Broken Dreams & A New Hope

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Broken Dreams & A New Hope

by Polarnacht

Summary

After the Centaurs beat the Voyageurs in the playoffs, Shane is condemned to sit at home and watch Ilya compete for the Stanley Cup. He's proud of Ilya, but he also still feels bitter about the loss. Both things grow unimportant when Ilya gets brutally checked on the ice. Despite the severity of his injury and Shane's vehement objection, Ilya wants to play the next game. Shane is not sure if he can stand by and let Ilya risk his life, but what other options does he have?

Chapter 1

Shane zipped up his hoody before he stretched his leg muscles carefully. The air was chilly, even though it was already the beginning of June. Despite the cloudless sky summer seemed still far away; the Canadian weather still clinging to early spring temperatures. It was still a beautiful day, or could have been one, if Shane were somewhere else. In an even colder place, surrounded by crisp ice and cheery teammates.

Today was the fourth game of the finals, finals he and his Voyageurs should be playing. They deserved to be playing. *He* deserved it. He'd played the best hockey of his life this season, racking up an unbelievable 148 points. And still. They had still lost in the most important series and instead of lacing up his skates and taping his stick, Shane laced up his trainers to go for a run.

Shane still felt worn out from the season, the grind of the playoffs deep in his bones. His body ached, longed for rest, but his mind was relentless. He couldn't sit at home and do nothing, had tried to do it for the past few days already. He was already going crazy. That he almost fled his home now definitely didn't have anything to do with the fact that today's match would start soon – in 18 minutes to be precise, but not that Shane was keeping track. He just needed fresh air.

The teams would be in the locker room by now, the warm-ups over. Time for the coaches to give last orders and for all the little hockey rituals the players had developed throughout the season. Fist bumps, kisses to cheeks and gloves, slaps on asses. The captain would give a last moral boost with a pep talk. Shane could picture it as easily as he could picture himself doing it. Ilya's eyes would be glinting like they did when he was about to take Shane apart. His golden locks would be a mess, his voice loud and whipping, urging everyone on to give their best, and yet offer a calmness the rookies would lean into. Ilya would be perfect, and Shane was so fucking proud of him. If he only could help feeling other things too.

Despite his best efforts, anger mixed with guilt surged through Shane. Ilya's Centaurs had beaten Shane's Voyageurs in an ugly series in game seven in a powerplay following a penalty Ilya had drawn against Hayden. His team had been too tired to withstand the force of Ottawa's offense, one man short, and Ilya had scored the final goal with thirty seconds on the clock in the third period. Shane had nearly choked on the *good game* he'd had to tell the opposing players at the mandatory handshake after the game. He'd avoided Ilya's searching eyes, too angry at him for being a pest on the ice and goading Hayden into taking a penalty. Too angry at him for scoring. Too angry at him for winning and making Shane lose. Too angry at himself for not being good enough to win, even though Montreal had been the better team. They'd played beautiful hockey. It didn't matter now.

He'd texted Ilya, later, congratulating him with written words he had not been able to voice. The day after the words still had failed to come, but Shane had called him anyway, stuttering through an awkward conversation. Ilya'd been still half drunk and understanding, which had made feel Shane even worse.

He really was proud of Ilya. He was happy for him. No one had had the Centaurs on the map for the playoffs, much less for actually making the final. He wondered if losing to another team would have been easier to stomach than losing to Ottawa. If he could cheer for Ilya more lightheartedly now. He genuinely rooted for him, deep inside, but Shane had already tasted the sweetness of victory and the cup before Ilya had whisked it away.

Shane had won the cup already – more often than Ilya – but he wanted it again. Hoisting the cup over his head, taking his lap with it, joining in the howling of his team, knowing he did it, knowing he led this team to success – that's why he played hockey. That's why he put his body through pain, endless road trips and nights in nameless hotel rooms, that's why he imposed a rigorous diet and training schedule on himself. That's why he lived for the short moments he could claw off hockey to be with Ilya, the love of his life he hid and yanked back into the shadows every time their love threatened to be too much to hide. That feeling was why he did it, what made all the sacrifices worth it. And that had been taken from him this season.

He was proud of Ilya, so fucking proud, and he wanted him to win now. He just was angry too, his jealousy mixing with sour guilt over it. He should have done more than sending texts and calling him once, even though they had agreed to keep it like that during the playoffs, everything else too distracting. But now Shane wasn't in the playoffs any longer. He still hadn't called again. Ilya hadn't either, so maybe this was what Ilya wanted too. Keep things as they had been, it had panned out for Ilya. Shane didn't want to mess with that for him, superstition and everything.

For a moment Shane contemplated listening to the game while running, it would ease some of the guilt of not being there for Ilya, of being a shitty boyfriend. But it would spike his own frustration, the emptiness he'd felt since the sound of the buzzer announcing Ottawa's winning goal and their loss. Instead Shane put his phone on mute and shoved it deep into the pocket of his hoodie and started to run.

His feet thudded rhythmically against the hard concrete, the sound soothing. Shane loved to run, almost as much as he loved to do yoga. It took him out of his mind, at least for a while. It was easy to get lost in the staccato of his steps, the sound of his own breathing and the strong beating of his blood.

When he headed home he felt exhausted, the good kind of type. Not the leaden, empty kind he'd felt after the loss. The good one he earned by pushing his body to its limits and then a little further. He should be kind to himself, post season, but he felt he hadn't earned that. Not this time.

Shane pulled his phone out of his pocket while wiping sweat from his forehead. He desperately needed a shower. He carefully glanced at his screen, the game should be well in its third period by now. His stomach dropped the moment he saw the missed calls from his mother. Shane knew Yuna was watching the game, rooting for Ilya like Shane should, even though Ilya was the reason Shane was in sweats and his trainers instead of his pads and skates. But Yuna would never call during a game. Not unless…

Shane swallowed against the raising unease, his heart pounding hard against his ribcage like he was still in the middle of his run. There were texts from his mom too. Shane opened them

first.

That was brutal, read the first.

He's standing, thank god, was the second.

Do you know anything? The third.

I'll bet he's okay. He's tough, the fourth. The reassurance made Shane even more angsty. He should *know.* He should at least know what had happened to Ilya. A hit? Most probably. A concussion? Ilya was, according to Yuna, standing on his own. But Shane didn't know, and it made him crazy.

Shane was running again, yanking the door open to the living room, picking up the remote with trembling fingers. There were no texts from the team or coaches from Ottawa, of course, because no one fucking new that Shane was someone to contact. In case something really was wrong with Ilya. No one knew, the realization not new but so forceful it made him nauseous. Someone should know, about him, about them.

"Fuck," he cursed when it took him a moment to find the right channel. The third period was almost over, the Centaurs led with one goal. Shane anxiously scanned the ice, but there was no sign of number 81. There was no sight of Ilya.

The next *fuck* remains stuck in his throat when a second later they replay a hit. *The* hit. Ilya danced on his skates like he often did, one moment darting to the left before going right, but this time Edmonton's d-man, Marcel Houde, saw it coming. Without stopping he slammed into Ilya in the middle of the ice, a few inches taller and at least twenty pounds heavier. Ilya didn't stand a chance. The hit is brutal, Shane felt the impact in his own chest when the beast of a man crashed into Ilya, throwing his body around.

Shane gasped when Ilya hit the ice in the replay, chest first. Shane waited, the rush of his blood the only thing in his ear, the voice of the commentator nothing but a side note.

"Stand up," Shane pleaded, even though he knew Ilya had already stood up. But he needed to see it. He needed to know Ilya was okay.

"Stand up," Shane yelled now, commanded, when Ilya still lay on the ice, unmoving, looking more fragile than a man of his height and built had any right to look. "Stand the fuck up!"

He hadn't hit his head, at least not that Shane had seen. But why wasn't he getting up? Then, slowly, Ilya moved. The camera zoomed in, showing his pain stricken face, the dark circles under his eyes more pronounced than ever. Ilya dragged his knees under him before pushing himself up, shakily but steadily. Then he stood. Ilya shook his head, the attempt on a smile hurting Shane more than the scowl before. Ilya started to skate slowly on the screen, relief flooding Shane for a second. Until Ilya stumbled and fell to his knees once more, before a teammate – Troy – pulled him up.

The replay ended with Ilya being guided towards the tunnel.

“Fuck,”Shane swore, the word not nearly covering the dread, fear and anger he felt. He pulled out his phone with shaking hands, tapping on Ilya’s name. It rang and rang before it went to voicemail.

Shane forced himself to listen to the commentator to see what they knew. Upper body injury was all they said, and that Ilya wouldn’t join the game again. Shane swallowed hard against the rising panic, forcing himself to breathe. That meant nothing. There was only a minute left on the clock and no one would send Ilya back for that, not after that hit. Not after that stumble. It didn’t have to mean anything. It *could,* but it didn’t have to.

The buzzer sounded and the Centaurs piled up in a heap at center ice, celebrating the third win in a row after losing the first game against Toronto. They could bring the cup home in the next game, at home. Shane didn’t give a shit. Not when Ilya wasn’t on the ice, when he didn’t know what was wrong with him.

The coach’s words in the post-game presser were cryptic regarding Ilya. *Upper body injury. Wait and see*. The words washed over Shane, he’d heard similar statements way too often, especially in playoffs. Shane looked at his phone again. Still no text from Ilya. Or a call.

The next game was already scheduled in two day, not much time to recover. Shane tugged at his hair, unable to catch a clear thought. His eyes darted back to the screen when they started to show the highlights of the game. A beautiful, impossible goal for Ilya in the first period, one for the hall of fame. Three goals for the other team in the second, but Ilya alone brought the Centaurs back on track. Not with another goal, but with his sheer will, strength and confident cockiness. The team needed him. If he were out, Shane doubted the Centaurs would win the fourth game. Or the cup.

The two more hours until he finally heard from Ilya are the longest in Shane’s life. He wanted to scream when his phone finally lit up with a text from Ilya, first with relief, then with frustration.

I’m fine, said the text, *don’t worry about me.*

How the fuck was Shane supposed to do that? He was worried sick. If Ilya were fine he’d have come out of the tunnel again, hopped over the boards to play and score another goal, or at least to celebrate with his team. If Ilya were fine he wouldn't have *stumbled*. Shane didn’t grace the lie with a reply, instead he called, trying to ignore the sting when he was forwarded to voicemail again. This was just how their relationship was. Hidden and complicated, and yet the best thing in Shane’s life.

“Hollander,” Ilya finally said when the stubborn idiot realized that Shane wouldn’t stop calling and picked up the phone. The last name stung too. It wasn’t like when Ilya called him that when they fucked, a nod to their past and laced with teasing intimacy. It sounded distant, as if Ilya were far away, much further than the kilometers which separated them.

“Ilya,” Shane replied, his voice sharp and clear like it rarely was. “How are you? And if you say fine I’ll drive right up to Ottawa myself.”

Shane heard Ilya exhale, long and slow. He tried to read that sound, tried to remember the way Ilya had said his name. How bad was it? How bad was he?

“So that’s what it takes to get your ass to my place during the playoffs? I would have let someone hit me earlier.” Ilya’s lightheartedness was almost convincing. Almost.

Shane squished the guilt rearing up. They had agreed on staying apart during the playoffs. It hadn’t been only his idea.

“Ilya,” he said pleadingly. “I need to know. You didn’t get back on the ice.”

Shane waited, his phone pressed against his ear so hard that it hurt. He heard Ilya’s shallow breaths, hated the time his boyfriend needed to answer. To decide if he were to tell the truth.

“They didn’t let me. I would have. I don’t have a concussion or anything like that... I’m good to play the next game. It hurts, but I’m fine, Hollander.”

Again the last name, as if calling him by his first would give too much away. Shane hated this.

“Okay *Rozanov*,” Shane replied, because what else was he to do? “Good game until then.”

“You watched?” Ilya asked, the surprise in his voice another sting, even though it was justified.

Shane should lie and tell Ilya he had been watching like the good boyfriend Shane wanted to be. But he couldn’t. This phone call was too serious for lying.

“I see,” Ilya said when the silence told the truth for Shane. “I see how it is.”

“I wanted to,” Shane pushed out, realizing it was the truth. He had wanted to, but he just hadn’t been able to. “It’s just… it’s the finals.”

“Yes,” Ilya replied, his voice softer now. “And you still think you should have won, yes? That your team is more deserving than mine.”

“We were the better team,” Shane argued, knowing how stupid it was to do so right now. It wasn’t always about being better, it was about who won, and it didn’t even matter right now. Ilya was hurt, he was injured, and Shane still didn’t know what exactly was wrong with him.

“Roz,” Ilya heard someone say in the distance through the phone.

“Who’s that?”

“Just Troy.”

“Troy? I thought you didn’t have a concussion.” It was the only reason Shane could think of why Troy wasn’t out celebrating with the team. And Ilya, for that matter.

“I don’t. Stop worrying, Shane. Is hockey, I’m fine.”

Shane let out a sigh, but the words eased something in him. “Will you play in the next game?”

“Nothing will stop me.”

This answer though made Shane tense again. “I will watch it,” Shane said nevertheless, “I will watch it and be so fucking proud of you when you will lift up the cup.”

“Will you?”

“Of course.”

There was a brief pause, interrupted by a cluttering sound and the echo of Troy’s apology.

“I need to go,” Ilya said into the silence. “Is the playoffs, Hollander. Is fine.”

“Wait!” Shane yelled, but the line was already dead. Shane didn’t know what to feel. Ilya had sounded almost normal. Almost. But that Troy was with him didn’t sit right with him. Ilya wasn’t someone to let other people help, too used to being on his own for too long.

“Fuck,” Shane swore once more with feeling. He didn’t know what to do. He knew what he wanted to do. Pack his things, hop in the car and drive the two hours and a half to Ottawa. Two if he pushed it.

He was torn about what he should do. For his career, the anonymity of his and Ilya’s relationship, he should stay put. He should trust Ilya that he truly was fine, watch the next game and hope for the best.

Shane imagined it. Watching Ilya play, injured and hurting but determined, carrying his team to the cup. Players had done the same already. Played with broken fingers, sprained ankles, fucked-up shoulders. Shane would do the same, but something told Shane that this was different. That this was worse than a broken foot or bruised ribs. Nothing would stop Ilya, but maybe Shane could.

Half an hour later, Shane shoved his bag into the trunk of his SUV, selected the least annoying radio station, and started to drive.

Chapter 2

It was late when Shane arrived in Ottawa – it had already been late when he had left Montreal. Shane smoothed his hands over the steering wheel, purposefully relaxing his shoulders. He'd been tense all the way, his mind spinning with what to expect once he arrived. Thankfully the traffic hadn't been too demanding and half his brain had been enough to navigate the streets. Maybe he should have waited until the morning, but the idea hadn't sat right with Shane. It felt like he had waited way too long to come to Ilya already.

Shane gave himself a moment to watch the dark house. All lights were switched off, Ilya was probably asleep. He should be asleep, his body needed rest after whatever injury plagued him. He'd be pissed to be woken up, but maybe he'd manage to sneak in without waking him.

Pebbles cracked under his shoes when he exited the car, but otherwise the night was quiet. He grabbed his back from the trunk before he walked to the door, reaching for the key Ilya had given him *just in case, yes,* the ghost of a smile appearing on Shane's face at the memory. It was *in case* now, Shane figured. For a second Shane's stomach dropped when he didn't find the key instantly, even though he knew he had pocketed it. He gave a low huff or relief when he's fingers closed around it. He shouldn't be so nervous, he wasn't intruding – he was taking care of his injured boyfriend. If Ilya let him, that was.

Shane unlocked the door and slipped in, listening intently for any sound. He didn't bother to check the living room or kitchen when he heard nothing but went straight for the stairs which led to Ilya's bedroom.

"Who are you?"

Shane jumped and almost let his bag drop to the floor when the sound of an unfamiliar voice behind him startled him. He jerked around to see the door to the guest bedroom ajar, the ruffled figure of Troy Bennet looming in the opening. He looked tired, his hair a mess, clearly pulled out of sleep.

"Eh," Shane said, and then after regaining his wits, "What are you doing here?"

He knew for a fact that Ilya usually didn't have little sleepover parties with his teammates. He took a steadying breath, trying to remain calm. This was okay, Shane told himself. He wouldn't freak out about someone finding out about him and Ilya, and he also wasn't freaking out about what Troy's presence said about Ilya's injury.

"Shane Hollander." Troy rubbed tiredly over his face. He sounded baffled, maybe even a bit starstruck. Definitely surprised, which was fair, Shane guessed.

"I won't be asking how you let yourself in," Troy said, and suddenly Shane understood better why Ilya liked the guy.

“No,” Shane agreed, “You won’t. But you will answer my questions.” Shane was too tired to be his usual polite Canadian self. “How bad is it?” he carried on when Troy didn’t object.

A complicated array of feelings washed over Troy’s face, clearly torn between his loyalty towards his captain, the unspoken rule to never talk about injuries to an opposing player and the urge to share the burden of knowledge with someone clearly close to Ilya.

“I’m not asking to sell it to the press. I’m asking as his… friend,” Shane said, hating the word. It was way too little, but even now with all the worry about Ilya’s condition, he couldn’t bring himself to say what they truly were. Boyfriends. Lovers. Partners. It was bad enough that Troy knew he was here. Shane just couldn’t help himself.

The silence stretched on until Troy finally cracked.

“It’s bad, Shane. It’s really bad.”

Shane’s stomach dropped immediately, and he had to swallow hard to keep the sinking feeling at bay. Troy’s intimate use of his first name as well as the way he emphasized *bad* didn’t sound good. Not good at all.

“What do the doctors say? What is it?”

Troy shrugged, shifting uncomfortably on his feet under the scrutiny of Shane’s gaze. “That’s up to him to tell.”

Shane huffed, knowing Ilya would be stubborn about it, but he *would* make Ilya tell him.

“What are they saying about playing?” Because that was what worried Shane even more.

Troy shrugged once more, and Shane wasn’t so sure anymore if he really liked the guy.

“It’s the playoffs,” Troy said, as if that explained anything.

Shane hated that it did. Everyone closed all eyes when it came to the playoffs, allowing players on the ice that didn’t have any business being there. Hell, Shane himself had played with an injury that usually would have forced him on the bench for at least a fortnight in the regular season.

“Is he asleep?” Shane asked.

“He’s pretty out of it, the pain meds are strong. Uh, be careful with his chest.”

Shane glared at him, but Troy didn’t offer anything more.

“I'll take it from here. Text me the instructions for his medication,” Shane said while fumbling a business card from their hockey camp with his cell number on it out of his wallet. He felt a tiny bit guilty for throwing Troy out in the middle of the night, but he wanted Ilya for himself. It would get difficult enough even without a witness. “And thanks. For taking care of him, I know he’s not the easiest.”

Troy gave a startled laugh, his eyes flashing in the dim lighting. “No shit,” he muttered. Shane was glad that he didn’t complain about being thrown out.

Shane straightened himself before he went the rest of the way to Ilya’s room. He was careful when he pushed the door open, trying to make no sound at all so as not to wake Ilya. His heart constricted when his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Ilya lay on his back, which was unusual for him. Shane doubted he had ever seen him sleep like that, usually he lay splayed out on his belly, face stuffed into a pillow, or curled up on his side, his arms slung around himself or Shane. Ilya's face was contorted and twisted, the pain visible even like this. Dark circles under his eyes emphasized the paleness of his skin which looked almost gray. Shane swallowed, for a moment overwhelmed by the need to wake Ilya up, to hear him, to see him move to know that he was okay.

Shane fought the urge. He was already selfish coming here, he wouldn’t be more selfish. He stripped quietly out of his clothes, folding them neatly before he slipped under the covers with Ilya, wearing only boxers and a tee. He longed to run his hand over Ilya’s body, rub over the frown on his face to smooth it, and to soothe the empty pit inside himself at the same time. Instead he leaned in and brushed his lips over Ilya’s forehead, just the ghost of a touch. The frown eased the tiniest bit – maybe Shane only imagined it. But it helped something settle inside him, and he lay down next to Ilya, putting one careful hand on his hip, not daring to touch him further. It took him longer to fall asleep than he would have thought, given the exhaustion he felt deep in his bones.

Everything seemed fine for a moment when Ilya started to wake up. His head was fuzzy like it was filled with cotton wool, but it wasn’t a particular bad feeling, just a strange one. Everything was fine until he made the mistake to breathe. Pain surged through his body like fire, his chest *hurt* like he was sucker punched by a giant.

A pained groan left his mouth, the pathetic sound making him cringe. The slight movement was enough to cause another wave of pain, the groan wanting to fall stayed stuck in his throat. The pleasant fuzziness gave way to a sharp, painful clarity. He’d been injured in the last game, he hadn’t been allowed to finish it – and, if Ilya were honest with himself, it had been the right call. It was bad, even for playoffs.

The rustling of the blanket and a small huff beside him made Ilya turn his head, careful and slowly without moving the rest of his upper body. What the fuck? Why was Troy here? He remembered clearly to have shown him the guest room. He didn’t want Troy to see how beaten he was, how vulnerable he felt. He was his captain, he was supposed to be strong and lead. They had a good chance at truly winning the Cup, but only if they managed to pull themselves together – only if he managed to pull himself together. He would, no matter the costs, as he really wanted that win. He wanted to feel his blood sing with the heat of the victory, he wanted to feel the coldness of the Cup against his lips. He wanted to be a champion again, feel that it, that he, was worth something. There were nothing he wanted more than win the Cup except-

“Shane,” Ilya whispered when he had finally managed to turn his head enough to see who was lying next to him.

His boyfriend looked unfairly beautiful in the wee hours of the morning, his long, black hair a mess, his face soft and grumbled with sleep, freckles standing in a beautiful contrast to his skin. Shane blinked his eyes open, clearly struggling to wake up. An almost hesitant smile tugged at his lips when their eyes locked. Ilya's chest ached, for a completely different reason than before.

"What are you doing here?" Ilya asked, gruffer than he'd planned.

"Good morning to you too. Isn't that obvious? Taking care of my boyfriend."

Ilya only glared at Shane, irritation rising. There was nothing particularly good about this morning and the way his chest wanted to murder him, and even though he liked the idea of Shane being here, he wasn't sure if he liked *Shane* being here.

"I can take care of myself just fine."

Shane sat up, carding his hand through his hair, hurt and anger and worry flashing over his face in quick succession. "So Troy had a sleepover here just for fun? That's bullshit, Ilya and you know it."

Ilya lifted his hand to rub over his face. He let it fall back on the blanket halfway through, trying to suppress a grunt at the sudden flare of pain. He really was fucked.

"If you don't want me here I can just go."

"So you would leave, just like that?" Ilya couldn't help the disbelieving tone. It was never that easy between them.

Shane glared at him. "No. Of course I won't leave, and I know you don't want me to leave either. So stop being stubborn and get up, eat something and then take your meds. And then you will tell me what happened."

"Bossy, yes?" Despite the pain, Ilya found himself smiling. He liked bossy Shane, and found that he didn't want him to leave. Even if it made everything more complicated.

"Yes," Shane said, his stern expression cracking around the edges, revealing a smile of his own.

"Maybe I need a little…" Ilya motioned with his hands, careful to not rise them to high, annoyed that his brain didn't come up with the right word. He knew he knew it, which didn't make it better. "Stupid language."

"Incentive?"

"Yes. This."

Shane's smile broadened when he leaned in, Ilya still felt it on his lips when they kissed. Shane held his chin careful and tenderly when he deepened the kiss, and for a moment the pain and the next game and even the Cup were forgotten.

“You get more when you’ve taken your meds. Not *that,”* Shane added, the stern expression back on his face when he caught the wink and the sparkle in Ilya’s eyes.

“You’re mean,” Ilya complained half-heartedly. In truth he didn’t think he was up for it.

“I’ll make breakfast, come on.” Shane slipped out of the bed, rolling his eyes when he felt Ilya’s eyes linger on his ass. Ilya might not be up for more, but he sure could enjoy a view.

“As long as it’s not one of your shakes,” Ilya said, making a disgusted face. The disgust morphed instantly into a mask of pain when Ilya tried to lift his upper body. Everything fucking hurt.

“Ilya?” Shane swirled around the moment he hurt the pained groan.

“Is fine,” Ilya managed, trying to get his breathing under control. Ilya wasn't a stranger to pain, and usually he breathed through the pain to make it more bearable, but this was exactly the wrong thing to do now. Ilya tried again to get up, but he didn’t get far, the pain too much. He sucked in a breath, his chest turning into fire once more. Ilya wanted to laugh, he wasn’t even able to fucking breathe. He would have laughed if it didn’t hurt too much.

“I need a little help,” Ilya confessed after long moments of contemplating his options. He avoided Shane’s eyes.

“You can’t get up on your own?”

“No,” Ilya snapped, “or I wouldn’t ask. Where’s Troy?”

“I sent him home,” Shane shot back. “You have to deal with me. I’ll bring you something to snack and then you take the medicine and then you tell me what the fuck is wrong with you. You stay put until the meds kick in."

Before Ilya could argue Shane was already gone. Ilya sighed, but he also felt relieved. He was too tired to put up much of a fight anyway.

A few moments later Shane appeared again, two granola bars, a banana and a glass of water in hand.

“I’ll make a proper breakfast later."

He propped Ilya’s pillow up and helped Ilya in a better position so that he could eat the makeshift breakfast and swallow his pills.

They didn’t speak, Ilya busy with chewing and not groaning every time he moved, and Shane with sucking at his bottom lip. He had bound his hair in a messy bun, and Ilya longed to bury his hands in his hair and tug at it until it was loose and sloppy. Shane watched him like a hawk when he reached for his pills to swallow them, as if Ilya was about to hide them under his tongue. Ilya suppressed the urge to stick his tongue out to show him what a good patient he was.

“So,” Shane said, after he had given the medicine a bit of time to take effect. He sat down on the edge of the bed, one hand wrapping around Ilya’s ankle, giving him a light squeeze.

“So,” Ilya repeated. “Is nothing, I’ll be fine.”

Shane snorted, but it lacked all humor. “It’s not nothing. You can’t even get up. What is it? Broken ribs?”

“No,” Ilya said. “My ribs are fine.” Well, they were a bit bruised, but truly they were fine. “I need to piss first.”

“Ilya,” Shane said, tugging at his bun, probably to do something else with his hands than slap Ilya.

“What?” Ilya asked innocently.

“You’re deflecting.”

“What does that mean?”

“For fuck’s sake, Ilya. I know you know the word. Stop stalling and tell me what’s wrong.”

Ilya sighed, the sound mirrored by Shane. “I really need to go.”

Shane sighed louder. “Oh fuck my life. I had to fall for the most stubborn man in the world.”

“No,” Ilya replied with a grin. *“I* already fell for the most stubborn man.”

“At least you’re good at hockey.”

“I’m the best,” Ilya acknowledged. “But you’re okay too.”

“Oh fuck off,” Shane laughed, the sound easing the tension around them. He stood up and leaned over Ilya. “Come on, slip your arms around me.”

Ilya did, biting his bottom lip until he tasted blood to not cry out. Somehow Shane managed to pull him over to the edge. It was embarrassing that he had to help him set his feet to the ground. “Just a second,” Ilya panted through gritted teeth. He just needed to get up and then he would be fine.

“Okay,” he said, holding on tighter to Shane. “Now pull me up.”

Shane slung his arms around Ilya in return, grunting under Ilya’s weight when he carefully pulled him up. It hurt like a bitch. But they managed without Shane throwing his back out and Ilya doing more damage to his battered body. After resting his weight for a second on Shane, Ilya straightened himself slowly. He stood and took a deep breath, followed by a pained wince.

Ilya was, in fact, not *fine* only because he stood. He managed to set one foot in front of the other though, and made his way to the bathroom without having to lean on Shane. Shane

hovered nevertheless, concern written all over him.

“See, I’m fine,” Ilya grunted when he reached the door.

“I-” Shane started, about to head after Ilya, but he was interrupted.

“You’re not following me to watch me piss. I’m f-”

“If you say you’re fine one more time I’m going to slap you. Where it hurts.”

Ilya gave a surprised little laugh. “I’m going alone and I stop saying I’m fine, yes?”

“And you promise not to fall over.”

“Yes.”

Ilya managed without falling, if he had to grip the sink a bit tighter than normal – well that was between him and the sink.

“If it’s not your rips what it is then?” Shane asked the moment he appeared again.

Ilya sighed, already exhausted from the short exercise. “I want another incentive first.”

“No.”

Ilya huffed. “Shane.”

“Ilya, please.”

The worry in Shane’s tone made Ilya finally crumple, even though he knew he wouldn’t soothe Shane’s worry but make it worse with his answer.

“I’ve got a fractured sternum,” he mumbled while making his way slowly back to the bed.

“You’ve got what?” Shane asked, shock clearly written all over his face. “You’ve got to be kidding me. A broken sternum?”

“It’s fractured,” Ilya said petulantly, growling when he realized that he needed Shane to help him settle back into bed.

“That’s the same. And don’t fucking argue with me over that. You’re not going to play with that.”

Ilya lifted his eyes to meet Shane’s gaze steadily. “Yes. I can and I will.”

“You’re insane,” Shane whispered, shaking his head.

“It’s the playoffs.”

“It’s insane!” Shane shouted, and then, more quietly, “it *is* insane. It’s dangerous, it’s-”

“What I’m going to do,” Ilya finished Shane’s sentence.

They stared at each other, the moment stretching until Ilya’s whole skin itched. He knew Shane - not even Shane - wouldn’t understand. Maybe it was a little insane, but it was what Ilya wanted. It was what he needed.

“I’m going to make breakfast,” Shane suddenly said, hurrying out of the room as if he couldn’t bear being near Ilya longer.

"Fuck," Ilya said with feeling as he watched him go, his chest throbbing with two very different forms of pain.

Chapter 3

Shane pulled the carton with eggs out of the fridge to slam it on the kitchen counter, almost disappointed when none of the eggs broke.

A broken sternum.

A fucking broken sternum. Fractured, Shane heard Ilya say, mocking him even in his head. Shane closed his eyes, trying to catch his breath and calm down. Getting angry wouldn't help, he knew that much. But he was angry, so fucking angry that it twisted his guts. He was a hockey player, he got the urge to play through pain for the greater good of the team. He was a captain, he understood how important it was to be present and lead. He'd won the Cup, he knew what lifting it meant. It wasn't only the single moment where the buzzer sounded and you knew you'd made it, or the moment the audience roared and your blood sang with it, the cup cool against your hot and sweaty fingers. It was the legacy that came after. A ring to show, stories to tell for years and years about the crazy stuff you and your team did to celebrate, your name edged into the pages of history. Shane got it. He really did. But this, this was-

An egg finally broke between his fingers, the slippery mess running down his hand and onto the counter. Shane stared at it as if it were his personal nemesis. He watched it spread, the yolk mixing with the white. He should move, Shane thought, otherwise it'd drop on the floor and make even more of a mess. He couldn't. He was rooted to the spot, just able to watch it unfold.

Shane closed his eyes, a huff of breath rushing out of his nose. He couldn't help the images invading his mind. He pictured Ilya bending down with a grimace to lace up his skates, tape his stick and get ready for a game with his bones broken. He saw it so vividly in his mind as if he were there, how Ilya would set foot on the ice and skate, his movements a bit slower and edgier than usual.

He would bend down for the first face off at center ice, his mouth guard sticking out between his lips, a chirp on his tongue. He'd snuck the puck away from his opponent and pass it to Troy before he'd start to race for the net, his frame tight with pain and yet faster than anyone else. He'd probably even score a goal, a sexy, filthy one right between the goalie's legs.

Shane watched Ilya skate away towards his teams, a victorious scream on his lips and a sparkle in his eyes. They'd be more careful with him, not jumping him, just slapping him on the back and petting his helmet. Shane still saw the wince, but it was overshadowed by Ilya's smile. It would be the perfect story for a game like hockey, a game which longed for blood, sweat and heroes. Gifs and videos would be made with the hit on Ilya followed by the game and cup winning goal, underlined by songs and lyrics about heavy forces, love and victory. The audience would eat it all up, feeding off Ilya's struggles and tears. They would love him then, even fans aside from Ottawa – maybe not from Montreal or Edmonton, but the rest of the hockey world would worship him for playing through the pain. For playing with his life.

Shane's eyes fluttered when the next pictures took over, uglier once than before. Another puck drop, another win. But this time the opponent was fast enough to follow Ilya, fast enough to intervene, fast enough to check him. He saw Ilya crash into the boards, chest on, and then fall and fall until he hit the ice with an ear shattering thud, his lips parted in a silent scream.

Shane yanked his eyes open, his gaze unfocused, his heart racing in his chest. HIs knuckles were white with the force he held onto the kitchen counter.

"It wasn't real," Shane muttered to himself, shaking his head, desperately trying to get rid of the images of Ilya hitting the board and falling. "It's not real."

"Fuck," he added when the blurriness lifted and he saw the mess on the counter and floor. With a sigh he reached for a cleaning rag.

Shane pushed the handle of Ilya's door down with his elbow, balancing the tray with food carefully. He'd done enough cleaning for the day. He had managed to make scrambled eggs at last, had toasted some slices of bread, had made coffee, had sliced up some fruit, poured orange juice and even put jam and Nutella on the tray, just to round it up and not to appease Ilya. If it made Ilya more amenable Shane would take it too. After that he had run out of excuses to stay longer in the kitchen.

He prepared himself one last time as he stepped inside the room, re-running the arguments in his head, bringing them in an orderly line as if he practiced a new drill. If he were just good enough, it would work.

Ilya lay still on the bed, half propped up, his face gray and his eyes closed. The circles under his eyes had deepened, dipping into a dark purple. He looked smaller than a man of his height and build had any business looking. The moment he heard Shane he blinked his eyes open. When their gaze met, all the words and points Shane had prepared were wiped away from his mind. He put the tray on the nightstand before settling down next to Ilya, carefully pulling one hand towards him. He looked down where their fingers entwined as easily as breathing.

"Please don't, Ilya," he said quietly, his voice barely audible. He lifted his eyes back to Ilya. "Please," he said again, the plea the only words that left his mouth.

It's too dangerous, he could say, *you could get hurt. You could die. They will manage without you.* But he didn't say it, because Ilya wasn't stupid. Ilya played hockey as long as Shane did, he knew all that. He knew about the risk, about what he would put his body through. He knew that it might not be enough anyway, or that his team might win without him. All Shane had left to do was plead and beg, and he would do both. He already had done both.

Ilya's finger closed tighter around his. "I can't. I can't not play. It's the playoffs. It's my team. It's the Cup."

"Please," Shane begged again, "do it for me."

Air rushed in a long exhale out of Ilya's mouth. He didn't withdraw his fingers, but he looked away, out of the window which overlooked his city, maybe even his home. Ottawa. Shane followed his gaze, brushing his thumb over Ilya's knuckle. When Ilya looked back at him, Shane wanted to scream. He knew he had lost. It was the same feeling he sometimes got on the ice even before the final buzzer sounded. It was over, but Shane had always given it his all.

"It's not fair to ask that of me," Ilya said, wincing when he tried to sit up a bit straighter. He sounded tired, his accent curling tighter to his words than usual.

It was not fair, Shane agreed, but it also wasn't fair to expect him to watch Ilya risk his health and life. "You could die," Shane said, "it's too dangerous." He sounded calm and collected, and he was proud that he managed to keep his screams hidden inside. It wouldn't help.

"Many players play with broken bones."

"Broken fingers. Broken feet! Maybe even a few broken ribs. But not with a broken sternum!" Shane almost flinched at the harshness of his own tone, having lost the battle against his screams. He still held Ilya's hand, and he squeezed him, relieved when Ilya squeezed back.

"I'll be careful."

Shane snorted, a sound akin to a laugh wrenched itself out of his lungs. "That's not how hockey works. You'll have a target on your back the moment you step on the ice. You always have a target on your back."

"'cause I'm the best," Ilya said with the hint of his usual smug smile, squeezing Shane's hand once more.

"Because you're a fucking menace." Shane couldn't help his own smile, but it vanished as soon as it had come. He wished he could fall back in their usual banter, smooth the tension between them with loving chirps and another squeeze, or maybe even a kiss. He couldn't. This was more important.

"How will you even play, Ilya? You can't even stand up on your own."

Ilya shrugged, a grimace of pain washing over his face at the too careless gesture. "Someone will help. And then I play." He said it so matter of fact as if it was normal. That he could skate and shoot and take hits when he couldn't even get out of the bed without crying.

Shane sucked his bottom lip between his teeth. It sounded so easy, and he bet it would even be, in a way. All for the game. Someone would lace up Ilya's skates, Troy probably, another one would put his stick into Ilya's hand and then Ilya would get on the ice and play, like he had done countless times before since he learned how not to fall, fueled by adrenaline and the roaring of the home crowd.

"Is it really worth it? Is the Cup worth risking your health?" Shane angled for a neutral tone, again, eliminating everything accusing. He wasn't sure whether he succeeded.

“You don’t know what it is like. You don’t know how it is to play hockey like *that.* While you were busy winning pretty Cups, I had to watch my team play shitty hockey game after game after game. And now… we play good again. *I* play good again.”

“You were always good.”

“Not like this. It needs a team, and now… I have one. I won’t let them down.”

“You always said you liked your team.” Shane exhaled slowly, ignoring the burning pain in his chest.

“I do. They’re a good team. But now they’re a good team who can play hockey.”

“Then let them play. Let them play for you.”

“It wouldn’t be the same. It wouldn’t be…” Ilya cursed under his breath, something Russian Shane didn’t understand and still felt to his core.

“Enough?” he asked.

“Yes. That. I sacrificed so much for this game, I need something back. We could have been happy, Shane. Without it. Now I want to be happy with it.”

Shane choked around his next words, his throat so tight he could barely speak or breathe. “You aren’t happy?”

Ilya sighed and shook his head, tugging helplessly at his curls. “I am happy, Shane. With you. I wasn’t happy with hockey for a long time. And I am not happy with hiding. With hiding you and myself.”

“We have a plan,” Shane whispered. “We both agreed to the plan.”

“Yes. We have a plan. So that we can play hockey. And that’s what I’m gonna do. I will play hockey. I cannot give this up now. Don’t ask me to.”

“But you are asking me to watch you play like this? You could be seriously injured. More than you already are. You could d-”

“As if you’ve watched any of my games.”

Shane felt heat inflaming his cheeks. “I,” he said, licking his lips. “I wanted to. I’m proud of you, Ilya, you know that right?”

“Yes, Hollander. I know.” Ilya lifted his gaze to meet Shane’s, the intensity of it taking Shane’s breath away. They just looked at each other for long moments, until Ilya yawned, sounding as tired as he looked.

“You need to eat and then sleep.” It wasn’t what Shane wanted to say, but it was true. And he couldn’t find the right words anyway.

“Yes. And you need to do what you need to do.”

Shane sighed quietly. For now he needed to make sure that Ilya ate and was comfortable enough to sleep. And then… he wasn’t sure. Well that wasn’t true. He knew what he needed. He needed Ilya not to play. He needed to make him understand, make him see how stupid and dangerous it was. He also needed to support Ilya, accept his decision and be the boyfriend he deserved. He also needed to protect himself, as he wasn’t sure if he were able to live with himself in case Ilya would play and get even more injured and he hadn’t done everything in his power to prevent that. What he needed was impossible to have.

They ate in silence, Ilya’s eyes already drooping before he had finished the meal. Shane pulled the blanket over him after he cleared the breakfast, ignoring his itch to tidy up the sheets. Now wasn’t the time. He looked down on Ilya for a moment. Ilya looked worn-out and exhausted, his messy curls framing his pale face, but the determined tilt to his mouth wasn’t lost on Shane. He looked like a captain carrying his team to a cup. He looked very breakable, too.

“Will you be here when I wake up?” Ilya asked, his voice already heavy with impending sleep. His eyes were barely open, but Shane felt the heat of his gaze nevertheless.

“I don’t know,” Shane whispered, thumbing along Ilya’s jaw before pressing a kiss to his lips. “I want to be, but I don’t know if I can.”

He really didn’t. Would it make a difference if he left? Would Ilya reconsider playing, finally realizing the gravity of his injury and the danger it carried when he left? Would Shane be strong enough to leave and jeopardize what they had built together? Would he be strong enough to stay and watch Ilya jeopardize himself?

“Is okay,” Ilya whispered back, an unreadable expression entering his eyes before he closed them, his lips going slack almost immediately.

Shane waited until he was sure Ilya really was asleep, probably waited longer than necessary, before he pushed himself up, collected the tray, and left the room, closing the door behind him as silently as he could. It was time to make a decision.

Chapter 4

Ilya woke from his own groan, the sound penetrating his dream. Part of him wanted to cling to the forgiving darkness and refuse to open his eyes, just let himself drift away once more. The other part told him to get it together, that he had slept long enough, and that, despite feeling still tired, it was time to get up. The latter won.

Ilya blinked, trying not to move too much. He hated sleeping on the back and wished he could just roll over on his stomach, press his face into the pillow and inhale the last lingering traces of Shane. Ilya huffed, annoyed with himself and just *everything* as a jab of pain shot through him, hot, white and toe-curling. Even getting on his side seemed an impossible task. Instead he only turned his face towards the window, soaking in the beams of sun making their way past the curtains. It must be well after noon already. The warmth on his face was welcome, the amount of time he'd spent napping not.

Irritated, Ilya pushed the blanket off him. He wasn't hungry, the late breakfast had been substantial, but he knew he should have eaten something for lunch. The playoff grind had taken its toll on him even before his injury; he was thinner than he'd been in a long time. The last time he'd been in a similar position, he'd been a lot younger and his body a lot more forgiving. His time with the Bears felt like a lifetime away. The feeling of lifting the Cup was almost forgotten, the tears of joy and desperation dried a long time ago. He'd felt invincible then, like the man he'd always wanted to be, despite his father, despite his brother, despite his whole country. Ilya wanted this feeling again. He wanted to be that man again. Ilya *wanted.*

But first he had to get out of this fucking bed. Ilya's helpless laugh turned into a yelp when he tried to push himself in a sitting position. This was ridiculous. He was a professional athlete, he was the captain of his team, he was about to win the damn Cup – and yet he couldn't even sit up without help.

Help. His house felt too quiet, his room empty and cold, despite the sun. Shane had left. The realization hit him like the player had. Sudden and painful. Ilya closed his eyes, wishing himself back to the blissful nothingness of sleep. He'd told Shane to do what he needed to do, and he'd known Shane leaving had always been a possibility. But still. Still he'd hoped that Shane needed to be with him more than he needed to be away.

Ilya swallowed. He could do this. He'd done everything alone for a long time, he could do *this.* He gritted his teeth, bracing himself for the pain that would come the moment he moved too much. The sound of a hushed voice and a small laugh made him pause.

Troy. He must be on the phone, speaking to someone. Harris, perhaps. Of course Shane wouldn't just leave him alone, he wasn't that kind of person. He'd called back Troy before he'd fucked off. Ilya gritted his teeth harder until they hurt, just as the rest of his body. Somehow this didn't make it better. It made it worse. It would have been easier to hate Shane a little to get through the next days, but of course Shane was being fucking *considerate,* so hating him wasn't as easy as it should be. Maybe if Ilya tried a little. Put some effort in.

Ilya pushed himself up, only half managing to bite back the howl building inside him. The door to his room slammed open instantly.

“What the fuck are you doing, Ilya? Why didn’t you call me?”

Shane’s arms were around him a second later, stabilizing him. Shane’s grip was steady but gentle, a sharp contrast to the fury in his voice. Ilya couldn’t do much more than pant into his chest. At least he was sitting.

“What the fuck, Ilya?” Shane demanded.

Ilya rested his head against Shane, taking the moment to inhale Shane’s scent, leveling his breathing to get through the pain but also not to make it worse. A broken sternum was definitely nothing he’d recommend doing again.

“I thought you’d left,” Ilya finally managed to say, the words only slightly slurred.

Ilya felt Shane’s body still against him.

“I thought about it,” Shane confessed, his grip tightening but easing up before it started to hurt.

Ilya remained silent for a bit. “But you’ll stay, yes?”

“Yes. I’ll stay. Troy is here to drive you to the team doctor, they want to run a couple of more tests before the game. But before you need to eat. Come on, I’ll help you up.”

Ilya was glad to be able to rest his weight on Shane while he pulled him to his feet. He didn’t know if he’d made it on his own.

“You know they'll clear me to play?” Ilya asked. He had to make sure Shane didn’t get his hope up. He couldn’t watch Shane walk away now that he had promised to stay.

Shane’s jaw ticked but he gave a curt nod. “Of course they will. You’re too stubborn to let them do anything else.”

Ilya’s mouth twitched with amusement. “You know you’d play too.”

“I really want to say I wouldn’t.”

“But you’re a bad liar.”

“Yes. And if you now say I’m bad at many things, I will tell Troy not to stop at Mc Donald’s.”

Ilya gave a short, low laugh. “You wouldn’t dare! Besides, you think Troy is more scared of you than of me? His actual captain?”

“I’m sure Troy knows what’s below your asshole attitude, I doubt he knows me that well,” Shane shot back.

“You’re so mean, Hollander. I really don’t know why everyone thinks I am the ass. Will you help me down the stairs now or do I have to call for Troy?”

“Oh shut up. I’m not mean. You’re glad to have me. But come on, then.” Shane gripped Ilya’s side to steady him.

It took Ilya an embarrassing amount of time to get down the stairs.

Doctor Martin cleared Ilya to play just as expected – to her credit, she did it reluctantly. But Ilya insisted that it should be his decision, that he was an adult and informed enough to make that choice. In the end Doctor Martin didn’t want to stand between the team and the Cup.

Ilya was exhausted by the time he returned home, but he already felt the excitement for tomorrow’s game buzzing in his veins. One game, and either everything had been worth it or not. Ilya was pretty sure that he wouldn’t make another game if they lost tomorrow. They couldn’t lose. They wouldn’t.

It was the mantra that got Ilya up the stairs that night and into bed. He heard it echoing in his mind while he fell asleep next to Shane, his hand carefully tugged against his side, stroking the few non battered inches. They were the words that got him up again and food inside him the next day. They wouldn’t lose. They couldn’t.

“Is it strange to have me here?” Shane asked after waking Ilya up from his pre-game nap and getting him ready, Ilya’s usual music playing from his phone to get him into the right mood.

Ilya took a moment to contemplate the question. Ilya wasn’t the most suspicious player out there, but he had some routines he’d like to follow before a game. None of them included Shane helping him getting dressed or prepare his meals or lay down with him for his pre-game nap. None of them included Shane, period. Even though Shane was the most important person in Ilya’s life, there was nothing. They had never been there enough for each other to establish something, their game plans too unpredictable. Of course they texted before each game, but this wasn’t a ritual. This was just a WhatsApp.

“Yes,” he said with a rasp to his voice. “But is good too. It’s…” Ilya shook his head, waving his hand helplessly in the air. “Is a bit sad that you’re my person and that you never got to share this with me before. Or I with you.”

Shane reached for Ilya while he nodded. The brush of his fingertips against Ilya’s cheek made him shiver. “But now I get to. I’m glad I came and stayed.”

“Yes,” Ilya simply said. “Me too. Will you kiss me goodbye? The last kiss before I’ll have two Cups.”

“Ilya,” Shane gasped at the audacity of Ilya talking about winning before such a game. He was the more suspicious person between the two. “Don’t jinx it. But yes of course. I’ll kiss you goodbye. I even wish you luck.”

Ilya shrugged with half a shoulder, as much as his broken sternum let him. “I don’t need luck, I’m the best.”

Shane only rolled his eyes, but a smile curled his lips, exactly the reaction Ilya had wanted to achieve. “I’ll still have one Cup more than you.”

Ilya laughed at that, delighted. He pressed his hands against his heart to show how much the words had hurt him. “So mean. Such a mouth on you, Hollander.”

Before Shane could protest, Ilya cupped Shane’s face and brought their lips together in a gentle kiss. “One day we’ll win one together. You can assist my winning goal.”

“You’d be lucky to even play on my line,” Shane gave back, biting back a laugh.

Ilya watched him intensely, scrunching his nose as if to assess Shane and his abilities. “If you practiced a bit I think you’d made a decent winger.”

This time Shane couldn’t help but laugh. “You’re such an ass. By the way, that’s why people think you’re one.”

“I just say the truth, yes. You’re alright at hockey.”

Shane rolled his eyes again. “Go be the best tonight, Ilya. And be careful, please. Come back to me in one piece.”

“I will be,” Ilya said, suddenly a lot more somber. “You will watch it?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world. I already put the right TV station on.”

Ilya pressed his forehead against Shane’s, taking a breath. “Good. Is good to know you’re watching.”

They kissed once more before Ilya pulled away and walked slowly towards the door where Troy was already waiting to take them to the arena. The whole way Ilya felt Shane’s eyes on his back, warm and steady. He would win the Cup tonight, and his boyfriend would watch him.

“Let’s play hockey,” Ilya said, his smile bride and sure.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ilya loved the pre-game atmosphere in the locker room when excitement was buzzing between the players, making the air drizzle with electricity. Today he wouldn't need a huge speech to get his players fired up, everyone was already burning. The only thing dampening his good spirits were the cautious looks Ilya caught from some of the guys, as if he were something breakable. At least no one dared to say something to his face.

Putting his gear on was excruciating and humiliating. Ilya tried to do it himself, but in the end he needed help. Troy helped him into his pads and Hazy laced up his skates for him, his body protesting vehemently at his trial to bend to do it on his own. That no one chirped him for it made the whole ordeal even worse. They should make fun of him, keep it light like they usually did before games. He didn't like that his teammates thought of him as fragile and protection worthy.

He definitely couldn't let the enemy see that. When he slipped on his helmet and closed the strap, he squared his shoulders, readying himself for the warm-up laps on the ice before the real game would start. He knew he was being watched, by the fans in the arena, the co-trainers of Edmonton to report back any weakness, the whole hockey nation in front of the screens. He was being watched by Shane. He wouldn't show any vulnerability. He wouldn't make him worry, even though Ilya knew he worried anyway. But he wouldn't add to it.

Ilya refused any help getting on the ice. The moment his blades touched it, he knew he could really do this. The ice was fresh and crispy beneath him, the air chilly but hot with the team's expectations and the roars of the fans. The atmosphere was everything they'd lacked for long, grueling seasons where anyone had waited for the inevitable loss. Now everyone was out for blood and the Cup.

Ilya lifted his face upwards, to the arena spotlights as if they were the sun. He allowed himself a moment to soak it all in, feel the warmth of the artificial light, let the thunder of the fans settle into his bones. Then he started to skate, slowly at first but then faster, finding his rhythm with his new body. He wasn't the same, each movement fucking *hurt,* but he could do this. He wanted to do this, needed it as much as he needed to breathe.

He found his edges on the ice, and even though it was difficult to grip the stick, he managed. The shots he fired on the net were decent. Not Ilya-good, but decent. He saw the signs of relief on the faces of his teammates, knowing then that he truly had made the right choice. His team needed him. When he left the ice after the warm-ups were done, his base layer was soaked with sweat and he was panting way more than usual. His chest was on fire, but so was his blood. He was fine.

"Today," Ilya said when everyone was back in the locker room for the final speeches and preparations before the game. He didn't raise his voice, he didn't have to. His voice carried. He stood in the middle of the room and he felt every pair of eyes on him. Ilya turned around

slowly so that everyone knew he meant each and every one of them, no matter if they were playing in the top or bottom six, or guarding the bench as their second goalie.

“Today,” Ilya repeated, “is the day everything comes together. Everyone here sacrificed a lot. Time with friends, time with family. We sacrificed our bodies, parts of ourselves. We’re here not because we were lucky, or because anyone believed in us. No one did. We’re here because *we* believe in us. We’re here because we deserve it. Because we’re the best. We’re here to win the Cup. And today we’ll make that happen.”

Ilya’s last words were buried by hollers and cheers, the sound of sticks tapping against the floor overwhelmingly loud. Today was their day. Ilya’s day.

Shane tugged at the collar of his jersey while his eyes were fixed on the big screen in Ilya’s living room. The jersey was too big for him, especially on his slender pre-playoffs frame. It was just a jersey, the same material he wore all the time, and yet. The *Rozanov* together with the eighty-one on his back felt different, the Centaur logo on the front was as ridiculous as ever, and yet it provided a sense of belonging he’d never felt while watching a different team than his own.

It was the first time Shane wore Ilya’s jersey. He could get used to the feeling. Ilya’s words came back to him, the words of them winning the Cup together. The yearning building inside came as a surprise. He wanted that. He wanted another Cup, but to win one together with Ilya? It seemed impossible, and yet here he was sitting, in Ilya’s living room with his jersey, something he thought impossible two days ago.

Shane tried to picture Ilya in Montreal-red, playing alongside him, Hayden, JJ and the others. Shane shook his head. He could picture playing with Ilya, it was just hard to picture him with the others on his team. He loved his team, had given them and the town everything he had. And yet, his imagination failed him now. Maybe somewhere else would be easier. Toronto perhaps, or an American team. Maybe even in Ottawa. But first Ilya had to win this Cup without him.

“Let’s go, Ilya,” Shane whispered when Ottawa’s players piled onto the ice. Ilya was the last to step out, his head held high. Shane tried to decipher the expression on his face. Ilya looked determined, focused like he always was before games, especially one as important as this. But Shane saw the exhaustion hiding beneath it, the pain. Shane was certain only he could see it, Ilya masked it well. But it was there.

Shane let out a breath when Ilya bent down for the first face off. His body was taught, too straight, lacking his usual fluidness that was a signature of his game.

“Oh shut up,” Shane said to the screen, when he saw Ilya pop out his mouthguard, a smirk appearing on his face before he said something to his opponent. Now was really not the time to antagonize, not with how bad this game could end when someone lost their cool and shoved Ilya too hard.

Of course Ilya didn't shut up. He said something else before he sucked his mouthguard back in again, winking for good measure. His opponent visibly grit his jaw in annoyance, Ilya had always had a knack to get under people's skin, Shane was the best proof of that. Whatever Ilya had said, it was working – when the puck dropped he was just that bit faster, stole the puck and passed it to Troy who took off towards the net, followed by the cheers of the crowd.

The Centaurs played like they were on fire in the first intermission. Their passes connected, Ilya's line with Troy and Luca Haas just *clicked,* and Hayes guarded their goal like a guy on a mission.

"Fuck yes," Shane yelled when Troy scored the first goal of the day from Ilya's assist, the puck going in at the top right corner of the net, leaving Edmonton's goalie no chance.

The Centaur's piled on Troy, Ilya among them. But Shane noticed that he kept on the periphery of the celebration, noticed how careful his teammates were with him. He was scared the guys from Edmonton noticed too.

Shane tapped his fingers nervously against his thigh. He loved watching hockey, but he hated watching the playoffs. He hated how useless he felt. He hated how fragile Ilya looked, even though Shane knew it was only in his mind. Ilya hid it well behind his layers of pads and iron will. Ilya played good, not as good as he could, but still. And his team stepped up for him.

Zane Boodram scored the second goal in the game with only a few minutes left on the clock in the first. Shane exhaled with relief when the shot went in, Ottawa had been careless with their chances. Missed shots that should have gone in, but a two goal lead wasn't bad. Shane just hoped it would be enough.

It wasn't. Edmonton scored last minute, a stupid goal following stupid mistakes by almost everyone on the ice. Shane saw Ilya grind his teeth in frustration before he schooled his features, yelling something encouraging at his team and petting Hayes on the helmet. The goalie hadn't looked good, but he'd been a brick wall so far in the playoffs, Shane hoped that one bad goal didn't jeopardize his confidence.

Shane wasn't happy about the first intermission ending a couple of seconds later. Ottawa looked aimless, whereas Edmonton was thriving on their late goal, all cheers and confidence even though they were still a goal behind. But Shane knew too well that such a goal could turn an entire game.

"Come on, Ilya," Shane murmured to his boyfriend's back on the screen. "Get them going again."

He watched carefully as Ilya stepped off the ice, his movements measured. He was holding himself too controlled, too carefully for Shane's liking.

"You shouldn't be on the ice," Shane said to no one but the screen. Ilya really shouldn't. Shane shouldn't have let him, he should have- Shane shook his head and stood up, forbidding himself of thinking those thoughts. He'd made a decision, and so had Ilya. They both had to live with them now.

He went to the kitchen, suddenly wishing he'd be more of a drinker. A little buzz would certainly help him get through the next two parts of the game. Instead of a beer or something stronger Shane grabbed a Gatorade and chucked down half of it in one go. He really hated this.

He settled back down on the couch just in time for the teams to return back on the ice. Edmonton brimmed over with the confidence their late goal had given them, almost strutting on the ice. Ottawa tried to mirror them, but their confidence seemed painted on. Shane knew it happened, sometimes. A good game suddenly turning bad, the break at the exactly wrong time when everyone was down and there seemed no way up. It happened to every team no matter how good. It just happened now at the exactly wrong time to the exactly wrong team.

And there was nothing Shane could do about it. All he could do was watch Ottawa lose the face off and Edmonton tie the game only twenty-six seconds into the second period. All he could do was watch Ilya trying to hold his team together but failing. He wasn't himself, even though Shane saw how hard he tried to be that player that could carry a team to a win. But he also saw Ilya shying away from contacts he usually threw himself into without second thought, normally even thought out.

He saw Ilya skate slower, the stick awkwardly clutched in his hands as if he were barely able to handle it with both hands. He had to watch Ilya's gray face on the bench, his eyes narrowed, his mouth pressed into a thin line, pain written all over his face. He had to watch him trying to breathe, but it never seemed he could truly catch a breath.

Shane's chest constricted when Ilya went over the boards for another shift. He played less minutes than he usually did, and yet every minute felt like one too many. Shane ached for him and his team, who seemed defenseless against the onslaught of Edmonton's offense. It happened, sometimes, that a game changed so fundamentally in the span of a few seconds. It really shouldn't have happened now.

"Come *on,"* Shane urged, willing them to do better. By themselves, but especially by Ilya who gave them his all. They really needed to give him something back.

"Yes," Shane yelped a moment later when Ottawa stole the puck from Edmonton, Ilya racing down the ice with renewed speed. This seemed to be it. This seemed to be what Ottawa needed, a goal to answer Edmonton, or at least a good chance to show that they still were in this game. Ilya passed the puck to Troy, Troy back to Ilya – and then Shane's world stopped.

"No," he whispered, or maybe he screamed it, he didn't even know. "No."

He shook his head, not able to accept what he was seeing.

Adam Patterson, Edmonton's best defenseman, barreled down towards Ilya. And then he hit Ilya. Right in his chest. It was a clean hit, it wasn't even that brutal. But it was Ilya. And it was Ilya's chest. Ilya went down, but by a miracle he got up again, even started to skate. Shane's world slowly moved again.

"Thank god," Shane whispered, just before his world stopped once more.

Ilya's hand came up to his chest, rubbing against it, shaking his head. He never looked up when he skated towards the boards, his hand pressed against his chest. Helping hands grabbed at him and helped him off the ice, and he was pressed down on the bench. His face was a mask of gray and pain, the camera zooming mercilessly in to catch the twitch of his jaw and the hunted look in his eyes.

The coach leaned into him, asking him something, the camera still on Ilya even though the game went on. It didn't take a lip reader to know what Ilya told his coach.

"I'm hurt."

This time, Shane knew he screamed.

Chapter End Notes

I always planned to have Ilya get hit in the chest again during this game, but I have to admit it hits differently after watching Matthew taking the check in the second to last game.

Chapter 6

In retrospect, Shane couldn't pinpoint the exact moment he realized that he needed to be at the arena. He just knew that he did, and that he had to make it happen, no matter what. He had already his phone pressed to his ear, a zip-hoodie in the other hand, trying to wiggle into it without disconnecting the call.

"Answer for fuck's sake," he muttered when it just rang and rang and rang. He didn't call Ilya, knowing that it wouldn't make sense. Even if his whole being longed to do exactly that. He wanted to hear Ilya's stupid voice with his stupid accent telling him stupid lies that he was *fine,* because at least Shane would know then that he was fine-ish. But Ilya wouldn't answer even if he called, wouldn't even have his phone with him.

Shane watched as the assistant trainer escorted Ilya towards the tunnel, his movements slow and sluggish. Shane knew then that Ilya wouldn't be back on the ice. He would be lucky to be back on the bench. He closed his eyes, not able to watch Ilya leave the most important game in his career. He just hoped Ilya was okay. He had to be.

"Shane, what's up?"

"Fucking finally," Shane almost yelled into the phone when Scott Hunter picked up his call. He took a breath and measured his voice before he continued.

"I need a favor," Shane said, the words rushing out of him in one long breath. "You know someone on Ottawa's team to get me into the arena, right?" *Right?* Scott had to. Scott knew everyone, and he was everyone's darling – except Ilya's, but that didn't count.

There was a slight pause on the other end of the line before Scott spoke again. "I've got Harris' number. I'm sure he can help. What do you want there anyhow?"

"Thank you." Shane sighed in relief, ramming his feet into his sneakers. His concentration was split between the call and the sound coming from the TV, hoping to get an update on Ilya's condition. Where were his damn car keys?

"I'll explain later. I just- thank you," Shane repeated, not able to say more. "Just text it to me."

Shane didn't wait for a response. He disconnected the call, looking frantically around, letting out a huge huff of air when he located his keys, neatly tucked away on the little dresser next to the door. Where he always put them.

His phone vibrated with a message from Scott, and before he could overthink anything, he already called the number. In the background, from the TV he'd forgotten to turn off, he heard the commentator announce another goal for Edmonton, but the ringing from the call not connecting was louder. He didn't wait for Harris to answer before leaving and heading to his car, he knew his chances to catch him during this game were almost nil. That Harris actually let him in even smaller, but he'd cross that bridge when he was there. If he didn't

reach Harris at all, he'd do what he hated: throw money at the person in charge until it was enough. Everyone had a prize.

Thankfully Ilya didn't live far away from the rink, and there wasn't much traffic. Everyone was watching the game, at the arena, a local pub or at home. Ottawa wasn't as crazy about hockey as Montreal, but with the sudden possibility of winning the Stanley Cup, they were crazy enough.

"Who is this?"

Shane almost jumped behind the wheel when a male voice finally answered his call. He sounded stressed and tired, nothing of the chipper tone left Shane associated with Ottawa's media spokesperson. He'd never met him in person but he had seen some of the videos on YouTube.

"Is this Harris?" Shane asked back, honking at the driver in front of him who'd missed the switch from red to green. God, he needed to keep it together.

There was a pause and Shane was afraid that he'd hung up.

"Yes. Who is this? Who gave you my number and why do you keep calling me?"

"It's Shane. Hollander," he clarified. Even though he'd called Harris the fifth time in a row, he had absolutely no idea what to say.

"From the Voyageurs? What do you want? I shouldn't even be speaking with you, there's kind of an important game going on."

"I know. I need a favor. You need to get me into the arena. To the locker rooms. I-" Shane said, switching lanes because the car in front of him was just so fucking *slow*. "I need to see Ilya. You know, we're friends."

"Friends," Harris echoed, and Shane could practically see him pinch the bridge of his nose.

"Yeah. I'll owe you one."

"You owe me a lot more than one if I let you into game five of the Stanley Cup finals."

"Yes," Shane replied. "I'll owe you a lifetime as you'll even let me into the locker room." He didn't have it in him to feel awkward about his request anymore. He needed to be where Ilya was, and Ilya was in the arena, so he'd find a way to get there. Ilya would be proud of him. For him it probably would be just another day in the usual life of Ilya Rozanov.

"Will Roz hate me or love me for *potentially* doing this?"

"Only one way to find out."

Harris snorted into the phone. "I can't believe I'm doing this. Someone will wait for you at the player's entrance. Don't make me regret this."

“Thanks. Really, thank you. I’m there in about ten.” Shane bit his lip, forcing himself to ask the next question. “How’s Ilya?”

The silence on the other end was deafening. “I don’t know. He hasn’t come back yet, and there’s no other information yet – official or unofficial.”

“Fuck,” Shane swore.

“We’re still one behind,” Harris added, even though Shane hadn’t asked. He didn’t really care, though it wasn’t completely true. He cared, not for himself, but for Ilya.

“Fuck,” Shane said with feeling before disconnecting the call. Everything had gone to hell in so little time, he still had a hard time catching up with it.

It was surprisingly easy to get into the arena. The guy guarding the players’ parking area waved him through after Shane stated his name, and as promised, there was another man waiting for him to give him an important looking name tag to grant him access to the catacombs and locker room. Shane had no idea how Harris had pulled that off in so little time, he must be a kind of magician. He definitely owed him more than he knew how to repay.

The walk through the catacombs towards the home team’s locker room felt longer than it had any right to be. Shane avoided looking at anyone as much as he could, pulling the hood up and into his face. He didn’t want to be recognized, he didn’t want to have to explain what he was doing here. He was glad that the man accompanied him, as he had no idea where to go. Shane had never been in this part of the rink, only ever in the guest area. It was strange to be in a place where he felt he didn’t belong.

He felt out of place in the loaded atmosphere of people trying to will their team to score. The voices around him rose and fell with what was going on the ice, excitement followed by despair when yet another pass didn’t connect and yet another shot was missed.

Shane rubbed tiredly over his face. It was already the third period, and Ilya was not back on the ice. Which was good, he shouldn’t be. It was bad too, because it was where Ilya belonged.

“Here’s the locker room,” the guy announced, nodding and pointing towards a closed door.

“Thank you,” Shane said, his voice too thin, but it was hard to push words past his tight throat.

Maybe Ilya wasn’t even there, Shane thought. Maybe he was still with the team doctor, maybe he was on his way to the hospital, maybe he was in there and didn’t want to see him. The thought hit Shane out of the blue, like an unexpected elbow to the chest. What if?

People would know or at least suspect what they were to each other when Shane showed up in the middle of such an important game, barging into the locker room as if he had any right

being there. Would Ilya mind? Would Shane mind if their roles were reversed? Probably, Shane had to concede with a sinking feeling.

Before he could convince himself that it was better to turn around and go Shane pressed the handle down and shoved the door open. He was greeted with the usual stink of a locker room, old, pungent sweat mixed with the newer, sweater version of it, the stale smell of old gear and a trace of cologne and deodorant.

Shane's heart was beating loudly in his chest, the thrum matching the chants from the fans outside. The door closed behind him, shutting the world out. Suddenly Shane was calm. His pulse slowed down when he saw the slumped figure in the corner of the locker room, sitting in front of the stall with the letters *Rozanov* above. Ilya leaned against the wall with closed eyes, his composure stiff with pain. His skates were thrown carelessly to the side, his pads half ripped-off, his face ashen.

"I told you to leave me alone!" Ilya's voice was cutting, his accent strong but not containing anything of the gentleness Shane loved about it.

"Ilya," Shane said, already moving towards him. He came to a halt in front of him, resting his hands gently on Ilya's shoulders, afraid to cause more pain.

"Shane," Ilya whispered, shaking his head in wonder before slowly blinking his eyes open, staring up at Shane as if he was seeing a ghost. Shane couldn't help but cup his face, resting his hands there, needing the contact as much as Ilya seemed to need it.

"You watched it."

"Of course," Shane said, swallowing down all the questions screaming inside his head. *How are you, what is wrong with your chest, where is the fucker who hurt you so I can kill him?* They were loud and demanding, but they weren't important now. Ilya wouldn't be here, alone by himself, in the locker room, if it was really serious in a threatening way. It was serious enough that they didn't let him play again, and that was all Shane needed to know for now.

"You came."

"Of course. I had to. I hope it's-"

"Is fine," Ilya said, leaning into Shane's touch with a heavy sigh. "They won't let me play again. I wanted to win. I wanted to win for you. For them. But even more for me."

"I know. And you will. You will get your fucking skates on again, and you will march out there with your pretty head held high and you will force your team to win with your stubbornness alone. They need you, Ilya."

"They need me on the ice." Ilya shook his head, leaning his head back into his stall.

"Oh fuck off, Ilya. They're good without you too, but they need to see that their captain is alright. And then they'll destroy Edmonton."

"They know I'm fine, the coach told them."

Shane bent down, tilting Ilya's face up a fraction. He leaned in and pressed his lips to Ilya's, gentle at first before he bit slightly down just to hear the tiny yelp Ilya always made when he did this. God he had needed to hear that sound, had needed to feel his lips against his own.

"Seeing and knowing are different things, Ilya, believe me. Get out of here and be the captain that you are."

With that Shane nudged Ilya's legs apart and dropped to his knees, reaching for one of Ilya's skates.

"You'll need them for the victory lap."

Ilya looked away, shaking his head. "Don't," he started, but Shane didn't let him finish.

"I'm wearing your jersey. I'm not wearing it to console you for second place."

Ilya's gaze snapped back to Shane. Shane smiled at him when he lowered the zipper of his hoodie, just enough to reveal the C on his chest and the top of the hideous centaur.

A smirk appeared on Ilya's face, and Shane couldn't help but smile back, suddenly feeling a lot lighter.

"I could get used to you kneeling for me in my jersey, Hollander."

Shane huffed out a laugh. "Later," Shane promised. "First you have to win me a cup. And then you'll get your reward."

Shane was careful when he reached for Ilya's leg and helped him place his right foot into the skate. He pulled the laces carefully tight, not too much but also not too little, so that Ilya would have enough hold. He laced up Ilya's skate loop by loop, before he made a knot and a bow, feeling Ilya's hot gaze on him the whole time. He looked up when he was done, their gaze meeting and staying, unsaid words flowing between them. Later they would talk, but now Ilya had to win a hockey game.

"Now the other one," Shane said when their gaze finally broke. He was as careful as he was before, his fingers as sure as they always were when he laced up his own.

"Good to go," Shane said, giving Ilya a tab to his shin pads before straightening himself. He reached for the shoulder pads to help Ilya back into them, but Ilya was quicker. He grabbed Shane by his wrist and drew his hand to his lips, pressing a kiss into his palm.

"Thank you," Ilya said, all traces of humor wiped away by serenity. Ilya didn't need to say that he thanked him not only for helping him get dressed, but for coming, for staying and then for coming again. Shane knew it anyway.

"Of course."

The roar of the crowd was deafening when Ilya appeared from the tunnel and stepped back into the spotlight.

Shane hung back, watching the last minutes of the game unfold in the shadows. He'd been right like he knew he would be. The team was more than Ilya, but Ilya was the team's heart. They were all tired, Edmonton and Ottawa alike, the grind of the playoffs demanding its toll from every single one of them. Shane knew that their muscles were burning with exhaustion, complaining at every inch they had to skate, at every hard shot they took. But he also knew that Ilya being back on the bench, even if only to watch, gave Ottawa a new pulse.

Shane wasn't sure if it was visible for everyone in the rink and in front of the screens, but he was sure that it was tangible. The energy radiating off the Ottawa players was pliable, there was an edge to their movements that hadn't been there before, there was a spark when the players looked at each other on the ice that had been lost at the end of the first period. Ottawa was back.

Shane held his breath when Troy won the next face off and slapped the puck over to Luca Haas, who was wheezing but forced his body to skate fast and precise. Luca passed to Dillon. Shane swore silently, Ilya's voice ringing sharply in his mind, of how *bad* Dillon was at hockey. Worse than Shane, Ilya had added with a wink, and the memory of the old chirp made Shane smile.

No matter how bad Dillon was, he was better than Edmonton's d-man. His pass found Troy in front of the net, now all Troy had to do was shoot. He shot, and Shane held his breath, together with the rest of the 19.000 people in the arena. The shot missed. It hit the goal post, the *ting* resonating in the throats of the masses.

"Fu-" Shane wanted to scream when suddenly, out of nowhere, Luca was there, catching the bounce mid-air, throwing it back on the ice and slamming it home.

When Shane had thought the crowd was loud before, he'd been wrong. The crowd practically exploded. For a second Shane was afraid for Luca as the other players slammed into him, but when he emerged from the pile of bodies he was grinning from ear to ear, pointing towards the bench.

Shane didn't need to see Ilya's face to know that he was grinning too, the pain of not being able to skate and score forgotten. It was nice when he was shown on the big screen nevertheless, his eyes gleaming in his otherwise gray face. Ilya was still hurt, but he wasn't broken.

"Come on," Shane saw Ilya mouth to his teammates, and he nodded to it. Luca had tied the game, but they were still one goal short of winning. As was Edmonton.

No matter how hard Ottawa pushed, they didn't manage to score. Edmonton mobilized their last reserves and held their ranks tight against the Centaur's offense, even almost scoring the game winning goal, but Hazy made an award-worthy save, keeping them in the game.

Shane dug his nails into his palm where Ilya's kiss still lingered to keep himself from screaming.

"Come on," he whispered, but they didn't listen. The game went to overtime.

Fuck. Shane hated overtime. *Everyone* hated overtime. One mistake was enough to lose. On the upside, one stroke of genius was enough to win, but he nevertheless hated it. Hated it even more when he was forced to sit tight and watch. The wait until the two teams reappeared on the ice felt like ages. Shane itched to be in the locker room with Ilya, but he knew that this wasn't a possibility. He didn't belong there, those minutes and moments belonged to Ilya and his team. He'd had his time with Ilya, and it had been more than he'd ever thought he'd get during such a game.

The moment Ottawa stepped on the ice Shane's heartbeat calmed. They looked tired but determined in a way only winners looked. They had the advantage of the momentum now, they had come back from the death, they had Ilya on the bench and this night's best team on the ice. Were they the best individual players? Hell no. But right now, they were the best team possible. And it showed.

Ottawa won the first face off, but they lost the puck to Patterson, who managed to pass the puck quickly on to his center. But Hazy was there with another parade, steady and calm, the save giving the team even more strength. The game went back and forth, Ottawa always looking a bit better, being a bit faster and a bit more ruthless. But Edmonton fought against the loss, trying to force a win and another game to happen on their home turf.

Shane watched as Dillon raced down the ice on a breakaway, watched his shot bounce back from the goal post, grunting in frustration with the rest of the audience. Suddenly Zane appeared seemingly out of nowhere in front of the net, not quite getting the puck but somehow managing to get his stick on it, giving it the most awkward slap Shane had seen in a while. The puck propelled towards the goal, impossible slow and fast at the same time.

Edmonton's goalie threw himself towards it in a frantic haste to get to it, and for a second Shane thought he had it. But then the puck propelled further, crossed the line and the goal horn sounded, followed by a moment of eerie, stunned silence before the arena erupted in noise. The horn was overlain by the combined roars of Ottawa's players and fans, the players and coaches on the bench threw themselves over the boards in their rush to get to their teammates. Zane was somewhere buried in a huge pile of players, screaming his lungs out.

And there was Ilya, still standing outside, his hand propped up on the boards, taking in the madness, before he turned around. It should be impossible to find Shane in storm of the celebrating fans, but they found each other, Shane the only unmoving, silent person in a madhouse. They looked at each other, the moment stretching to eternity, before a smile appeared on Ilya's face, making the gray and pain disappear. Shane laughed, the sound quiet and as private as Ilya's smile was, not directed at anyone but them.

Ilya mouthed something to Shane who had no fucking idea what he was saying, but he mouthed *I'm so proud of you* back, grinning now, his chest almost exploding with joy.

Go celebrate Shane mouthed, and he had no idea if Ilya was the better lip reader among the two of them or if it was a coincidence, but Ilya turned around and let himself be helped on the ice, finally joining his teammates who swallowed him the moment he set foot on the ice, only letting him re-emerge when the Stanley Cup was carried on the ice. They really had made it. Ilya had made it.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane jerked awake, groggy and disoriented. It took him a few moments to realize that he'd been dozing on Ilya's couch, that the pain in his neck came from the awkward position he'd been in before falling asleep, and that the weird noise waking him came from outside the front door. Shane heard shuffling and the noise of a key dropping, a Russian swear overlain by an English one, and a giggle. Shane frowned, rubbing at his tired eyes, wondering if he'd just dreamed it - but no, there was definitely someone giggling. He dragged himself up and cracked his neck, trying to soothe his tense muscles.

"Can I help you?" Shane asked dryly when the door opened and the hallway was filled with three tall, clearly drunken hockey players. Shane just hoped that alcohol mixed well with Ilya's meds, or at least didn't make anything worse.

"Shane," Troy said, grinning widely, whereas Ilya went for "Hollander," the last syllable slurred, his smile lopsided and so fucking pleased with himself that Shane wanted to step close, pull him in and kiss it from his lips.

"What's he doing here?" was what Hayes said, the frown on his face appeared slowly but steadily. "And why are you not surprised?" Hayes asked, scrutinizing his teammates as best as he could in his state. He swayed slightly, but overall seemed a bit better in shape than the others.

"Oh he's been here before," Troy replied, waving casually at Shane as if it weren't a big deal at all that Ilya's archrival was waiting for him in his house. "He belongs to Ilya's inventory." The last bit made him giggle again, but Shane couldn't help that the words, as drunken as they were, knocked something loose inside of him.

"Yes," Ilya said, his self-satisfied smirk dipping into possessiveness. "He belongs to me."

Hayes studied Shane for a second, but then he shrugged. "Well then you're in charge of him now. He-"

"He," Ilya said pointedly, "is fine. And the best because he won the Cup. Where's the Cup? Did you lose it?" Ilya asked, looking back at Troy, his tone accusing now.

"Couldn't carry the Cup and you, it's safe. And waiting for you."

"I wanted to show it to Shane," Ilya pouted.

"I know what it looks like, thank you very much. Won it myself a couple of times." Shane was happy for Ilya, he was so proud of Ilya, but nevertheless he was glad not having to share Ilya's bed with the Stanley Cup. He wasn't sure if he was *that* happy for him.

“Come on,” Shane said, stepping forward to wrap his arm around Ilya’s shoulders. “Let’s get you upstairs and in bed. You’re drunk.”

“I’m Russian,” Ilya protested, “a little Champagne won’t get me drunk.”

“You’re on pain meds,” Shane countered, “and I doubt it was only a little. Thanks for taking care of him, I got it from here.” Shane smiled at the two Ottawa players who nodded back at him, swaying a little when they turned around to leave.

Despite the meds and the alcohol, Shane felt Ilya tense when he wrapped his arm more tightly around him and tugged at him to make him move. But he needed to move himself, as even though Shane was stone-cold sober, there was no way he could carry Ilya.

“You’re heavy,” Shane complained while slowly dragging Ilya up the stairs with Ilya’s full weight resting on him. Maybe he shouldn’t have sent the others away just yet.

“‘m not heavy. You’re weak. And small,” Ilya slurred, wincing a little when he took the next step. They had almost made it to the top.

“Ilya,” Shane complained, resisting the urge to stab his finger into Ilya’s side. He would if Ilya’s sternum weren’t broken. “I could let you fall, you know. Maybe I have to, considering I am so weak.”

“And small.”

“Ilya,” Shane hissed once more, close to laughing but also closed to getting annoyed for real.

“But you won’t,” Ilya carried on, ignoring Shane's warning.

“And why is that?” Shane asked, panting as if he had just played a shift in a hockey game. Ilya was fucking heavy

“Because you love me.” Ilya sounded so smug, Shane didn’t need to turn his head to see it written all over his face. He turned anyway, and he couldn’t help the warmth spreading through his body. He really loved the smug idiot.

“You’re lucky I do,” Shane grumbled, pushing the door to Ilya’s bedroom open. Ilya should shower, his hair was sticky, his shirt was drenched in something Shane hoped was Champagne or another alcohol, but he decided against it. He’d fetch a washcloth for now, the shower could wait until Ilya was at least sober again.

“Yes. I am lucky. Very lucky,” Ilya said, the serenity catching Shane by surprise. Of course Ilya had to ruin it a second later. “So lucky to have this small boyfriend who’s not half bad at hockey and who-”

“I still have more Cups than you!” Shane refrained from dropping Ilya on the bed, just a little, and he really deserved another Cup just for that if anyone asked him. Instead he lowered him gently down, arranged the pillow until Ilya sighed comfortably. His eyes were already fluttering shut.

“Hey,” Shane murmured, “I need a little help here.” He tapped on Ilya’s hips, making Ilya groan.

“Go away, Shane,” Ilya muttered, but there wasn’t any heat behind it. Shane ignored him.

“You hate sleeping in pants,” Shane replied, tapping Ilya again with a little more vigor behind.

Ilya’s groan was laced with pain when he finally lifted his hips, but Shane pushed the guilt back down. Ilya wouldn’t thank him in the morning if he let him keep the pants on, but he decided he wouldn’t make him lose his shirt, no matter how spoiled it was. It was dry, and that was good enough for now.

“I’ll be back in a moment.”

Ilya only hummed to Shane’s announcement, his eyes firmly shut, his breath already evening out. It wouldn’t surprise Shane if he were asleep when he came back. Shane made quick work of getting ready for bed himself before he wet a washcloth. He should use cold water, Ilya deserved that much. Shane smiled at himself, picturing the yelp and the scowl on Ilya’s face while he waited for the water to turn hot.

Ilya seemed fast asleep when he returned, his arms stretched away from his body, his features more relaxed but traces of pain edged into them. Shane allowed himself a moment to only look. It was good to slow down for a bit. Everything had happened so fast, Montreal being eliminated, Ottawa moving on, Ilya getting injured and Shane’s decision to come here to support Ilya. There was still a slight ache in his chest when he thought about the Cup, but the feeling of gratitude was stronger. That Ilya’s injury wasn’t life-altering, that he had witnessed Ilya fulfill his dream and prove himself, that Ilya was his, no matter what.

He settled down next to Ilya, careful not to wake him up. He brushed over Ilya’s face with the warm cloth, trying to rub away the filth of the celebrations without disturbing him. Just when he was about to give up and pull away, Ilya’s hand came up and grabbed his wrist.

“Feels good,” Ilya slurred, nuzzling into the cloth, smiling when Shane resumed to drag it over his face, neck and throat.

“I thought you’re asleep,” Shane whispered, leaning in to press a kiss to Ilya’s forehead.

“Wanted to wait for you. Thank you for…” Ilya’s voice trailed away, a frustrated frown appearing on his face.

“For everything?” Shane asked with a slight smile.

“Yes. Couldn’t have been easy.”

“It wasn’t until it was. You matter more than a Cup or my hurt pride.”

“I’m really lucky to have you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Really. And now I want my victory kiss. You can give me my victory blowjob tomorrow.”

Shane laughed, shaking his head. “So modest.”

He cupped Ilya’s chin and turned his head until the angle satisfied him before he leaned down to kiss Ilya, slowly and thoroughly, just like a Stanley Cup winner deserved.

“You taste like stale Champagne,” Shane complained, wrinkling his nose. Ilya reeked of it too, but it didn’t stop him from kissing him again.

“Next time we’ll do this, we’ll do it together. You and me and the Cup.”

Shane couldn’t help the broad smile, but he also didn’t fight it. “Yeah,” he said, giving Ilya another kiss. “You and me.”

He wasn’t sure if Ilya had heard him, his whole face had grown soft and slack. This time he really was asleep. But Shane was sure Ilya knew, and if not, he’d tell him tomorrow again. And the day after that.

Chapter End Notes

That's it... hope you enjoyed it, I had a lot of fun writing it!

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