.”

“I’m sorry.”

Logan shrugged. “We were all making this plan to get you out. More legally than how I did it. Kind of got… put on hold.”

Eduard wasn’t sure how to feel about that. Not good. “How’re you holding up?”

“Could be better. You?”

“Well, as distractions go…”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

They drove in silence for a while, both of them staring at the road. When Logan glanced over, Eduard had slipped out of consciousness again. His head lolled against the back of the chair. Logan had to check he was breathing at every red light. It was approaching rush hour. Maybe he could have timed this better. Still, not far now.

The moment he’d found a parking spot, Logan scooped Eduard up like a baby and bolted into A&E.

“Come on, mate, stay with me,” he muttered, “Stay with me.”

He was light, but he was fragile, and his height made him so cumbersome. He was getting used to carrying around Reilly (they were almost as spindly, but also not yet 4 feet tall, even less now that they’d lost half of their legs) but he hadn’t held Eduard like this in a long time. But he’d always been able to carry him. That much he was sure of.

“Please,” he sobbed at the desk, “my friend is hurt! He’s not breathing too good and he’s been beaten pretty bad.”

The woman at the desk nodded. “Name?”

“Eduard Mets.” Logan took a breath. “He might need a gurney. He’s unconscious but he’s a bit on and off.”

“We’ll get to that, don’t worry. Date of birth?”

“24th of February. 1987.” He rattled off more pointless information. Couldn’t they see it was an emergency? He tried not to let his impatience show.

“Okay, well there’s a forty-five minute waiting time-”
Logan glanced down at Eduard. Foam dribbled out the side of his mouth and his limbs twitched and spasmed in his arms. Probably not the most reassuring of developments.

“Can it not be that long?” he asked, voice unusually high, “I think he’s in trouble.”

The receptionist nodded, just as Eduard threw up on himself. He jerked his limbs, and it took all of Logan’s strength to keep hold of him.

“Whe-” he tried to speak, but all that came out were unintelligible mumbles. His eyes rolled, and it looked like he was about to choke on his own tongue.

“Stay with me,” Logan whispered, clutching him as a doctor lowered him onto a gurney. He followed him through a set of doors, the same ones they’d taken Reilly through last week. “Stay with me, mate, please. I can’t lose you too.”

He survived what turned out to be a brain haemorrhage, but that didn’t mean a smooth road ahead for Eduard. Any of the fractures he’d lived with all week could still get infected; the fact that he had been strangled several times meant stroke, organ failure, blood clots and death were still very much on the table; and, after everything he’d been through, and everything he’d have to live with, there was a chance Eduard would just give up. He looked about ready to fall apart as it was.

Logan hunched over in an orange plastic chair, watching Eduard, as Harry, feet up on the seat next to her, played on his phone. A doctor was with him, checking up on him.

“What are his chances?”

“I’d say 50/50. Is he a fighter?”

“He’s the bravest guy I know. And the strongest. But no, he’s not a fighter.”

Logan watched him sleep, and watched him stare into nothing. All he had to do was pull through, then he could rest for as long as he liked. There was nothing to fear anymore, and Logan would fight everyone in the universe before he let Gunner near him again. That said, in Ed’s condition, Gunner might be the least of their issues.

Logan had never felt the urge to pray, despite everything that had happened. While he wasn’t quite the firm atheist that Eduard was, he wasn’t exactly religious either, and usually it was either too late, or he was busy trying to find the solution himself. But now, when he felt like a spider under a jar, waiting for the unknown to decide his fate, he’d take what he could get. He’d not even known he was doing it at first, but it took Harry by surprise.

Even more so when he broke down crying.

“Dad?”

He put his arms around her. She leaned up to him, wrapping her arms around his neck. She’d always considered him so sturdy. He cried, of course he did, when dogs died in films or way back when she was little and Reilly was born, but not often. He’d cried at the funeral and he’d cried since.

He hadn’t stopped, really. It scared her.
“What do you mean you don’t remember Uncle Eddie? You’ve known him since you were a baby.”

Reilly shook their head. “Don’t know him.”

“Guess you were pretty small last time you saw him.”

“I remember him,” Harry added, scoring points as siblings did.

“Yeah, because we visited him yesterday. Anyway. Ed. He’s my friend and he’s in hospital too.”

“Was he hit by a car too?” asked Reilly.

_No, a police officer_. Logan shook his head.

“But what happened to him?”

Logan hesitated. This was a hard thing to say to kids, and he didn’t want to freak them out. “It’s a secret.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s some secret grown up thing I’ll explain when you’re older.”

The kids started to protest that, and Logan tried to tune them out. “Alright. I need the toilet, I won’t be long. You two behave. Harry, you’re in charge.”

Harry flashed Reilly a smug grin. “We’ll be good.”

“Good.” Logan stood up and left the kids to it. The moment he was out of earshot, Harry leaned in close to Reilly.

“A secret! Do you know what that means?”

Reilly’s eyes lit up. “What?”

“It means he’s been doing secret stuff! He’s a spy!”

“A spy? ” It sounded cool, but Reilly wasn’t stupid. They knew a thing or two from the month they’d spend refusing to watch anything but _Spy Kids_ , and they were pretty sure they were all American.

“Yeah! Definitely! They’re a thing in real life, Cassandra at school said so, even here. And when we were visiting him, Dad was talking about how he was all strong and brave and cool. Like a spy!”

Reilly gasped. “He’s a spy! It makes sense!”

“Yeah, _obviously_ it does, ‘cause it’s _true_ !” Harry smiled in her smug older sibling way.

For the first time since the accident, Reilly looked excited, looked like the happy, curious six-year-old they were supposed to be. Even the beeping hospital equipment and wires and tubes and horrific injuries were at the back of their mind, for once. Their dad knew a real life spy!
“How’d he go in the hospital, then?”

“How’d he go in the hospital, then?”

“Doing spy things. He probably got beat up by bad guys or something. He had all these scars on his face, I bet they did that.”

Reilly nodded with eyes full of wonder and a wide mouth. “There must have been so many! Or, like, the biggest, scariest bad guy ever!”

“He probably fought really bravely and won in the end but he got beaten up bad, like in all those films,” said Harry.

Reilly looked at her in amazement. “He’s the coolest man on earth!”

Lyubov was already crying before she came in, with two thermos flasks and something wrapped in an old tote bag under one arm. She put them down carefully on his bedside table.

“Eduard!”

“Lyubov.”

She wiped her eyes and settled in the orange plastic chair by his bed. “Are you okay?”

“Oh yeah. Totally.”

She sighed. “Ed…”

“Sorry.”

“No, it was a dumb question.”

“I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me, Shevchenko.”

“How can I not?”

“I can handle myself.”

“But you don’t have to. I’m here.”

“I know. And… thank you.” He glanced at the flasks, searching for a way out of the conversation. “What’s with the stuff?”

“Soup and bread. Thought you might want to escape the horror that is hospital food.”

“What kind?”

“Borscht. Dad’s recipe. The bread is too. Dad’s, I mean. There’s no beetroot in the bread.”

“Thanks. He does make good soup and bread.”

“There’s a lot there, it should last you a while. Can you get a doctor or something to warm it up?” He hesitated.
“Do you want me to get them to?” She was all too familiar to Eduard’s aversion to asking for things. She was no better, after all, not unless someone else asked her to do it.

“Please.”

“Will do.”

Tino, thankfully, didn’t bring any of his cooking.

He sat down on the chair at his bed and handed him a card. He’d scribbled over the “birthday” on the most whimsical “happy birthday” card he could find and written “brain haemorrhage” above it in black Sharpie. Tasteful.

“Hey, scarface. Lyubov been in?”

“Yeah. And Logan’s parents. They’re in town for a while with the girls. Taking care of Logan through all the Huna stuff, you know?”

“How’s work?”

“Fine. The captain needs a little convincing on the Gunner case. I’ve got more eyewitnesses than I can count, but you know how cops are. If it’s not weed, it’s not worth throwing away an officer for.”

“I feel so safe and protected by our law enforcement.”

“Yep. To serve and protect. He could get away with murder. Then again, so could I.” He grinned at him. “Now that’s an idea.”

Eduard tried to laugh. He managed a smile, barely.

Logan was the biggest regular, naturally, usually with Harry in tow.

Her card was a collaborative effort between herself and Reilly, which meant that half of it was elaborately drawn flowers and the other was an unintelligible mess of macaroni and glitter glue. It took pride of place nearest his bed.

The first chance she got away from Logan, Harry leaned in conspiringly, holding her chin between her hands.

“Me and Reilly figured it out.”

“Figured what out?” He couldn’t help the sudden wave of fear, even if he couldn’t for the life of him tell what exactly they had figured out.
“The spy thing! We know you’re in the MI5!”

He blinked. “The spy thing?”

“It’s okay. We’re not gonna blow your cover. Dad said what happened is a secret, so we’ll keep it zipped.”

He looked at her oddly, then decided he may as well indulge her. “Right. That spy thing. You got me.”

“I knew it! What happened?”

“I, um… classified.”

“I won’t tell!”

“Sorry. Classified information.”

“Give me a clue!”

He bit his lip, trying to make something up. He’d never been much of a storyteller. “There were ninjas.”

“Really?”

“Mhmm. Bad ninjas. Mafia ninjas.”

“Is that why you’re in hospital?”

“Yeah, the leader one beat me up.”

“What was his name?”

He said the first name to come into his head. “Steve Buscemi.”

“Really?”

“Yep. But we took him down. It’s all good.”

“You did?”

“With ease.”

When Logan came in, Harry shot back up, acting conspicuously innocent.

“What’re you two whispering about?”

“Harry here managed to figure out I’m a spy. I told her about the ninjas. And Steve Buscemi.”

Logan bit back a laugh. “Wow. You figured it out all on your own?”

She beamed with pride. “I did.”

“Very smart.”

“Thank you.”
“I ran into Elisabet last week,” Layla mumbled to Logan as they both watched Eduard sleep. “Gotta say, she’s not aging well. Anyway, I told her about Eddie. Well, I told her he’s in hospital, if she wanted to see him.”

“She hasn’t,” Logan replied, “or at least, not while I’ve been here.”

“She hasn’t,” muttered Eduard, blinking his eyes open slowly. Layla winced.

“I’m sorry, Eddie. I thought she should know, and show up.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Seeing his parents again was the last thing he needed. “They’d just twist it around anyway. *It’s my own fault, they were right, men don’t get abused, et cetera.*”

Layla nodded. “Sometimes I just don’t want to believe they’re like that, but…”

“You know what they’re like.”

“I’m sorry, Eddie. I just wanted to think they’ve changed. That there’s some parental instincts, deep down.”

“They don’t have any. Doesn’t matter.”

“It does. You deserve better.”

Eduard touched Layla’s hand. “I have you.”

She teared up at that. “You’re such a brave boy. Why is it that the whole world seems to be out to get you?”

“Some people aren’t built to be happy.”

“Nobody’s meant to be unhappy, dear.”

“Explain me then.”

“You got unlucky.”

Eduard forced what was barely a smile and shook his head. “If you say so.”

“You’re going to be happy from now on,” Layla continued, “you’re safe and free and we’ll all be here for you, help you get better.”

“I’m fine,” said Eduard, “there’s nothing- I don’t think I’m gonna get better.” She was trying, but the promises sounded empty to Eduard’s ears. Like she was talking to someone else.

At least by now she knew not to touch him without warning. He appreciated that, he really did. Even if he didn’t necessarily deserve it. She held out her arms and, after a moment’s thought, he gave her a tentative cuddle. “Yes you are, son,” she mumbled into his hair. “It might take some time, but you’re free from him and can recover now.”

“Recover?” he looked at her strangely.
“Yes, recover. Get back on your feet. Maybe, one day, find someone who treats you the way you should be treated.”

“With contempt.” He tried to laugh. Tried.

“With love and care and understanding.” Layla stroked his hand, “like I promised I would give you. And I know I haven’t been there for you, lately, but I never stopped loving you like you were my own son.”

“It’s not your fault I never visited. You’ve got actual kids to take care of.”

“I think you might be a little more in need.”

“Really? How old is Manya now? Six?”

“Ten.”

“That long, huh?”

Layla nodded grimly. “Yes, too long. You had to put up with— with that horrible man.” She looked on the verge of bursting into tears, again. Eduard didn’t know why she was so upset. He loved her more than he’d ever loved his own mum, but she had her own children. Her real children, who were worth crying about. “I’m so, so sorry. I should’ve done something. Marched in there and let him know he doesn’t treat my little boy like that.”

“Fighting Gunner isn’t like fighting Eliisabet. He’d have hurt you. Badly. I couldn’t forgive myself if that had happened to you, mum.”

“Maybe so.” She smiled at Logan. “I suppose we’re all lucky he’s so fucking reckless, huh?”

“I suppose so. I mean, he saved me.” He touched Logan’s hand. “Thanks. I… thank you. Sorry you had to deal with him.”

“Mate, I’ve wanted to deal with him for ages now. Since I met him.”

“That long?”

“He was a cunt then and he’s a cunt now,” Logan realised what he said and winced, turning to Layla, “sorry mum.”

“No, no, he is.”

Even Eduard nodded at that.

“And you’ll never have to deal with him again,” Logan assured him, taking Eduard’s hand gently. “I promise.”

Eduard bit his lip. Gunner would come back for him. He’d hurt him and hurt Logan. Maybe even Mr and Mrs Cooper. Maybe even the kids. He’d come right to the hospital and drag him back home and kill him. Any safety was temporary. He’d hurt everyone around him if he pretended otherwise.
As Lyubov walked into the office, she could really see Eduard working there. Lines upon lines of software developers tapped away at desktops on IKEA desks, chewing on pencils or drinking paper cups of coffee, not saying a lot to each other. A couple looked up at her. She had to remind herself that they were software developers, and thus not very accustomed to women. And the only ones with massive honkers like hers they’d probably seen were from hentai.

“Uh, excuse me?” Maybe she should have had taken Tino’s offer to do it for her. He could get people to listen to him easily. Plus he was like a software developer-whisperer. He spoke fluent Reddit. “Excuse me?”

A couple people looked.

“Does anyone know Eduard? Eduard Mets, blond, skinny, glasses?”

A guy with a weak attempt at a beard, a shirt that said “declare variables, not war” and a questionably-aged anime girl for a desktop background narrowed his eyes. “Name rings a bell. He barely comes in, though. Works from home.”

“Fucker’s invisible. Like that bitch from The Incredibles,” added the guy to Mr Shittybeard’s left. “I mean, sure, yeah, he codes well but nobody knows him.”

“Yeah, even his commenting’s shit.”

“No idea what he’s doing,” he agreed, “Bit of a mess.”

“I mean, respect to the guy, he’s a good programmer, but if he was any more standoffish-”

“He’s in hospital!” Lyubov snapped.

Shittybeard and his friend blinked.

She counted off on her fingers. “Brain haemorrhage. Broken arm, ribs, jaw, ankle, and wrist. Missing teeth. Blood loss. Scarring. Very nearly got a neck hematoma. Still not off the table, actually.” She willed herself not to tear up. Why couldn’t she just argue without her eyes betraying her? “His boyfriend beat him half to death. Been doing so for years; not that anyone bothered to check up on him.” She slammed a card on his desk and forced herself to take a breath. “Will you please sign this for him?”

Shittybeard blinked at her, then tentatively signed the card. “Sorry.”

His friend nodded, not meeting her eye, and took it off him to sign his own name. “Yeah, sorry. You think he’ll be alright?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted, “Nobody does.”

By the time she left, the signatures wouldn’t fit on the inside of the card, leaking out onto the back. She wasn’t sure she’d done the right thing in telling them. Maybe she should have kept her mouth shut.

When Eduard was finally deemed well enough to leave, Logan was there to pick him up from the hospital. Eduard told him a hotel room would do, but he was having none of that. Eduard was living
with Logan again and there was nothing he could do about it.

Eduard couldn’t help feeling relieved at that, on top of overwhelming guilt. He didn’t want to be alone, but he didn’t want to take up space, not when Logan had his own problems.

Logan had put a camping mattress in Reilly’s room for the time being, just until they got discharged and Logan’s parents left the living room futon to go home. It was a space he could hide from the noise and movement and recover. It was a little corner where he could find peace, even if everything in Reilly’s room was horrifying.

It was bright orange, for starters, and if he bothered to open the curtains, the colour would probably give him a headache. In a corner, a doll was wearing a Furby’s skin, stood underneath a Shrek poster that stared at him no matter where he stood. Reilly really seemed to like Shrek, actually, judging by the many Shrek toys they had. As well as an extensive collection of toy lobsters and crabs, bees, and minions, worst of all. There was even a box of bee corpses under their bed, staring blankly at him as he lay on the mattress trying to sleep. Eduard decided he’d made the right call when he’d taken a step back from being in their life.

Eduard had to smile at the tanks of bugs and lizards, though, just like Logan used to keep, and the lights above the lizards were warm enough to emulate human warmth, without the added stress of physical contact.

He never thought he’d see the day where he’d stop craving human touch.

Except he still did, just not as much as he feared it.

He was a mess and he didn’t know why Logan was bothering. He couldn’t even eat half the time. He barely talked. He shut himself away and waited for himself to do everyone a favour and rot away.

Gunner would come get him, sooner rather than later, even if he could try to get better. He was in danger. And by helping him, Logan was putting himself in danger too. God knows what he’d do to him. Sure, Logan was stronger, but Gunner was still capable of doing a lot of damage. And what if he really wanted to hit him where it hurt? What if he pulled the kids into it? That would be his fault. Another in a long list of fuck-ups. He didn’t deserve Logan, much less his help.

He looked at Reilly’s empty bed. The kid deserved better.

Quietly as he could, he pulled himself up and wrapped Logan’s hoodie around him. It was big and grey and came halfway to his knees despite their near-identical heights. He’d lent it to him, just until he went over to Gunner’s to pick up the rest of Ed’s stuff. It smelt just like Logan: his aftershave, and that fruity shower gel Layla used to buy them. If he was going to die wearing anything, he was glad it was that.

He pulled the hood over his head and opened the door as quietly as he could - he was more than used to sneaking around now. The hallway was lit only by a lamp in the corner, throwing all the mess into long shadows.

He stepped out of the room, eyes on the door, when he heard a sob coming from the master bedroom.

Logan was awake.

He knew he should just go, ignore it and get out and face his fate, but he couldn’t leave his best friend. He tiptoed to the door and cracked it open. He was facing away from him, curled up in a ball.
He didn’t see him until he knocked.

“Ed! Shit, sorry. You alright?”

“I’m fine,” he lied, “Do you want me to go?”

“Do you want to?”

He shrugged. He didn’t know what he wanted anymore.

“...Alright, fine, please don’t go.”

Eduard slipped onto his bed, letting Logan hold him close. He told himself it was fine. Logan wasn’t going to hurt him. There was no need to be afraid. He almost felt safe, for the first time in a long while, before remembering this would probably be the last time he’d see Logan.

He whispered into his hair. “I miss them, Ed.”

“I know.”

“I loved them.”

“I know.”

He couldn’t have been more useless at this if he tried. What was he supposed to say? Hunapo was dead. There was no bringing them back. He let Logan cry on his shoulder and kept his mouth shut. He was trembling, every sob shaking his body. He looked smaller than he’d ever been.

“I love you,” he whispered, “Sometimes I feel like you’re the one thing keeping me upright.”

“I’m a mess,” he pointed out.

“Maybe. Maybe we both are. But I like having you here. You’re my best friend.” He stroked his hair. “It’s good to have you back. I’m so, so sorry I didn’t do this sooner.”

“It’s fine.”

“I wanted to charge in there and kill him. But I figured I should be smart for once in my life, y’know?” He chuckled bitterly. “That sure worked out wonderfully.”

“Logan?”

“Hm?”

“I know I’m not exactly the most helpful person you know. And I know you’ve probably heard this far too many times. I know I have. But if you need me I’m here.” Guess he wasn’t leaving just yet. He could stick around, until Logan was feeling better. Gunner was probably biding his time anyway, waiting for an opportunity.

And yet, in Logan’s arms, he almost felt safe. It was like they were 12 again, and Eduard was staying in Logan’s bed, using the fact that it was a single bed and they were growing boys as an excuse to cuddle up to Logan. Purely platonic, of course. Friends huddled up together. If one of them fell off, they both did.

This was just the same. No romantic intent. Best friends, holding on tight, because nothing else made sense. Logan’s tears soaked through the hoodie, freezing Eduard’s shoulder, but he didn’t mind.
Maybe they needed to help each other.

Maybe he should stay around. Just for a while. Just for Logan’s sake, until he didn’t need him.

Because who would need Eduard for that long?

“Hey, Eddie, I got a surprise for you!” Logan tried to make his whisper sound as excited as possible, knocking on the door gently. He put the box he had under his arm on the ground next to the bed. “Since Gunner’s in custody, I went and picked up your stuff for you.”

Eduard nodded. “Want me to start looking for my own place?” It was about time, too. He’d only been there a few days, but he couldn’t help feeling like a horrendous burden.

Logan blinked. “Not what I was getting at. I- look, now you don’t need to go back there. We can start working towards getting you your own space. Maybe here, since we’re looking to move Reilly downstairs. Maybe I should look for a place with a downstairs bathroom too, if you’d be okay with another move.”

“Why would you want me to come with you?”

Logan knelt down in front of him and stroked the back of his hand with a finger. “Eddie, of course I do. You’re my best mate. You’re my family.”

“You’d have enough to worry about, moving with two kids.”

“It wouldn’t be for a while anyway.” And it would probably be somewhere smaller, too. A lot smaller, now it was just Logan working.

“If you need money-”

“You keep your money, it’s yours.”

“But- I could-”

“No, no, it’s yours.”

He opened his mouth to argue, but he didn’t want to be annoying. Eduard’s money was not for him; that’s how it went. And what would he have to spend it on anyway? He wasn’t planning on staying alive much longer, just until Logan could manage without him. Logan needed it, to find a new place accessible to Reilly, and if Eduard was coming too, surely he should contribute.

Unless he was lying, which of course he was. Eduard wasn’t a part of the family, certainly not in the long term.

He began rifling through the box.

“That toaster isn’t mine,” he mumbled, “it’s Gunner’s. He’ll get mad if we steal it.”

“Who paid for it?” asked Logan, “like, whose card?”

“Mine, but-”
“Then it’s yours. I got the feeling everything in that house is, legally, so took anything reasonably nice. No use him destroying it all in a temper tantrum, if anyone bothers to pay his bail.”

Eduard hesitated. “The left slot doesn’t work. I’m just… forewarning you.” It hadn’t since Gunner had tried to bash him over the head with it. Logan didn’t need to know that. “But it’s a good toaster. Very sturdy.”

It was nice to have his desktop back too, and the gaming PC Gunner had insisted on Eduard buying for him, but never let him use. It was better than Eduard’s, so on Logan’s suggestion, he transferred all his files onto it and started using it for himself. He decided it was his own little act of defiance. Like a battle trophy. Logan asked if he wanted to sell his old one, but he gave it to Harry. He didn’t quite want to let go of it yet. Anyway, he owed the Coopers a lot.

Even with his possessions dotted about the house, Eduard still felt like he didn’t belong. Like he was a guest, and an overstaying one at that.

Even though he was the one under interrogation, Gunner still looked in control.

Even though one eye was puffy, his nose broken and he was missing a tooth, he looked at Tino like he could eat him alive if he so desired.

Tino knew this would be tricky; Gunner was a police officer, and knew what was coming. He knew how this would work and just what Tino might try, to get him to confess. He didn’t know if 24 hours would be enough to break him.

The interview hadn’t started yet, though Tino made sure Gunner was already being recorded as they waited for the second officer to come back from their toilet break.

“You think you’re gonna get a confession outta me, huh?” Gunner smiled brightly, like this was all a holiday to him.

“I hope so,” said Tino flatly.

“Well you’re right.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I did it,” He shrugged. “Whatever charges you have? I did it.” He stood up and shoved his face right up against the recording device. “I fucking did it! I controlled every little aspect of his life, I cut him off from his friends and family, and when he stepped outta line, I beat him. Sometimes with my fists, sometimes with my belt, or whatever was nearest. And just to make sure he knew who was boss, when I’d beat him into submission, I’d also fuck-”

“Stop it! Stop it! Stop it !” cried Tino.

“What’s wrong?” he grinned, “you don’t wanna hear about it? He liked it more than he let on.”

“No he didn’t!”

“You’re right. He didn’t. He cried. The first few times he begged me to stop, but after a while, he gave up fighting back. Just lay there. Accepted it. Shame. I liked grabbing him by the hair and
smashing his face into the floor. Made me feel powerful.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Tino whimpered.

Gunner leaned back in his chair. “It’s nice to talk, friend. I haven’t been able to tell anyone this. And it doesn’t matter if you know. Doesn’t matter if the whole station knows. There’s nothing you can do.”

“I’m going to make sure you get the maximum sentence,” he spat.

“Somehow, I don’t think that’s gonna happen. I’m a good officer. I’m a good guy. They love me around here. And someone higher up, I don’t know who, they’ll make you drop your case. Bound to. Evidence will mysteriously disappear. They’ll return Eddie to me on a plate and apologise for the inconvenience.” He gave him an innocent smile. “That’s justice, Tino.”

“Then I’ll blow the whistle,” he said, “I’ll expose you and this entire case and anyone who tries to stick up for you.”

“Go ahead. They’ll tell you you’re too close to this. You’re his family, you’re getting protective. He’s clouding your judgement. Eddie isn’t even the one pressing charges: it’s Cooper.”

“He’ll testify against you. Just like I will.”

“It’ll never come to that. See, here’s how it’ll play out. I’m released, given a full apology, and I finally get to press charges of my own, against Cooper. Assault isn’t legal, Tino, in case you’ve forgotten. Neither is breaking and entering. Then we all go over there, Cooper is inevitably killed for “resisting arrest”, and Eddie is mine forever.” His smile fell. “And when I get him back, I’m gonna break every bone in his body. He’ll be begging for death after that, but it’ll never come. Don’t cross me, Tino. It won’t go well for you or him.”

Tino glared at him poisonously. Is it police brutality if the other guy’s also police? Because he wanted to smack Gunner in the jaw.

“Tell me I won’t get away with this, so I can reply with “Oh? But I already have.” Go on. I’ve always wanted to say that.”

Tino hoped he looked calm, and not like he was about to cry. He rang the doorbell and took a moment to compose himself. Deep breath. Everything would be okay.

Harry opened up the door. “Tino. You alright?”

He nodded. “Is Eduard in?”

“Guess.”

“You’re right. Dumb question. Can I see him? Him and your dad?”

She nodded and held the door open for him. “He’s a bit fragile, but he’ll be happy to see you, probably.”

He wouldn’t, Tino thought, not once he told him the news, but he followed her into the house.
Logan was on the couch, watching the ads on the television with the fiery concentration of someone unable to process a word of whatever was being said.

“Logan. How’re you holding up?”

He didn’t look away from the screen. “Yep.”

“Thought so.” He sat next to him on the sofa. “I need to talk to you and Eddie. It’s about Gunner.”

And with that, he had Logan’s attention. “What the fuck’s he done now?”

He glanced at Harry. “Where’s Ed?”

“Upstairs.” He got up. “C’mon.”

Logan led Tino up the stairs. He’d had photos upon photos hung up on the stairway, school photos, holiday photos, family Christmas cards. Half of them were gone, the older ones only commemorated with ghosts of frames and holes left by the nails that used to hold them up there. Not one picture of Hunapo remained.

Logan knocked gently on Eduard’s door - Reilly’s, technically.

“Eddie? It’s Logan. Tino’s here too. Can we come in?”

“Yeah.” His voice was barely audible, but Logan seemed to hear it. He cracked the door open and the two of them stepped inside.

Eduard was curled up on the floor mattress, hugging his knees and staring at them with wide eyes. He looked like a caged animal.

“Can I sit?”

Eduard nodded. Reilly’s bed creaked under his weight. Logan sat on the floor.

“How you been?” asked Tino. Eduard shrugged.

“Right.” He waited to see if he said anything else. Eduard just glared at nothing. “Eddie, I need to ask a favour of you.”

Eduard looked at him.

“I need you to come in to the station and make a statement. I’m trying to build a case against Gunner and I need your help. And photos of your injuries, for evidence. You… if it goes to court, we’ll need you to give evidence there, too.”

“What? No. I can’t face him,” he whimpered, “you know that. Please.”

“We’re not gonna have a strong enough case unless you do,” sighed Tino, “you’re the one he hurt, not Logan. We need you to stand up to him, or there won’t be enough evidence to do anything about him.”

“So that’s it,” he shrugged, “he walks.”

“No? We have to bring him down, or Gunner’s free to try and get to you, or move on to another victim.”
Eduard squirmed; he didn’t want someone else to go through that.

“And if he’s found innocent, he’s coming after Logan. Gonna accuse him of all sorts of things,” he glanced over at Logan, “some you’ve actually done. And others… well, for some reason, the police will be more inclined to believe Gunner.”

“And?” Eduard swallowed, “what happens to the kids? To me?”

“Harry and Reilly have their grandparents, and you have your parents,” Logan assured him. “He can’t put the entire Cooper family in prison. Can he?”

“I’d like to see him try,” said Tino.

“But he’ll come after me, right?” Eduard picked at the skin on his hand, “take me back.” Beat him. Kill him, probably. If he was lucky. And maybe hurt Mr and Mrs Cooper, and their daughters and grandkids, to do so. Sheltering Eduard was dangerous, and not worth it whoever you were, but especially with children.

“Ed, I’m not going to lie to you. He might, if he’s feeling brave,” said Tino; “he always was an arrogant cock. But, well, he’s clever, too. Calculating. He’ll try, if given the opportunity.”

Eduard nodded. First thing someone had said he really agreed with.

“But you could ruin him. Take him down. It’s within your power, you just need to… push through it, I guess. But Logan and I aren’t going anywhere. We’re with you. It’s going to be okay.”

“Seriously, we’re not gonna leave your side,” Logan gently took his hand, “if… if you go to the station - when you’re ready - we’ll both come with you.”

Eduard looked between Logan and Tino, then sighed. “I don’t want him to get away with it,” he mumbled.

“So you’ll come?” asked Tino. Eduard nodded, already shaking.

“I’ll get you some ice cream when you’re done,” Logan told him.

“I’m not the kids. Ice cream isn’t going to help.”

“I’ll buy you a…” Ed didn’t drink alcohol or coffee. Or really eat. “I’ll give you a hug. If you want one. And you won’t have to do anything big for a while. I’ll do the washing up or something. Sort out your laundry. Am I hitting on anything here?”

“I already said I’d do it, okay?”

“I’m not bribing you! I just want to help. And I want you to know we’re with you.”

Eduard nodded. “Well. Thanks, I guess.”

Logan reached over and squeezed his hand. “Hey, I’m a witness too, right? I saw him try and attack you. I’ll be giving out evidence right next to you.”

Another nod. “Okay… okay, together- we- want to go now?”

“Sure thing.”
Eduard staying in Logan’s bed became a nightly routine, that in turn became a more permanent sleeping arrangement when Reilly came out of hospital. Little by little, Hunapo’s belongings disappeared into the attic. Eduard’s clothes stayed in his suitcase. Neither was quite ready to put them in what used to be Hunapo’s side of the wardrobe. As insistent as Logan was on vanishing all evidence of them having existed in their house, he couldn’t quite bring himself to fill up the blank spaces they had left.

Except in his bed, apparently. Not that anyone considered Eduard any sort of replacement - they’d shared beds so many times before, after all. And it was only convenient. It was here or the living room, and they needed that room for other things.

But really, who were they kidding? When either couldn’t sleep, or woke up in a cold sweat from a nightmare, the other was there, whether awake or not, to keep them grounded. Even if Eduard couldn’t lie with his back to him, even if Logan couldn’t touch him too suddenly, he was a comfort to wake up to.

All throughout uni, coffee had kept Eduard functional, and Logan still made him cups, left them on the bedside table. Eduard didn’t touch them, though. He didn’t like the heat, and - from what he said - Logan could guess why. He’d seen the pink blotches on his cheeks.

Gunner seemed to have ruined every aspect of his life. Eduard wasn’t allowed anything anymore. Reilly couldn’t feel their legs. They supposed that made sense, since they weren’t there. But it was weird. Legs weren’t really something you felt, not really, but once they were gone, you felt them not being there.

Except sometimes they did feel them. Sometimes they would go to pick a scab on their knee, and their hand would slip through nothing. Some nights in the hospital they would go to sleep and they’d be there, except they’d be crushed. Not between the cars, like in real life, but in monsters’ jaws or by giant clanking machinery.

Reilly would feel their legs sometimes. They’d wake up in their bed with the gross soap smell and the boring sheets with them still hurting. They weren’t scared, obviously. That was silly. Reilly didn’t get scared, not really. Other kids at school got scared of spiders and dogs and dark rooms, but not them. Reilly didn’t get scared. But they woke up crying, with their breathing not really working and their leg still hurting, and they didn’t like that. They couldn’t even sit up properly. They screamed for their parents, but one of them wasn’t in the hospital and one of them wasn’t anywhere anymore.

There’d been a nice nurse there, at least. Dr Adnan kind of reminded them of their dad. He had the same big smile, and every time the bad dreams happened, he’d be there with water for them. He’d talk to them until they felt better. When they went home, Harry helped make him a card, like the one they’d made for Eduard.

Being in their own bed helped a little. For a few days, they thought maybe the dreams had stopped. It would make sense, wouldn’t it? The doctors made them better, so their legs were gone properly now.
Getting to sleep was hard, but at least there were no more nightmares. Up until the night they came back.

They woke up crying. Their sheets were damp with sweat and their hands wouldn’t stop shaking. A month ago, they could have gone down the hallway and climbed into their parents bed. Now they had to stay in bed; they had no choice. They could yell, but Dad always was a heavy sleeper.

Still, of course, that didn’t stop them. They propped themself up on their arms and shouted for their parents - for both of them, even if they knew full well the monsters had swallowed one of them and they weren’t coming back.

Finally, someone tiptoed into their room and knelt at their side. Light footsteps. Skinnier than Logan and taller than Hunapo. Eduard.

He sat on the floor by the bed and switched on the nightlight.

“Hey. Are you okay?” His voice was always soft, almost too quiet to hear. Harry said that he had to be quiet, for sneaking around the evil ninjas. The theory checked out.

Reilly nodded. “Mhmm. I’m fine.” Eduard had beat thirty bad guys bare-handed. He wouldn’t get it. They felt embarrassed, crying about their dumb legs and nightmare.

“Bad dream?”

Reilly hesitated, then nodded.

“Do you… do you want to talk about it? You don’t have to. But you can.”

“I… there were monsters. Eating my leg. Like the car crash thingy, but… but, like, they were monsters.”

“Do the dreams happen a lot?” He was smiling, but not in a happy way.

Reilly nodded. “All the time in hospital. Now a bit less, but…” They gestured vaguely.

“But they still happen.”

“Yeah.”

He helped Reilly sit up and passed them the glass of water on their bedside table that Logan filled up for them every night. They drank the whole thing.

“They started when the crash happened?”

They nodded.

“Not fun, is it?”

They put the glass on the bedside table. “It’s scary.”

“I know.”

They sat in the silence of the room for a moment.

“Ed?”
"Yeah?"

"Do you ever get scared?"

Eduard nodded. "Oh yeah. All the time."

"But you’re a spy!"

He laughed. "I know. It’s a scary job."

"Not for you. You can do everything. Daddy said you’re all brave and stuff."

"He said that?"

"All the time. He’s always like “Ed’s so cool and brave and I’m so proud of him” and whatever."

"Really?"

"Yeah, Harry said he said so when you were in the hospital. And then on the phone he’s like “Ed’s taking things one day at a time but he’s getting stronger”. So if you were already really strong and now you’re even stronger then why are you so scared?"

Eduard nibbled his lip. "He says the same stuff about you, you know."

"Yeah, but I never fought ninjas."

Eduard nodded. "Maybe. But you’ve still done some very scary things."

"I’m not scared."

"Yes you are. And that’s okay."

"...Okay, sometimes. But I’m not scared now. It’s just when I have bad dreams."

Eduard stroked their hair. His hands were colder and bonier than their dad’s, but it was a comfort in the same way.

"You know, Reilly, when scary things happen, sometimes they can carry on happening, in your head."

"What d’you mean?"

"Well, bad dreams like yours happen to a lot of people. Sometimes if you get in a car accident, or you’re in a war, or... or someone hurts you a lot, sometimes your head keeps playing it back, over and over again. In dreams, or even in the day time. And it can make you scared, or sad, or angry."

"Is that why you get scared?"

"Yeah. And sad. And angry."

"At the ninjas?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes at myself."

"Why at yourself? You’re cool!"

"I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. My point is, things don’t always stop being scary after they finish"
happening. But you have Daddy and Harry and… and me.”

“Does it ever stop being scary?”

“I think, after a while, it does. And until it does, we’ll help it be less scary. Do you want me to get your dad?”

“Can I sleep in his bed?”

“Why don’t we ask him?”

Eduard scooped Reilly up, trying his best to carry them down the hall to Logan’s room.

“Eddie?”

“Yes?”

“Do you think I could be a spy?”

“Oh, yeah. Definitely. The spy agency would be lucky to have you.”

“Even though I don’t have legs?”

“Of course! You’d be the best spy.”
Eduard was 29 when he testified against his abuser.

His hands were shaking so much he couldn’t tie his tie. When Logan helped him, he looked like he was about to faint. Logan tried not to tie his tie too tight; Eduard hated people touching his neck.

“I know this is gonna be a long day,” he began, “but just know I’ll be here for you, in the same room, and supporting you through this. Tino’s built up a watertight case, and, when you say your bit, he’s bound to get years.” Eduard nodded. “I’m so, so proud of you, by the way.”

“What if they find him innocent?” he asked. “What if he walks free and comes after me?”

“We’ll get to that if it happens, but for the record, I don’t think he’d be too keen to cross me again. Or you. You kick back hard.”

“But then you’ll get in trouble and he might start saying you assaulted him and press charges and have a better lawyer and have everyone believe him because he’s a cop and they stick together and you go to prison and he comes back for-”

“Ed, you’re spiralling. Look, you know Tino’s got his entire squad by the throat. They try and cover Gunner’s tracks, he exposes them.”

“Tino’s one guy.”

“But he’s a good one.”

Eduard nodded reluctantly. “He is.”

“And if worst comes to worst, you still have so, so many people ready to help. You’re a grown man; they can’t force you to move back in with him.”

Eduard shuddered, but nodded. Logan pulled him into a gentle hug.

“Whatever happens, I’ll be there with you.”

“Two years?” Logan tried to keep his voice down, tried to suppress the boiling, shaking rage in his body, if only for Eduard’s sake.

Eduard just stared into nothing. Two years. That’s all they had away from him. And that’s if he
didn’t get out and go after him. He was sure he could if he wanted. Pretend to behave himself.

An hourglass turned in Eduard’s head. Two years worth of sand trickled down into the bottom half, slowly but surely.

He’d be back for him.

Eduard sunk into the sofa, pulling off his tie and trying not to be sick. Logan poured him a glass of water, but his hands were shaking too much to touch it.

Two years.

And it was looking like he’d be back on the police force when he came out. Tino tried to tell him that wouldn’t happen, but Gunner was charismatic. It had taken every ounce of evidence, multiple testimonies, and Eduard breaking down in the witness box to sway the jury.

He’d almost given up, with all the questions. The needling for details and evidence and why he’d done this and that. Why had he gone back to Gunner? Why didn’t he just leave? Well, he couldn’t admit it was to use him to get over Logan. He’d tried to explain the psychology behind it, that he didn’t have self-esteem and wanted someone and he didn’t care if he was hurt. The whole time, he didn’t look at Logan, or anyone, really. He just stared at his knees.

Before the trial had started, Gunner’s mother tried bullying him into admitting he was making it all up. She’d not wanted to believe her son could do such a thing. If it wasn’t for Logan by his side, he would’ve caved.

She’d apologised to him after the trial.

Still, he thought he’d have crawled back to Gunner by now, so two years left was better than nothing. He could help Logan get back on his feet, earn money for the family, not be completely useless.

Then Gunner would come for him. Hell, if he spent two years living with Logan, not being able to tell anyone he was in love with him, he might go to Gunner instead, end the misery.

He couldn’t believe he was thinking about that at a time like this. Teenage crushes had no place in a courtroom.

“Ed, he’s never gonna hurt you again.” Logan knelt down in front of him. “Not while I’m alive.”

Eduard teared up at the sound of shattering porcelain. He knew he should do something, clean it up, say something, but he just froze. He didn’t mean to knock it off the counter, it was on the edge, and he was always so clumsy, like he was moving at the wrong frame rate sometimes, so clumsy and stupid and so goddamn worthless, incapable of being near a simple bit of crockery without breaking it.

“Eddie.” Logan’s voice was soft. He never spoke softly except with him. Why was he still here? Why did he still take care of him? “Eddie, are you alright?”

He nodded. “I’m sorry. I… the mug was… I broke it.”

He looked down, kicking the shards into a little pile. The sound they made on the tiles made Eduard grimace. “It’s okay. It’s just a mug.”
“I’m sorry.”

“I have other mugs. It’s alright.”

He was expecting a blow that never came. A slap. A punch. Maybe even a kick, but Logan just cleaned up the mess, then turned his attention to comforting Eduard.

He flinched at the touch - he couldn’t help it - but soon settled into Logan’s arms. It was okay. He was safe. Logan wasn’t going to hurt him, no matter what every instinct and muscle told him.

He hated that he couldn’t stop crying. Logan said he was allowed to cry all he wanted, but there was that pitying look - the heartbeat - the twisted, wobbling frown that made Eduard feel like a child. He tried so hard to shut up and suck it up. To act like an adult for once. It didn’t work, not on Logan. He was an open book to him.

Eduard nestled into his broad chest, partially in an attempt to hide the crying, partially because Logan was warm and soft and the closest thing to safety he had. He always had been.

Logan let him cry silently, both pretending he wasn’t. He held him until long after Eduard had stopped.

“Hey, guess what I found,” Logan mumbled into his hair, eventually.

“What?” Eduard sniffed.

Logan pulled away and walked over to a drawer. “Found it a few days before… yeah.” He handed Eduard his copy of The Matrix. “Huna wanted to let you know they’re sorry for losing it. And, hey, maybe you can build up your collection again?”

Eduard looked at the DVD box. “They found it.”

Logan nodded. “It fell into the sofa cushions.”

It felt so long ago. They’d told him time and time again that they’d look for it, that it had to be somewhere. They’d apologised and assured him it would be found. After Gunner got rid of his collection, or even before, he’d stopped caring. It wasn’t worth caring about anything.

He held the DVD to his chest.

But he still cared, about Hunapo and Lyubov and Tino and Logan, as much as he told himself he couldn’t. Gunner could never beat that out of him.

“I don’t need to rebuild my collection,” he said softly, “it’ll just take up space. There’s better things to spend money on.”

“Eddie, you should. I remember how excited you were when you first started, and you decorated your shelves with all those figures and models. You spent a week putting a Lego Death Star together for it! I know what your collection meant to you.”

“That was uni. I was a kid then.” He chewed on his cheek. “I’m too old for that kind of thing.”

“Did Primary-school-job Manchild tell you that?”

Eduard almost snorted. “Yeah, but he’s ri- no, I’m not doing that. Do you think I should start it again?”
“Yes, and I know starting over is more painful than starting, but it’s something to focus on that isn’t work.”

“I don’t just focus on work,” he chuckled, “Sometimes I wallow in sadness.”

Logan squeezed his shoulder, very lightly. “Yeah.”

Eduard stiffened at the sound of the doorbell.

“Hey, it’s okay. I’ll get it.”

Logan opened up the door. Eduard tried to hide out of view.

“Sorry, is this where Eduard Mets is staying?” The voice was familiar. Not Gunner’s - it was deeper, softer - but it still made Eduard’s skin crawl, just a little. It was a voice he didn’t particularly want to think about.

“It’s where he lives. Who are you?” He could hear that little twinge of protectiveness in Logan’s voice.

“Lars. May I come in?”

“I’ll ask him.”

“Tell him I’m here to make things right.”

Logan paused, raising his eyebrows, but he put his head around the living room door to ask Ed.

“Says his name’s Lars. Says he wants to make things right. Want me to tell him to fuck off?”

Eduard bit his lip. “Guess I’ll hear what he has to say.”

“Sure?”

He nodded. “Let him in.”

Logan reluctantly opened the door for him. “I don’t know who you are,” he muttered as he passed, “but don’t try any shit.”

Lars nodded. “I won’t.”

He sat in the armchair across the living room to Eduard, with the posture of a man taking a job interview.

Logan left them to it, making a start on dinner. Maybe Eduard would eat this one.

“Lars, what are you doing?”

They had never really talked much. Seen each other, sure, but Eduard got nervous talking to anyone but Gunner when they were together.

“I’ve cut Gunner off. What he did was unforgivable and I’m sorry you had to go through that.” He smoothed his shirt. It was probably the drug dealer equivalent of what one would wear to a job interview too. “I should have said something.”

Eduard stared at his knees for a moment, then rolled up his sleeve. He laid out his forearm for Lars to
see. Pink circles, some like bug bites, some the size of coins, decorated his arm.

“Have you ever had a joint put out on your skin, Lars?”

He didn’t say anything to that.

“No? How about a blunt?”

“I can’t say I have.”

“No? You should really try it some time. It’s a lot of fun.”

Lars’s expression was unreadable.

Eduard pointed to one of the burns. “That was the first one. You sold him the joint. I spilt his beer.”

“I-“

“Now this one-” He pointed to one right below his inner elbow. “-This one I believe he didn’t pay for. But don’t quote me on that, after the tenth time you start losing track.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t care that you slept with him. Fucking keep him.”

“I stopped talking to him.”

“Oh, excellent. What a relief. My arm feels so much better.”

“Look, I understand why you’re angry, but he’s a tough guy to stand up to. It’s not like we had the healthiest relationship either.”

“Did he ever hurt you, Lars?”

“I’d have liked to see him try.”

“I don’t just mean physically. Did he have that same kind of power over you?”

“I gave as good as I got. And then some.”

“And if he was so incapable of hurting you-“

“Look, it was business, okay? He was a customer.”

“So, you giving him ecstasy in exchange for a blowjob, that was business?”

“It’s complicated.”

It dawned on him. “Jesus Christ. You didn’t even cut him off for moral reasons, did you? That was business too. He’s not exactly buying off you in prison.”

“What? No, no, I-“

“I think you should go.”

Lars stood up. “Fine. Fine, I understand. Just…” He fished a white card out of his pocket. “Just give me a call if you need anything. If there’s any way I can make it up to you. I owe you one. I’m sorry.”
So you said.”

Logan decided it was time to get involved, grabbing Lars by the scruff of his shirt and practically launching him out the door. Furious as he was, he couldn’t help feeling a little proud of Eduard. He was sticking up for himself. That counted for something.

This was a mistake.

Everyone was staring at him as he shuffled towards his desk, barely remembering where it was or what it looked like. The least personal one there, it seemed. People glanced at him when they thought he couldn’t see them. He tried to ignore it.

He settled down into his cubicle and placed the card from Harry and Reilly on his desk. It was the first time he’d moved it from its original home next to Logan’s bed, and it would feel weird, not being able to see it. He logged onto his work computer and got coding, tapping away at his keyboard and spinning algorithms.

He’d always known he was a good programmer. He was talented at problem solving, always had been, breezing through puzzles since he was a kid. He worked hard on the program, the one he privately thought of as his baby, even with the others working on it with him. It felt almost refreshing to do it here, after so many times hunched over his laptop at home, trying to avoid going to bed until after Gunner was asleep. He sat up straight and tried to embrace the quiet chatter of the office.

But then he noticed how everyone was talking. Muttering to each other under their breaths, sending pitying glances his way. The moment he caught someone’s eye, they would look away and pretend to be busy. There was chatter everywhere - quiet chatter, not enough to disrupt anyone, but there, everyone belonging but him, and yet he was the one they were talking about.

He wasn’t that interesting, surely? Did they all know? Wait, the card, course they did. Everyone knew.

“Eduard, right?”

He looked up. Someone he knew by face only loomed over him. “Right.”

He perched on his desk. “Listen, I don’t wanna pry, but that boyfriend of yours-”

“Ex.”

“Right, ex, what sort of shit did he do exactly?”

Eduard froze. “I, uh- I don’t-”

“I don’t mean to pry or anything. Just wondering.”

His mouth went dry. He couldn’t think of a precise example, not in the moment. Not one he was comfortable to share. He went through things in his head. “A-lot.”

“Yeah, but specifically. Like, what was the worst thing?”

He choked me until I went unconscious. He punched me in the jaw until I couldn’t talk. He smashed glass in my face and broke my arm. He took away everything and everyone that made me happy. “I couldn’t, uh… I couldn’t tell you off the top of my head, sorry.”

Someone he didn’t even know by face joined the two of them at Eduard’s desk, glaring at the other
man. “What the fuck, man? Why you asking him that?”

“I was curious!”

“Go do your fucking work.”

The man walked off, grumbling to himself.

“Sorry about him.”

Eduard just shrugged. “I get it.”

“Doesn’t make it alright.”

“No, guess not.”

“Let me know if he tries anything again. I’ll let you get back to work.”

The man clapped Eduard on the shoulder and walked away. He squirmed and bristled and focused on his computer. He could still feel his hand even as he sat down. Modules and subroutines and if statements jumbled up in his head. Maybe he wasn’t so good a programmer after all.

That evening, he came home from work to a pair of pale green eyes staring at him from the bookshelf. He didn’t see them at first. They glared out from a mound of light grey, coiled up on one of the highest shelves. He wouldn’t have noticed at all, but he caught the mound moving from the corner of his eye and swivelled around in a panic.

It was just the mound, shifting around and sitting back down. He blinked. The mound just stared at the wall next to it, glanced at Eduard, and then went back to the wall.

He backed up gently, then ran out of the room, downstairs, into the kitchen. Logan was making dinner.

“Logan. There’s a, uh... rat in your room.”

To his surprise, Logan just chuckled.

“Not a rat.”

“I- no?”

Logan smiled and shook his head. He walked Eduard back up to his room, leaving his pasta to boil. It was pretty big for a rat. Logan extended his hand to it. It mewed and buried itself further into the bookshelf. Now Eduard could see it clearly, it was, in fact, a small, grey kitten.

“Mewie’s like you,” Logan explained, “they rescued him from his owners a few weeks back. Only one to make it.”

“Is this going to become a home for sad, broken people or?” Eduard’s heart ached for Mewie, though. The kitten was looking at them in terror, even when Logan offered him a handful of treats.

“I thought you two would be good for each other. Mewie needs someone to respect his boundaries, who knows what it’s like to be abused. And I reckon you would enjoy the company of something quiet and gentle. Plus, you just had your first day back at work. Thought maybe you’d like having a friend.”
Eduard watched Mewie cower on the bookshelf. “I don’t think I’d be a good owner.”

“I think it’ll take a while for you two to get used to each other, but you both could be just what the other needs.”

He thought about it for a long while before sighing. “Fine. But what if I’m a bad owner and he dies?”

“I refuse to believe you’d ever be a bad cat owner. You were always gentle with the ones that showed up in our garden. And anyway, I’ll help.”

Eduard reached up and offered him his hand. “I do love cats.”

“And you were better at showing it than Steveo.”

“Was one of the bad things his owners did calling him Mewie?”

“I chose the name, you cheeky cunt. Short for Mewbacca.”

Eduard did something he’d been certain his body had forgotten was possible: he laughed. He burrowed his face into his jumper, his shoulders shaking ever so slightly.

He didn’t notice Logan was staring for a full second.

He blinked and shut up. “Sorry, sorry, I-”

Logan held out his arms. “Hug?”

Eduard hesitated, then wrapped his arms around Logan’s neck. “Thanks for the cat. He’s lovely.”

“He is.” Logan held him gently, his face in his hair. “He really is.”

Eduard froze at the sight of the bottle. It wasn’t the same brand Gunner used to drink, and the logical part of his brain told him Logan was perfectly entitled to a drink and it was none of his business, but he was still panicking. Still unable to control his breathing and sweating and wish to be anywhere else. Still looking at that bottle, thinking maybe it could be flying right at his head, thinking it could smash over his head and knock him out and leave him drenched in beer with blood dripping into his eyes.

Logan noticed. Of course he did. His eyes rarely left Eduard these days. It took a moment for him to join the pieces. Fussing only ever made him feel crowded, so he poured him water (plastic cup, glass made him anxious, especially when his hands were shaking so much) and stepped away from him, just to give him space. He put the bottles at the back of the cabinet and closed it. Out of sight. Nothing to worry about.

“Do you want to sit on the sofa?”

Eduard floundered. “I- no, I’m- I’m good, I-I-I just- I don’t need-”

“Go sit down, Ed. Drink your water.”

He nodded and scuttled off to the living room. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright. It’s alright. I’ve got you, mate. I’m here.”
He tried to breathe.

“Threw it.”

“What?”

He laughed shakily. “Gunner. He’d throw them. Right at my head.” He laughed like he was being strangled, squeaky and awkward and hysterical. “Like something out of some shitty TV drama, I swear. On target, course! I—” he doubled over, “I cried! It… it left… It left a bruise!” he wheezed the last word out, clutching his stomach. “Covered in beer. Head to toe. Beer and blood. Like if—” He wasn’t quite sure if he was laughing or crying. “Like if Carrie was an alcoholic. Hot diggity shit, that was wild.”

Logan touched his hand. “Are you okay?”

“Not even kind of,” he chuckled, “Not. Even. Kind of.”

Logan tried to hide it. He tried to keep his drinking solely in the pub, where the noise helped drown out the pain and Eduard didn’t have to see him. He didn’t want to scare Eduard. The guy had been through enough. He could hide his bottles and keep away from him when he was drunk, but he needed something to ease it all. Something to help him forget. If only for a moment. Was it a good idea, drinking when he was already struggling to pay rent? Probably not. Was he going to stop? Definitely not.

“Mate, slow down.”

He glowered up at the bartender. Angie was sweet, and she had been close with him and Hunapo, but he was in no mood to slow down. “I’m going through some things. I’ll drink what I want.”

She sighed and adjusted her ponytail. “I know. And I get it. But you have a liver that needs thinking about.”

“You’re a bartender,” he snorted, “Your job is fucking people in the liver.”

“Well, yeah. But I can liver-fuck responsibly.”

“And I can’t liver-jack-off responsibly?”

“How many beers have you had, Logan?”

“Some. I don’t know. I’m not Eddie, I can’t count.”

“Case in point. Do you want to talk about it?”

“What is there to talk about? They’re fucking dead. Not coming back.” He blew a raspberry. “Bye-bye. No more Huna. Just me and my sad kids and my sad friend and a wheelchair.”

“Well, how are you feeling?”

“Bad.”

“I would expect so, but—”

“Baaaaaad. BAD!”
“Logan—”


“Do you want to elaborate on that? It might help.”

“I dunno. I want Eddie to be okay. Does that help?”

“But what about you?”

“What about me?”

“You’re looking after Ed, Harry, and Reilly. Who’s looking after you?”

“I’m a grown ass man, Angie.”

“So’s Ed.”

“Yeah, but he’s really going through it. He needs me.”

“You’re going through it too.”

“Yeah, but I never got a bottle chucked at me.”

She winced and glanced down. “That boyfriend of his was a real piece of work, huh?”

He snorted. “Yeah. Y’could fucking say that.”

Angie looked at him. “You really love him, don’t you?”


“What?”

“I dunno.” He almost fell off his stool.

“What about you? Why can’t he be with you?”

Logan made a face. “He needs better. Not- not a drink. Drunk. He doesn’t like alcohol. Used to drink all the time in uni.”

Angie nodded. She’d heard all about Gunner.

“You’re nothing like him,” she told him.

“I know. But- well, he… I’d never hurt him, but he still needs better. He also needs a friend.”

Logan fumbled with the lock and let himself in. The house was quiet, but he stumbled in loudly nonetheless.

“Helloooo?”
He barged into the living room. There wasn’t a single light on, but the blue glow of a laptop screen lit up Eduard in the corner, a Visual Basic file shining in the lenses of his new glasses.

“Eddie!” Fuck, he wasn’t supposed to see him like this. “What are you doing up? It’s fucking late. Go bed. Sleep bed.”

He was frozen on the spot, staring right through him.

“Fuck, you good?” He fell onto the sofa next to him. When he leaned on his shoulder, Eduard snapped out of it to shudder. “Eddie?”

“Working. Just… I was working.”

“You work too hard. Toooooo hard.”

“I’m sorry.”

Logan laughed. “You’re sad a lot, aren’t you?”

Eduard didn’t even know what to say to that.

“Promise me… promise.”

“Promise what?”

“You’ll stop being sad. You deserve a bit of happy. Some not-sad. You’re always sad. You were sad when we were babies. Promise me you’ll stop being sad.”

“Yes, I promise. Sorry.”

“Do you promise?”

“I said I promise, Gunner!”

Logan paused. Eduard was looking at him like he’d just ripped someone limb from limb, shrinking into the sofa. He almost fainted in terror.

“Eddie, it’s me. It’s Logan.”

“I’m - I - I’m sorry.”

“Are you okay?”

He nodded. He was lying. Even completely plastered, Logan knew when Eduard was lying.


Eduard didn’t hug back. He stiffened. “Logan…”

He pulled away. “No hugs?”

“No, you can.”

“You’re just saying that, aren’t you?”

“…Yeah.”
“Do you want me to sleep down here?”

“Go to bed. I’ve still got work to do.”

“You sure?”

“Just go to bed, Logan.” His voice was so soft.

Logan nodded. “I’m sorry. I’m really, really- I didn’t think you’d be up, and-”

“Please.”

He nodded again and left. Eduard stared blankly at his screen until it went to sleep. Logan found him like that the next morning. Eduard’s eyes hurt, and every time he blinked, they felt like they’d been coated in lead. And he hadn’t even made any progress on the coding.

“Eddie?”

Eduard jumped. He glanced at the window to find daylight peeking through the cracks in the curtains. Again?

Logan looked awful. His hair stuck up everywhere and his skin had a greyish tinge to it. He was still in his clothes from last night. Not that Eduard looked any better.

“I’m sorry,” Logan mumbled, “I should’ve been more careful. I’m gonna be more careful.”

“You don’t have to be. It’s fine. You don’t have to accommodate me and by problems. It’s fine. I’m fine.” He turned back to his work. “I just need to grow up. You do what you want.”

“Not if it upsets you.” Logan sat on the sofa, keeping space between them.

“Who cares what upsets me? I can handle it. I’m an adult.”

“I care.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re my best friend and I love you. I want you to feel safe here.”

Eduard looked away. “Don’t worry about it.”

Logan pulled him into a hug, closing the laptop. “You’re worth worrying about.”

Eduard had to laugh.

“You are,” he insisted, “That’s why we do it. I’ve met very fucking few people not worth caring about, and you’re not one.”

Eduard shook his head. “You’re wasting your time.”

“I’ve never been wasting my time with you.”

He was never going to be okay. That much was for sure. He would never be okay again. Logan couldn’t do anything for him. He was as fucked up as he was. And it was his fault for making
himself his responsibility in the first place.

He wasn’t built to be happy. He never had been and he never would be. Not properly. Not permanently. That wasn’t news to him, of course not- he’d always known. It was drilled into him as a kid, like all his “please”s and “thank you”s. You’ll never be happy. Anything that gives you any semblance of it is temporary or lulling you into a false sense of security or hell, just an inconvenience to everyone but you. Some things are made to be broken. You especially. So why bother?

Everything good in life had been temporary: fleeting distractions to keep him going, try and convince him being alive was worth it. His stupid hobbies. His drinking, back when he could look at a bottle without getting freaked out. Lyubov. Logan.

He wouldn’t want Eduard here much longer, surely. He didn’t even want him here now - he just needed a distraction. Part of Eduard wanted it over and done with. Part of him never wanted to leave. But that was selfish. He was just holding Logan back. The man was a single father, a widower, struggling through life, and he didn’t need Eduard here to make things worse.

But where else could he go?

He tried to make it up to him. He toed the line between making himself useful and keeping himself seen but not heard. That wasn’t hard, not with all his practice. He had it down to a science. He tidied up almost obsessively, cleaned the counters, put away things they wouldn’t yell at him for moving, put out the rubbish. It was the least he could do.

He was sweeping all the debris out from under the sofa when he found Lars’s number. Weirdly professional for a drug dealer. Small black text, plain white background, nice paper. Classy.

The worst thing about filling your life with distractions is that it doesn’t work. Not even temporarily. Half the shit you do feels like a masquerade and the other half just reminds you how numb you are.

He looked down at the business card and fished his phone out of his pocket. Logan was at work. The kids were at school. He wouldn’t be interrupted. And after all, Lars wanted to help.

Then again, logically, this wasn’t going to help. Logically, this would only hurt him. He knew the health risks well enough, and he didn’t need an addiction on top of everything else.

Then again, logically, if it killed him, he was okay with that. If it ruined his relationship with Logan, if it emptied his bank account, if it drove him crazy, it was what he deserved. What he always had.

He sat on the sofa and called Lars. He picked up fairly quickly.

“Hello?”

Eduard wasn’t quite sure what to say.

“Hello?” Lars didn’t sound happy to be silent-called. There was something cutting in his voice that made Eduard flinch.

“Uh, is this… is this Lars Mooren?”

“Who’s asking?”

“It’s me. Sorry. It’s Eduard. Mets. I found your card.”

His voice softened a little. Maybe he wasn’t all bad. “Eduard. Hey, you alright?”
“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. Listen, are you still, like… y’know…” He wasn’t sure how to phrase this without sounding like an idiot. Or a cop. “Dealing? Drugs, I mean.”

“Yeah. Why?”

“I don’t know. This is dumb. I just… I’m not a drugs guy. I don’t even know if I should… anyway. I’m calling you now. I might as well just say it. Do you have anything that’ll make me feel… I don’t know. Alive? Not even fully, necessarily, just… kind of.”

Lars paused, considering. Maybe turning over the ethics of the subject in his head. Oh, who was Eduard kidding? The man didn’t care about that, thankfully.

“When can you meet me?”

“Any time, I guess. I’m working from home most days. When’s good for you?”

“I’m free right now. I can come over if you want.”

“No, no!” He didn’t want him in Logan’s house. This place was so much nicer than what they were about to do. “Uh… kids. In the house. Maybe not the best idea. But we can meet somewhere else. Where do people generally do these things?”

Eduard had seen shittier parks, but he wasn’t sure where. Scabby pigeons, overfed on the remains of cheap fried chicken and chips, fluttered about on the battered concrete, fighting over the contents of an abandoned paper box. A gaggle of teenage boys kicked a football around, but the playground itself was empty.

Lars himself was waiting for him on an iron bench, the hood of a grey parka hiding as much of his face as it could. Following his lead, Eduard decided it was probably for the best that he put his hood up too. It occurred to him that the black backpack on his lap contained whatever it was he was about to buy. The goods.

He sat next to him. “Afternoon.”

“Afternoon,” Lars agreed.

“How’ve you been?”

“Fine.”

“What drugs are you suggesting? Prescribing, as it were?” He laughed nervously. He had very little clue what he was doing.

“Snow.”

“What? You can get high off snow?”

Lars snorted. At him. “Cocaine,” he amended, “Sorry, forgot you were new to all this.”

“Cocaine?”


“I know what cocaine is.”
“You would think so.” Lars pulled a little plastic bag out of his backpack and handed it to him.

“Is that the stuff?” He’d never seen cocaine in person before. It looked so harmless. Like flour.

“Indeed it is. It’s good stuff, too.”

“You’re selling me the good stuff?”

“Course. I owe you one, remember?”

“Well, I… I’m flattered.”

“No problem. Do you want to try it here? I find if it’s your first time, it’s good to have somebody around.”

“I know how to put cocaine in my nose,” he assured him, “I’ve seen Pulp Fiction.”

Lars smiled. “I don’t doubt that. But it’s best to have someone around who knows what they’re doing. Take a little now and see how you feel.”

“Here?”

“This park’s seen more drugs than I have. I’ll genuinely give you money if none of those lads are high right now. We won’t get caught.”

“Are you sure? Do I not need a surface or something?” For a weird moment, he wondered if he was supposed to sniff it off the floor.

Instead, Lars put his hand out to him. “Give me your phone.”

He handed it over without question. He’d done the same for Gunner so many times, it was muscle memory. “Do you need me to unlock it for you?”

Lars ignored him and fished a credit card out of his pocket.

“Right. The screen. Sorry.”

“No, no, it’s fine. You’re new to this.” He laid out an expertly neat line on the screen. “Try that out. Pulp Fiction, like you said.”

He took the phone off him. Real, actual, cocaine. For him. Intended for his administration. It smelt weirdly sweet. Like incense, almost. How was this stuff made again?

“So just… snort it?”

“Yeah.”

“In the… in the nose?”

“No, Eduard, you snort it into your ears.”

“But… not really, right?”

“Right. Look, don’t let it scare you. It’s only coke. It’s not gonna hurt you.”

“Unless it does.”
“Unless it does. But it probably won’t.”

“That’s very reassuring.”

“I’m just your dealer. That’s not my job. Now take the damn blow.”

“Right, sorry, I…” He cleared his throat and breathed out slowly. This would be fine. Lars knew what he was doing. He raised the phone to his nose and took the whole line.

“What now?”

“Give it a moment. You’ll know when it’s kicking in.”

“ Weird aftertaste. Or… I don’t know. Is it an aftertaste if it’s in your nose? Anyway, it’s kind of… in my throat.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

He touched his nostrils, inhaling the dregs of it. It was so much easier than he’d expected. Didn’t hurt his nose anywhere near as much as he’d anticipated. Easy, once you do it. Like riding a bike.

Lars was right about it kicking in. The park sharpened in focus. Everything in HD. He could hear the blood in his body, the drugs flowing through it, his heart pounding. It was as if someone had gone over the world in Photoshop, cranked up the contrast and brightness, and airbrushed out all the fog. He felt his mouth form a smile as he turned to Lars.

“Wow.”

“Good stuff, isn’t it?”

“Amazing.” He laughed.

“How you feeling?”

Eduard took in the park. It was a beautiful place, really, in all its concrete-and-litter glory. “Alive.”

“That’s what I’m here for. You ever done drugs before?”

“ Not really. I used to drink a lot. Like, a lot. But when a beer gets smashed over your head, the stuff really loses its charm, y’know? It’s like- it’s like- you know what it’s like? It’s like when there’s a name you like. And you think, like, “if I ever have a kid, that’s what I’m naming it”. But then you meet some dickhead with that name. And then you’re like… “fuck that name! I’m gonna call my kid Georgia instead. That’s a good name.” It’s like that.”

Lars nodded as if he was listening. He had to admit, this was the first time he’d heard Eduard say more than a sentence at a time.

“Georgia is a good name, actually! I should have a kid and call her Georgia. Georgia’s a good name. Except, maybe I shouldn’t have a kid, because Logan has two already. They’re good kids. Chaotic, but good. Like in Dungeons and Dragons, you know? And, Harry, Harry’s my baby. Or, she was, when we were in uni. She’s twelve now. Can you believe that? Twelve. She was so little, and now she’s in secondary school. Shoulda been there.” He paused, moving his mouth into strange, exaggerated shapes. He rolled his tongue, then unrolled it, then rolled it again. “But she had Huna. And Logan, of course. Huna was like my replacement. And now they’re dead, so I’m Huna’s replacement. And they have to come back so they can replace me when I move out of Logan’s so it’s
a proper cycle. We have to take turns. And I have to move out at some point. I really should move out. But it’s hard. I don’t want to live on my own. I don’t even want to be on my own at Logan’s. Plus, it’s really hard, getting out of the house. The whole trip here, I was waiting for Gunner to get on the bus and beat the shit out of me. He’s gonna find me eventually. Maybe he’s here.”

“He’s not here,” he reassured him.

“But you would say that. You’re his friend.”

“Not anymore.”

“But you were.”

“Eduard, the cocaine just makes you a little paranoid. It happens.”

Eduard laughed. “No. No, I’m already paranoid. I can’t get more paranoid. I only leave the house to go to work. I don’t like standing with my back to the room in case he’s behind me. It’s not the cocaine. But is he here? Is this a trap?”

“He’s in prison.”

“He’s in prison, yeah.” Eduard perched up on the back of the bench, feet on the seat. “Ignore me. I might be a bit high.”

“You think?”

“Yeah, possibly. It’s actually very nice. It’s very nice.”

“I doubt you’ve even reached the peak yet. You’ll get there in…” He checked his watch. “About ten, fifteen minutes. Probably less, since you haven’t built up your tolerance yet.”

“How long will it last?”

“Half an hour, 45 minutes?”

“Logan gets home at 5. Will I be sober by then?”

“It’s 3. You’ll be fine.”

“Good, good. Good good good good good. Good. I don’t want him to know. He’s got… stuff. Enough stuff. Lovely guy. Deserves to have less of the stuff.”

“You and him close?”

“Yeah. Or, I’m close to him, anyway. Or, I was. I don’t know. You-know-who fucked that all up. Now everything freaks me out, and he keeps looking after me and that’s all… I dunno. Don’t like it. Doesn’t matter.”

“I should’ve said something before.”

“You wouldn’t have. Not while he was still paying you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“No, I guess I-” He caught himself. “I do, actually. ‘Cause you didn’t.”
“But I should have.”

“Yeah, but, you didn’t.”

Lars chuckled to himself.

“What?”

“Never heard you so blunt.”

“Sorry.”

He shrugged. “It’s the coke. Anyway, it’s good. Means you’re getting confident.”

“Guess so. Say, how much is it? If I wanted some for later?”

“£40 a gram.”

“How many grams do I need to be happy?”

Lars lifted the still-mostly-empty bag between them.

“Ah.”

“That’ll keep you going for now, though. Call me when it’s out, if you want more.” Eduard would. He’d be so addicted, of course he’d be back for more. And more. And more, until it finally killed him. Sounded like a solid plan. To die grabbing at whatever semblance of life he could and finally stop wasting Logan’s time.

Eduard was gonna love this!

Logan held the battered cardboard box under his arm, fumbling with his keys and grinning like an idiot. This was just what he needed!

Eduard was getting there, slowly but surely becoming himself again, getting out of his shell and the house. Logan didn’t know where he kept going, exactly, but it wasn’t to work, and it certainly wasn’t back to Gunner. As long as he was safe, he didn’t need to speculate why he was out. Even when he seemed so sad once he was home. Even if he couldn’t shake the feeling it was linked to the evening he’d come home from work to find him manically cleaning the whole house.

He was getting out of the house. That was the important thing.

Logan found him in their room, and set the box down in the doorway out of sight. Eduard was sat at his desktop, Mewie on his lap. The kitten was curled up asleep, and it was the first time Logan had seen it get that close to someone. So, a good day all round for Eduard.

The man in question beamed when he saw him, pointing at the kitten, but daring not to move anymore than that. It was the brightest, most genuine, smile Logan had seen on him in years.

“Hey,” he spoke in a low voice, for both Eduard and Mewie’s sakes, “I got a surprise for you.”

“Another one?” Eduard blinked, genuinely unable to process people being kind to him. It had always been something he couldn’t quite understand. He hadn’t known why Layla kissed his forehead, or
the Coopers celebrated his birthday. And, after years of building him up, Gunner had tore him down again.

“My friend upgraded his set and was gonna donate this,” he began to explain, moving the box into the room, “but I asked if I could have it instead. I missed hearing you play.”

“What?”

“What what?”

“I wasn’t even good.”

“I thought you were pretty good,” Logan mumbled, “but even if you weren’t, it’s something you like doing.” Liked. But he could learn to like it again.

He nodded. “Thank you.”

Eduard didn’t touch it.

Logan would catch him staring at the piano, but every time he asked him to play, Eduard would shake his head and mumble out an excuse. The real reason, though, was he didn’t like making too much noise, didn’t want his presence known and the attention on him.

Eventually, Logan decided the only option was to phone Lyubov.

“I can’t play without you,” Lyubov wiped dust off the keyboard with her sleeve. “It’s a duet.”

Eduard looked at her from his bed. “Sorry.”

No one else was home. Logan had thought - maybe - just having Eduard and Lyubov in the house would give him more confidence.

“It’s okay, it’s okay. I know. But I think there’s a keyboard that needs breaking in.”

“You’re a better player.”

“I play guitar, Mets. You’re the pianist.”

“It’s not hard. You just press the keys and music happens.”

“I know how to play it. But you know it better.”

“Not by much.”

“Nonsense, you’re a wonderful pianist!” He didn’t reply. “Please?” Her lip wobbled and her face fell. Eduard sighed.

“Okay, fine, please don’t cry.” He got up and sat next to her, running a finger over the keys before gently pressing one. Lyubov smiled reassuringly and let him get used to the feel of playing again.

He tried a few notes, then some chords, and eventually started up a simple melody, something his piano teacher had drilled into him as a child, along with a sense of dread and inadequacy.
He’d missed it, though, playing. Gunner never had an interest, even when they were younger. He’d just dismissed it as another one of Eduard’s boring, nerdy hobbies. Logan never understood it, either, but at least he never tried to make Eduard feel small about it.

Lyubov caught him smiling, and Eduard caught himself.

Gunner had always said his smile was goofy. Made his jokes. Then, later, made sure Eduard had no reason to smile.

His fingers came to a halt at the end of the song, and Lyubov pulled him into a hug.

“I missed playing with you.”

He put his arm around her shoulders and rested his cheek on the top of her head. “I missed playing,” he admitted.

It had been a while since Logan had heard Eduard play alone.

It was one of those pretentious acoustic-y songs Logan didn’t have the attention span for, but by God was he happy to hear it. He lurked in the doorway and listened as silently as he could. Eduard’s fingers danced up and down on the keys delicately.

And better yet, he was singing. It was sad, but it was beautiful, his voice as soft and deep as he remembered - baritone, as he insisted, though Logan didn’t know what any of that meant and generally just went with pretty.

“Signs and wonders, sea lion caves in the dark,” he sang, gentle and only to himself, “Blind faith, God’s grace, nothing else left to impart.”

Something pulled at Logan’s heart. Eduard’s voice always had a weird quality to it Logan could never place. Something he hadn’t heard in any other voice. He couldn’t tell you what it was. Maybe he was just in love with him. But as he watched him play, everything else faded into the dark. Eduard didn’t see him, but he felt like every word was sung for him. If he teared up a little, that was nobody’s business but his own.

The last notes filled the air. “Should I tear my heart out now? Everything I feel returns to you somehow, mmm-mmm-mm.”

He switched his keyboard off and went to get up, only to see Logan in the doorway.

“I—I was just playing around with it, I’m sorry, it was—“

“Mate, you’re allowed to play your keyboard.”

“I wasn’t disturbing you?”

“No, no, course not. I was watching. Sorry if I startled you.”

“You didn’t. Sorry, I was just playing around. Won’t make a habit of it.”

“You should. It’s good.”

His face fell; Logan was just saying that. He was trying to be nice. He pitied Eduard and put up with
him and didn’t really want him making all this noise.

“Makes me happy,” Logan continued, “always did. Something about your voice is just… so beautiful. And the rebelling.” He held out his hand for Mewie to sniff. “Loved it when you played dad rock. And those alternative songs and the film soundtracks. Songs you liked but your parents would never let you play.”

“They’re not my parents,” he said quickly. Logan smiled.

“Please play more, if you want.”

“You really want me to?”

“Yes.” Logan pulled him into a hug and rubbed his back. “Please play as much as you want.”

__________________________________________________________________________

The new guy looked as scared as he did.

Or maybe Jānis was just shy, hunched in his little cubicle and keeping to himself. Maybe something bad had happened to him too. He looked like one of those people: attracting tragedy. But then again, maybe not.

He took the desk near Eduard’s, working with his head down, the same way he did. People didn’t seem to be paying him much attention, and he seemed lonely.

Eduard, already shaking from the idea, stood up and walked over to him. At least Logan would be happy to hear him standing on his own two feet. He kept it in his mind as he hovered around his desk.

Jānis was younger than him. He must have been straight out of university, if that. He blinked up at him.

“Hi.”

“You’re new here?”

“I am. Uh… pleasure to meet you.” Jānis looked rather relieved, like he’d been waiting for someone to be friendly to him, start a conversation. Or maybe he’d thought Eduard was out to pick on him.

“You too. I’m Eduard.”

The two of them awkwardly stared past each other for a moment.

“Want a drink?” asked Eduard, fiddling with his blazer.

Jānis nodded and gave a tiny smile. “Yeah, where d’you want to go?”

He blinked for a moment, then corrected himself. “I meant water. Or coffee.”

“Oh! Sober drink!”

“Yeah, sober drink. Unless you want to go somewhere after work. I don’t mind.” Would he be up for non-sober drinks? Maybe if he had a little visit to the bathroom-

No, he had little-to-no filter on coke. Jānis was a chance to start over, no baggage. No stares and prying questions, no tiptoeing, no babying. He could have a clean slate if he kept his mouth shut.
Incidentally, a clean slate was a good surface to snort off. Maybe a line wouldn’t hurt.

Focus, Eduard.

“I would like that.” He even gave Eduard a little smile.

“Wherever you want to go. I don’t mind.” Although bars might be a problem. Too rowdy. They made him nervous. And Logan would get mad at him if he brought people home out of nowhere.

“Actually, uh, I only just moved, I don’t really know anywhere. But we can go to mine if you want to. I have a lot of drinks at home.”

Eduard blinked. Would he be allowed to do that? No wait, surely Logan wouldn’t mind? He wasn’t Gunner. He wasn’t going to hurt Eduard, no matter how much he deserved it.

“I’ll just check my schedule, er, Jānis. Want me to grab you a sober drink?”

Jānis nodded and Eduard ducked out of there, over to the cooler to text Logan.

guy at work invited me over, can I go?

His reply came quickly.

course u can dummy have fun

unless it’s the guy who was asking all the questions in which case go ahead but i’m gonna punch him

See? Logan wouldn’t hurt him. Logan was his friend, and always had been. He smiled at the screen, then went to give Jānis his water.

It was one of those nights. The two of them were exhausted but nightmares kept them up, so they just watched films in bed from Eduard’s laptop, Mewie curled up on Eduard’s lap. Logan made them drinks, and - for once - Eduard felt brave enough to drink it. He waited until the coffee was lukewarm, but it was progress. Logan had given him the softest smile at that. He was trying so hard to help Eduard, and the guilt prickled away under the surface.

If Logan knew, he’d throw him out, surely?

Logan let out a chuckle at some joke, then turned to Eduard and held out his arm. Eduard tucked it around his shoulders, resting his head on his strong shoulder.

“There’s a continuity error,” he muttered, half to himself and half to Logan.

“A what?”

“In this shot—“ Eduard rewinded the film. “Her hair’s in her face, just there. And then you can see her hands up close. They don’t move. But then in the next one… boom. Hair tucked behind her ears.”

“Oh yeah.”

“The actress must have moved it between shots. Like, force of habit.”

“How do you notice these things?”
“Keen eyes, I guess.”

“They should be paying you for it. Fixing all the errors.”

“I don’t know. I quite like them being there. I like having something to notice.”

“You just like being pedantic.”

“Pedantic.”

“Proving my point.”

“…Shut up.”

Logan had no right having that infectious a laugh. When he snickered to himself, Eduard had no choice but to join in. He leaned into him, giggling uncontrollably in the dark of their room. The film went on as they recovered, chests still shuddering, Logan’s arms still around him. Eduard leaned his head back against the wall, gazing at him out of the corner of his eye. Logan looked right back with his gentle, crooked smile.

He didn’t know why he did it. The exhaustion, maybe. But Eduard leaned up against him, hooking his arm around his shoulders, and kissed him. Dry lips on dry lips, the faint taste of coffee, the distant dialogue of the film. His hands were familiar and warm on his cheeks. Something in him, something 18 years old and quiet for far too long, whispered “Finally”.

He pulled back, fingers brushing against his lips. He felt the echoing sensation of Logan's on his. He wasn’t sure if he was trying to preserve the feeling or get rid of it.

“I’m sorry.”

Logan shook his head. “Don’t be.”

On the screen of the laptop, something exploded. Mewie got up and walked off. Neither of them noticed.

“Do you want to go to bed?”

Logan nodded. “Got work in the morning.”

“Me too.” He shut the laptop and put it down on his side of the bed. “Goodnight, Logan.”

“Goodnight.”

Chapter End Notes

The song Ed sings is The Only Thing by Sufjan Stevens.

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