

The Centaurs Have a PR Problem (and It's Married)

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The Centaurs Have a PR Problem (and It's Married)

by [Justaromanticfool](#)

Summary

Shane and Ilya are finally on the same team! The Centaurs' communications and PR department hasn't known peace since.

Featuring: the unhinged internet, chaotic group chats, Ilya being a menace, Shane being very tired, Harris trying (and failing) to contain the chaos, Luca accidentally starring in his own little rom-com, wholesome group dynamics and love all around.

Notes

Thank you all for all the love to my previous (and first) fic ! I hope you'll enjoy this one. Also I would like to make it clear I know NOTHING about PR and communications. And how amazing is the trailer, it could not have been better, I am so excited 🥹

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

Chapter 1: Thirsty on main

The trigger:

A post from the Ottawa Centaurs' official Instagram account. It shows a video thumbnail of Shane Hollander running on a treadmill in a gray tank top, his arm muscles caught mid-motion and a towel draped on the machine beside him. The caption reads: "Sweat. Focus. Repeat. 🦵 Go behind the scenes with our hometown hero's training routine 🏋️🔥." Within an hour, the post has nearly thirty-five thousand likes and the comment section has already descended into chaos, led of course, by Ilya Rozanov writing: "hot damn 🤩 my sexy impressive husband, increasing fertility rates worldwide."

@SensGuy47: form looks solid. dude's been grinding.

@Ottawon24: welcome to Ottawa Holzy! Can't believe this guy is on our team !

@GoCentaurs12: nice to see a pro actually using incline treadmill work. elite stuff.

@Centaurs4Life: we don't deserve him tbh.

@thirsty4holzy: why is this video 4 hours long 🤔

@sportsbabe99: every time I think I'm normal about hockey, new Shane Hollander content drops

@hollanov4life: omg Roz comment, they are husband goals 🤩

↳ @sportsbabe99: did he lie tho

@puckbunnyOG: Roz out here speaking for the people. fertility rates RISING indeed 🤩🍑

@gays4hockey: the phrasing is INSANE and I respect him for it

@policynerd42: okay but why are we unironically talking about fertility rates under a hockey post 🤩

@econbro420: actually declining fertility is due to cost of living, not lack of attraction to athletes 🤩 it is also a serious issue, we should not joke about it.

@EconGoddess: Okay but unironically, if we're talking fertility, policies like paid parental leave and affordable childcare >>>> hot hockey husbands. Let's focus, people.

@HotTake25: really audacious from a millionaire - if Rozanov wants to talk about declining fertility rates, he should talk about the rising cost of living but well I don't think he is impacted by that

@IntellectualPuck: Are the Centaurs pro-natalist now ? Children are hard work. No policy or family planning initiative will change that. Maybe our generation don't want to fuck up kids like our parents did.

@puckrealist: Why do they need to flaunt their relationship ?not what hockey's about. gross.

@Dudebro9872: two dudes shouldn't be calling each other sexy on official account. embarrassing.kids follow this page.

@CityofOttawa: Shane Hollander, the father of the nation 

@HotTakeLiz: not sure the "fertility" phrasing is it though lol

From: Harris Drover <h.drover@centaurs.com>

To: Kayla Chen <k.chen@centaurs.com>, Isaak Hale <i.hale@centaurs.com>

Time: 12:09 PM

Team,

Roz commented under Hollander's training video : "my sexy impressive husband, increasing fertility rates worldwide." And somehow, that's now a headline. We're trending under #PopulationGoals.

Reactions so far:

- 70% think it's the funniest thing they've ever seen
- 20% clutching pearls about "professionalism"
- 10% arguing about birthrates

Our priorities:

1. Delete / hide any homophobic or gross stuff fast.
2. Clarify that Roz's comment was a joke, not a policy stance. Keep tone playful but grounded, we don't want to sound defensive or humorless.

Kayla, draft something. Isaak, I know it is not in your job mission but could you please pull engagement numbers + sentiment snapshot for me. And I promise you not everyday is like this.

—Harris

From: Kayla Chen <k.chen@centaurs.com>

To: Harris Drover, Isaak Hale

Time: 12:24 PM

okay, here's a draft :

“The comment was made in jest and isn’t intended to promote any social or political message. The Centaurs celebrate love, diversity, and good-natured humor , on and off the ice. The Centaurs are not running a population growth campaign, everyone’s welcome in our fanbase, babies optional. 🍷❤️”

Maybe it will be great for Razanov to post the statement as well ?

Also, we are now also trending under #FatheroftheNations.

—Kayla

From: Isaak Hale <i.hale@centaurs.com>

To: Harris Drover, Kayla Chen

Time: 12:31 PM

Hi,

Analytics update!

- 55% positive / laughing, 18% “unprofessional,” 25% confused / political
- One minor sponsor asked if “fertility” was part of a new campaign (???). I said we’d get back to them

—Isaak

From: Harris Drover <h.drover@centaurs.com>

To: Kayla Chen, Isaak Hale

Time: 12:38 PM

Kayla, it’s perfect ! Thanks !

I am trying to reach Rozanov with no success. Isaak, send me the final analytics by end of day. I’ll handle the sponsor. Also, good job on editing Hollander’s video, it is clearly a success despite everything !

—Harris

The Ottawa Centaurs aka Luca Dads and Uncles group chat :

Troy: @Ilya u need to answer ur phone bro harris is having a meltdown 😭😭😭

Bood: @Ilya you can’t be THAT thirsty on the team page 😭😭 in front of everyone’s salads

Troy: Bood Harris is telling me you’re also in trouble for ur comment

Bood: what did I do 😬

Wyatt: not defending roz but holzy did look like a whole damn meal 🍽️

Ilya: he is not 🍷 he is 🍑

Dykstra: omg TMI

Ilya: @Troy what, is crime to love my husband now??

Ilya: this is homophobia

Luca: harris is literally gay 💀

Ilya: they post sexy video, I react 😊

Ilya : is normal husband reaction

Luca: next time maybe just react in his DMs

Ilya: luca 🤔 what do u even know about sliding in DMs???

Wyatt: 🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄

Bood: whose DMs are u sliding in kid ?

Luca: 💀💀💀

Troy: ILYA, THIS IS HARRIS, ANSWER YOUR PHONE

Ilya: phone broken.

Troy: ur literally texting rn. pick. up. the. phone.

Ilya: can't hear u over love ❤️

Wyatt: 💀💀💀💀💀💀💀

Dykstra: 😂

Troy: ok that's it. coach and Harris say PR training tomorrow 10am for everyone 😊😊

Bood: WHAT 😭😭😭😭😭😭

Wyatt: why the rest of us 💀

Nick: send roz to detention alone 😞

Boyle: and bood

Troy: harris said captain + alternate = whole team

Dykstra: barrett can't u calm ur man down ??

Dykstra: show him ur abs or something

Wyatt: just make holzy captain already then

Wyatt: luca gets the A let the kid fly 🐣

Luca: 😞

Luca: but yes to captain Hollander

Ilya: betrayal.

Luca: well u did call Shane the father of the nation 🇨🇦

Wyatt: correction, father of ALL nations 😭😭😭

Dykstra: let's call Holzy Daddy now

Bood: no

Wyatt: no

Luca: ...no

Troy: no. Gotta go, don't forget PR training tomorrow. Harris says you'll get an email

Shane: wtf is going on

3 minutes later

Shane: ILYA I AM GOING TO KILL YOU

Dykstra: get in line 🔪

Wyatt: 🔪

Nick: 🔪

Boyle: 🔪

Luca: 🔪

Troy: 🔪

LaPointe: 🔪

The house was quiet when Shane arrived home. He dropped his bag by the door with a thud that was louder than necessary. He could hear Ilya moving around in the kitchen.

"Ilya?" he called out, his voice tight.

"In the kitchen, moya lyubov."

Shane found him there, wiping down the counter. The air was warm and sweet.

"You made banana bread," Shane stated, his voice flat.

"Gluten-free. With the protein powder you like," Ilya said, looking a bit sheepish.

Shane leaned against the doorframe, crossing his arms. "So you know I'm pissed."

Ilya's shoulders slumped, his tentative smile dissolving into genuine contrition. "I had the call with Harris. And also Farah. I am sorry sweetheart. I saw people on the internet using this phrase to call people sexy and it seemed... fitting." Ilya had the decency to wince. "I did not think it will start debate."

"That's not the only reason I am angry, Ilya. " Shane said, his voice low. "It was my first solo video for the Centaurs, it was about my work, me as a hockey player. And with your comment. You made it about us before it could ever be about me."

The words landed. Ilya's gaze dropped to the floor, then back to Shane's, clear and understanding. "Shane, I am sorry. I did not think. Is just... I wanted to be silly and proud of you like a husband."

The simple, gruff apology deflated Shane's anger. He pushed off the doorframe and walked into Ilya's space, resting his forehead against Ilya's shoulder, inhaling his familiar scent.

"I love that you're proud of me. I love that we don't have to hide," Shane murmured into his shirt. "But I need 'Shane Hollander, Ottawa Centaur player' to exist before he becomes 'Ilya Rozanov's husband.'"

Ilya's arms came around him, solid and sure. "I know," he said, his voice a rumble against Shane's ear. "Like Harris said I will be more... politically and professionally aware with my thirst for you. Perhaps I will start a secret fan account."

A laugh huffed out of Shane despite himself. "Did Harris really use these words ?"

"Yes, I was confused. He was not happy when I asked what does it mean to be thirsty for someone." His eyes were soft now. He reached out and hooked a finger into the belt loop of Shane's jeans, tugging him closer. "I am thirsty for you Shane Hollander." He murmured, kissing Shane's cheek.

Shane could not help himself from giggling. "Oh yeah, how thirsty ?" he whispered, still smiling, his lips brushing Ilya's jaw.

Ilya hummed, tilting his head to give Shane better access. "I can show you", his hands sliding down to cup Shane's ass, pulling him flush against him.

Shane nipped at Ilya's lower lip. "How much time on that timer?"

"Enough," Ilya growled, and then he was walking Shane backward out of the kitchen, his mouth hot and demanding on his, the world outside and its debates forgotten.

The next day, the entire team was gathered in the meeting room, radiating varying degrees of boredom and resentment towards their captain. Harris, looking exhausted, finally wrapped up his presentation on "Social Media Best Practices in the Modern and Unhinged Era."

"And so," Harris concluded, pinching the bridge of his nose. "To conclude this... session, your captain has a few words."

Ilya stood up, the picture of contrition, holding a notecard that was clearly written by Kayla in PR. He cleared his throat.

"I would like to formally apologize for my recent comment on the team's official social media channel," he read, his tone flat and dutiful. "My remark was unprofessional and in poor taste. The issue of global fertility rates is a complex socio-economic matter that should not be used as a joke on an official platform dedicated to sport. I regret the distraction it has caused."

The room was silent for a beat. Then Wyatt piped up, "To be fair to Roz, that video was edited like a full-on thirst trap. Who's responsible for that? Even my mom saw it and blushed."

"Yes, made a lot of people thirsty for Shane. See !" Ilya exclaimed eagerly while Shane groaned, covering his increasingly red face with his hands.

Harris cleared his throat.

"Well, while we are on that topic. Everyone, this is Isaak Hale. He is our new digital content producer and graphic designer."

All eyes swung to the corner of the room where a young, flustered man, was trying to become one with the wall. He was lean and tall, with artfully messy dark hair, olive skin and sharp green eyes.

"Isaak is the one who edited the video."

Isaak went beet red. "I... I just... the footage was very... compelling. Hollander's form is... aesthetically... I mean, his athleticism is very clear and... it was inevitable?" he stammered, clutching a tablet to his chest like a shield.

Ilya smirked. "Is okay, Isaak. Shane is taken, but you have good eye. Maybe you make thirst trap for Luca next time, yes? He is single."

Luca Haas, who had been slouching in his chair, shot upright, his face flushing a brilliant scarlet. "Ilya!" he hissed.

Isaak, mortified by the sudden attention and Ilya's matchmaking, took a step back and his foot caught on a bag strap. He stumbled, a folder of release forms he was holding went flying. Papers fluttered everywhere.

There was a collective wince. Before anyone else could move, Luca was out of his seat. He didn't look at anyone, just crouched down and started efficiently gathering the scattered papers.

Isaak knelt beside him, frantic. "I'm so sorry, I've got it—"

"It's fine," Luca muttered, his voice gentle. "Ignore Roz, he is an idiot" he said, jerking his head toward Ilya.

Luca stacked the papers neatly, handed them to Isaak, and gave a small, shy smile. Their hands brushed and for a moment, they were frozen in a painfully adorable, awkward tableau in front of the entire snickering team.

Ilya leaned over to Shane, his voice a low, satisfied purr. "Luca was glancing at him all morning." Shane looked at him and Ilya pointed at himself, looking smug, mouthing "Perceptive."

Shane snorted, shaking his head, but his hand found Ilya's under the table and squeezed.

The Ottawa Centaurs aka Luca Dads and Uncles group chat :

Shane: Troy, ask Harris if Isaak is single.

Ilya: WHAT. Hollander why do you care !

Shane: for Luca, not for me. and stop texting while in the bathroom !

Bood: yes I definitely saw sparks there

Wyatt: Don't worry kid, we'll keep it on the DL

Luca: OMG you are all so annoying. Leave him alone.

Private chat between Shane and Luca:

Luca: can you tell me what Harris says please 👉👉

Luca:but don't tell Roz !

Chapter 2: Mine

Chapter Notes

Chapter 2 ! Finally ! I've been super busy, so it took me way longer than anticipated. Also, warning - the scenario in this chapter is not really realistic lol. But I just really wanted to write jealous Ilya. I hope you enjoy ❤️

The trigger :

It happened during a TV timeout. The Centaurs were playing Toronto at home and they were currently leading 2-1. A hush had fallen over the arena, broken only by the sound of skates on ice as players glided toward their benches. The Jumbotron, as it always did during breaks, began its pan across the crowd.

Shane was sitting on the bench, drinking water and replaying his second goal in his mind when a roar of laughter and cheers snapped him from his thoughts. He looked up at the screen and felt his stomach drop. There, in all high-definition glory, was Christopher Lawe, a famous Canadian actor, known for his role as a hit man in a blockbuster trilogy. He was also very openly gay. He was grinning as he unzipped his jacket to reveal a Hollander jersey. The camera lingered on him as he made an exaggerated *call me* gesture, then finished it off with a blown kiss.

Shane felt heat rush from his neck to his hairline. Every eye in the arena seemed to be on him. Mortified and aware that the clip would be all over the internet within minutes, he forced a small, awkward wave and a polite smile.

Out on the ice, Ilya was talking quietly with Wyatt when the crowd's reaction caught his attention. He turned and froze. On the Jumbotron, some movie star was blatantly flirting with his very married husband, in front of thousands of people. Who the fuck does he think he is, Ilya thought indignantly. And then seeing Shane blush, trying to smile like it was fine. Yeah, that was the last straw. Ilya's hands tightened around his stick until his knuckles ached. He wanted to punch something. Preferably Christopher Lawe's perfect handsome face. The crowd's reaction only made Ilya angrier. They were loving it, laughing like it was harmless. If a famous actress had pulled that on a straight married player, Ilya thought bitterly, she'd be torn apart by the press.

His lip curled. "*Fuck this son of a bitch,*" he muttered in Russian under his breath as he skated toward the bench. He glanced briefly at Shane and the evident discomfort on his face made Ilya's heart squeeze. He knew his husband hated the spotlight that this asshole put on him, it was very important for Shane to stay calm and focused during a match. The frustration boiled over, he slammed his stick against the boards, with a bit too much force, snapping it

into two. Ilya could feel the worried glance of his teammates, including Shane, on him and felt suddenly childish at his outburst. At least now everyone would know he was pissed.

Harris and Isaak were watching the match from the media booth when Harris let out an audible sigh, watching the scene unfold on the ice in real time. Isaak glanced over to his boss, unsure if he should say something.

“Every damn week it’s something,” Harris muttered.

“Well,” Isaak said cautiously, “having a married couple on the same team is... unprecedented. At least the job’s never boring.” He offered a small, hopeful smile.

Harris huffed a short laugh, more exhale than amusement. *Unprecedented*, he thought. That was one word for it. A professional nightmare was another. Not because of Ilya and Shane themselves, God knew he adored those two idiots, but because the world still hadn’t learned how to just let them *be*. He knew both of them were hurt by how the public didn’t really understand their relationship, but somehow always had an opinion on it.

“Yeah,” Harris said dryly, “and the couple being Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander doesn’t exactly make things easier. Fuck, I’m sure it’s all over the internet already. We should probably start reviewing and monitoring what people are saying.” He gave Isaak an apologetic look. “I swear, we don’t have to put out this many little fires every week.”

Isaak shook his head. “It’s fine, really,” he said, trying to sound reassuring, smiling in that earnest way that reminded Harris how young he still was, only twenty-two and full of energy.

“Alright. Let’s see what’s going on online.”

@thirsty4holzy: [VIDEO] Omg 😭 Christopher Lawe was at the Ottawa game tonight and did a *call me* to Shane Hollander on the Jumbotron!! Look at Rozanov’s reaction 😳 Kinda an overreaction tbh. Lawe better hope he never runs into him in a dark alley 🦋

@sportsbabe99: Ilya’s reaction was *so* aggressive. Chill, dude.

@Dudebro9872: This is why we can’t have a couple on a professional team.

@Ottawon24: Well tbh it was a bit bold of him. Hollander and Rozanov are married after all.

@hollanov4life: Honestly? That level of possessiveness is 🔥

@HotTake25: Shane looked so scared after Ilya broke the stick. That kind of aggressiveness was totally uncalled for. Poor Shane.

↳ **@puckbunnyOG:** He doesn’t look scared, he looks *worried*. There’s a difference.

↳ **@hollanov4life:** They’re literally married. Let the man be protective 😭

↳ **@HotTake25:** Being so possessive you break your stick because of harmless flirting? That's toxic behaviour.

@VoyageurWife24: Rozanov is so funny being this jealous while he probably keeps a roster of women on the side.

↳ **@MontrealRules:** Yeah, no one sleeps around so much with women just to end up with a guy! So shady. Hollander should get out while he still can.

Harris scrolled slowly, each new comment sinking his mood a little lower. He could feel the story slipping out of their hands and into the jaws of online speculation. *People don't even know him*, Harris thought grimly. *They don't know either of them.*

At his side, Isaak was frowning at the screen, eyes darting between tweets. "There's a lot of support too," he murmured.

"Yeah, but the loud ones are always the assholes," Harris said, rubbing his temples. "And the media's gonna eat this up."

As if summoned, the first news alert blinked onto the monitor: *'Rozanov Loses His Cool: Actor's Flirt Sparks Viral Reaction.'*

Harris swore under his breath, more than a little annoyed. Sure, Ilya's reaction had been a bit over the top and embarrassing, but there was something so fundamentally unfair about watching people tear him down for being protective of the man he loved.

If someone ever pulled a stunt like that with Troy, in front of a whole arena, cameras everywhere? He'd have run the guy over with his car. Or at least *considered it*.

He took a slow breath. "Alright," he said finally, turning toward Isaak, voice steady again. "Hollander's for sure talking to the press after the match. I'll brief him and warn them both. We're not going to issue a statement, this is ridiculous. Maybe try to edit a little montage of unseen Rozanov and Hollander footage, something that shows their relationship is like ... normal, yeah?"

Isaak nodded, already typing. "Okay, got it."

Harris got up to leave, the match was almost done. At the last minute, he turned back to Isaak.

"Oh, and for the love of God, Isaak, please keep it PG-13, yeah?"

Isaak blushed furiously. "Of... of course!" he squeaked, making Harris laugh loudly as he made his way toward the locker rooms.

The Centaurs won 3–2. The mood was bright and loud, as it always was whenever they beat Toronto. Shane was still riding the rush of victory, two goals, one assist on Troy's, but under the adrenaline, he felt restless. He mostly just wanted to be alone with Ilya, to make sure he

was okay. His husband had seemed tense, fed up after that actor's little stunt on the Jumbotron. *Fuck*, Shane thought. *People online are definitely already blowing this up.*

Harris poked his head in, his expression grim. "Ilya. Shane. A word?"

Shane could already feel anxiety tightening his chest.

"We have a situation," Harris said, keeping his voice low. "A video from the second-period timeout is blowing up online. Ilya, a fan caught your reaction on camera, translated what you said in Russian, and the clip of you breaking your stick is going viral."

Ilya's face was unreadable. Shane's heart sank. "What have people been saying?" he asked quietly.

Harris grimaced. "Nothing catastrophic. Just... not ideal. There's a headline about you 'losing your cool.' People arguing about whether you're toxic, protective, or just an asshole."

Ilya's jaw flexed. "I don't apologize," he said finally, voice low and tight. "Shane is my husband and -"

At the same time, Shane burst out, "What? People should be talking about the *audacity* of that guy instead of badmouthing Ilya -"

"I know," Harris interrupted gently. "And you're right. He was out of line. But we can't feed the story. The best move is to not address it directly."

Shane nodded slowly. "What's the plan?"

"I've already talked to Isaak," Harris said. "He's putting together a small highlight montage for tomorrow morning. Something wholesome, to remind people you're just a married couple who also happen to be teammates and stupidly good at hockey."

Ilya raised an eyebrow. "Wholesome?" he repeated, deadpan.

"Yes," Harris said flatly. "Isaak has been specifically instructed to keep it PG-13."

That earned the faintest smile from the Russian. "Good call," he murmured. "We all know Isaak gets a little... creative." He smirked, waggling his eyebrows at Shane.

Shane scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Glad you can still make jokes."

"Yeah," Harris said, rubbing his temple. "Shane, you're heading into the press conference in five. They'll ask about it. I'm not going to tell you what to say, just be honest. I trust you."

Shane met his eyes, steady, and nodded. "Thanks, Harris."

Surprisingly, most of the reporters' questions focused on hockey and Shane was thankful for it. He only got one question about Ilya, near the end.

“A video of Rozanov reacting to your interaction with Christopher Lawe tonight has gone viral. There’s a lot of discussion online about it. What are your thoughts on your husband’s behaviour?”

Shane didn’t hesitate. He leaned into the microphone, gaze steady and clear. “My thoughts,” he began, his voice firm, “are that Ilya Rozanov is the most loving and loyal person I know. Neither of us would appreciate it if someone made a very public attempt at flirtation, even if harmless, toward one of us. We’re here to play hockey, and we’re very good at it. We just also happen to love each other and to be married. I’d appreciate it if everyone could be respectful of that.”

The finality in his tone, leaving no room for follow-ups.

Later, inside the car, Shane finally let his composure crack. “I can’t believe what some of these people are saying!” he fumed, scrolling through his phone. “Calling you toxic? A hypocrite? They have no idea...”

“Shane.” Ilya’s voice was quiet, hollow. His hands were tight on the wheel, eyes fixed on the road ahead.

Shane put his phone down. “What?”

“They’re not wrong.” Ilya swallowed hard. “I do have a temper. Like my father.” His voice was barely above a whisper. “I got so angry, Shane. Over a joke. I saw you blush...” He trailed off. “I usually love it, how red you get. But seeing it because of someone else, in front of everyone...” He exhaled shakily. “I felt crazy.”

“Ilya,” Shane said softly, reaching over to rest a hand on his thigh. “You know I blushed because I was embarrassed and uncomfortable. It was awkward and it happened in front of twenty thousand people.” He smiled faintly. “And are you kidding me? You are nothing like your father. There’s not a day I don’t feel adored by you. And honestly... seeing you that possessive was kind of a turn-on.”

Ilya smirked, the tension in his shoulders easing a little. He lifted Shane’s hand and kissed it. “I do adore you, *moy pomidor*. And Shane, I could breathe in your direction and you’d be turned on.”

“Well, yeah,” Shane said, grinning. “I’m desperate for you. There could never be anyone else. Which is exactly why you can’t listen to what those people say, they don’t know us.”

He watched the tightness in Ilya’s jaw finally soften, the storm in his eyes clearing to reveal that raw, unguarded love.

“I know,” Ilya murmured, voice thick. “I love you.” He squeezed Shane’s hand hard.

Shane glanced at the road and judging it was quiet enough, he leaned over and kissed Ilya on the cheek.

"I love you too." He kissed his neck. "I fucking adore you." He sat back in his seat, taking Ilya's hand and putting it on his crotch. "I'm so fucking gone for you." He said, groaning at the pressure, his dick already getting hard.

Ilya's eyebrows shot up and he gave Shane's dick a squeeze.

"Fuck Shane." He said, sounding a bit breathless.

"Can you feel it ? Can you see what you do to me." Shane went on, whining at the way Ilya was now massaging his dick through his pants.

"My little slut." Ilya growled in Russian. "Mine".

"Yes. Yours." Shane took Ilya's hand and brought it to his mouth, sucking his index and middle finger sloppily and moaning around them.

Ilya groaned and Shane could see he was struggling to keep his focus on the road. Thankfully, they were just turning onto their road and after an interminable two minutes, Ilya was parking the car in the driveway. Without bothering to undo his belt, he lunged towards Shane and devoured him. The kiss was wet and aggressive, both moaning loudly into it.

"Out." Shane rasped. "Now."

"Leave the bags." Ilya growled.

No need to tell him twice. Shane was so hard and turned on, he felt like he would come as soon as his husband touched his dick. He began making his way towards the front door when Ilya roughly grabbed him and threw him against the hood of the car.

"Ilya" Shane exclaimed. "Fuck." He whined, as his husband began licking his Adam apple and peppering kisses all over his neck and face, in a frantic manner. He clung to Ilya and curled one leg around his thighs so that their crotches were rubbing against each other. Ilya took Shane's mouth once again, pushing his tongue inside, his hands roaming all over Shane's body.

"Ilya" Shane said weakly when his husband began sucking his neck. "Let's go inside, you can't fuck me here."

Ilya growled and pushed himself deeper between Shane's legs, grinding down on him , "I bet I could, I could take you right here." He gripped Shane's thighs and opened them even further. "You would love it right ? Everyone in the neighbourhood, hearing you beg for it, hearing how crazy you make me." Ilya whispered in his ear.

Fuck, Shane was going to cum in his pants just from the dirty talk. "Ilya," Shane sighed. "Let's go inside, I want to be on my knees for you."

That seemed to do it for Ilya, who eased off Shane to let him stand on the ground. They were both panting, hazy with lust. He roughly grabbed his hand and tugged him towards the house, impatiently. Once inside, Shane barely had time to remove his shoes before Ilya lifted him up and carried him to the living room, dropping him unceremoniously on the couch.

"Ilya !" Shane exclaimed.

He smiled playfully, "What ? You're not even heavy."

Shane scoffed. "Shut up and get your dick out."

"And they say romance is dead," Ilya teased, sitting on the couch and starting unbuckling his belt.

Shane slipped to his knees in front of Ilya, watching him with hooded eyes. Ilya was transfixed by him, his beautiful husband, obediently waiting for Ilya to feed him his cock. Once he was down to his boxers, he sat back and massaged himself, "This is what you want." He asked in Russian.

Shane met his gaze and simply nodded. He then opened his mouth and stuck his tongue out, never breaking eye contact. Ilya growled loudly at the gesture, pushing his boxers down and grabbing a tight fistful of Shane's hair to guide him to his cock. Shane nipped and teased with kitten licks for a few minutes, before swallowing him down. He looked like a fantasy, he always did. His lips were swollen, spit around his mouth and all over his chin, moaning loudly at every sound Ilya made and every tug of his hair, like worshipping Ilya's cock was his favourite thing in the whole world.

Ilya fucked his husband's mouth, pushing his length deeper. "Yes, Shane. Such a slut for me, yes ? Made for my cock." Ilya murmured in Russian. Shane looked up at him, purposefully widening his eyes. "Fuck Shane." Ilya moaned, beginning a punishing rhythm. "You are perfect. For me, always, perfect sweetheart, you take me so good."

His hips stuttered. "I'm close, fuck." Ilya tugged at Shane's hair roughly, making him look up again. "Don't swallow, feed it to me."

Shane closed his eyes and moaned in agreement. A few seconds later, Ilya came with a long groan, his head thrown back against the couch. He was catching his breath when Shane stood up and straddled his thigh. The sigh of his mouth slightly open with Ilya's cum dripping out, was enough to make Ilya's already spent cock twitch. He slipped his fingers into Shane's silky hair and brought him to his mouth, swallowing his own cum and licking his husband's face clean.

"Perfect, Shane." Ilya said, almost reverent, gazing into his husband's eyes and caressing his face.

Shane whined, leaning into Ilya's hands and was slowly grinding against Ilya's thigh. "Yours." he whispered.

Ilya kissed him deeply, undoing Shane's belt and bringing his cock out. "Da. All mine. Show me, Shane. Show me how desperate you are. Stay right here, rub yourself on my thigh until you come." Ilya ordered in a wrecked voice.

Shane let out a soft pleading sound, starting to rut shamelessly. Ilya's eyes never left Shane's face, urging him on, telling him he is perfect, beautiful, made for Ilya. "Yes, that's it, baby. C'mon."

Seeing that Shane was close, he pushed one hand inside Shane's boxers and slipped a finger inside his hole, making Shane jerk up violently. "Ilya !" He cried out.

"Come for me, Shane. Show me. After, I will bring you to bed and fuck you like you like it."

"Fuck..." Shane whined, rutting in a frantic manner, chasing his release. He buried his face against Ilya's neck, clenching around Ilya's finger as pleasure overtook him. He came crying out Ilya's name, his cum coating his husband's thigh.

"That got weird." Shane huffed out a shy laugh, still catching his breath.

Ilya gripped his chin, making Shane look at him. "That was perfect, *moya luybov*. You're perfect." He growled and then kissed him softly. Shane sighed into it, before pulling back and nuzzling Ilya's neck. "I love you. Always you." He says quietly.

"I love you too, sweetheart. Always."

The Ottawa Centaurs group chat:

Bood: Alright team, Operation *Support Our Gays* is a go. Drop some love under the vid, keep it PG-13 and non-political or Harris will personally end us 💀

Dykstra: no one's talking trash about our captain 🤔💪

Bood: #TeammatesWithHollanov 🖋️❤️

Wyatt: wait what do you mean by PG-13 ??

Wyatt: my first thought was "#TeammatesWithHollanov, your first criteria for a hotel is the *soundproofing*"

Bood: yeah, so definitely *not that*

Dykstra: #TeammatesWithHollanov is being traumatised because I overheard Roz calling Holzy his "perfect little rabbit" once

Troy: #TeammatesWithHollanov is watching them chirp each other at practice like it's foreplay but we call it "team chemistry"

Luca: #TeamateswithHollanov is seeing the scratches on Ilya's back the day after a match where either of them scores more than one goal

Dykstra: like clockwork !

Nick: *#TeamateswithHollanov* is seeing Roz looking at pictures of Hollander during the WHOLE FLIGHT to New York that one time he was injured

Nick: a lot of shirtless pictures obviously taken in bed but also a disturbingly amount of random pictures with Hollander wearing glasses

Dillon: I remember this 🤔 he kept zooming on the freckles

Boyle: *#TeamateswithHollanov* is sometimes seeing them making out in their car in the parking lot. They once went at it for more than 15 minutes !

Wyatt: Like you watched them the whole time ? Weird man

Boyle: I was interested to know how long it was going to be !

Shane: I remember this day, it was because Shane perfectly did my move during practice and I was turned on

Shane: This is Ilya btw

Dykstra: TMI man 🦴. Why are u using Hollander's phone ?

Shane: We are married. We share everything. House, car, phones, body fluids 💧

Luca: but Shane always shows like mad impressive skills

Luca: are u like turned on all the time ?

Shane: yes. only thing I love more is his angry little kitten face

Dillon: to be fair, I think Hollander's competency is a huge turn on for everyone 🔥

Bood: Dillon you don't have to say everything that goes into your mind

Bood: also we are getting side tracked, none of this is pg 13 !

Shane: well our relationship never was PG13

Shane: not even when we were 17

Dykstra: wait what

Bood: SEVENTEEEN ?!?!?!?

Wyatt: I need to go lie down

Luca: this has reshaped my entire childhood memories

Shane: Shane is giving me the kitten face, I am going

Shane: you guys better not post these things or I will kill you I swear

Shane: we need to have better boundaries

Ilya: relax Hollander

Shane: Don't text me when we are in the same room !

Troy: don't worry Shane, the media team is monitoring all the comments so nothing explicit will get posted

Shane: thanks Troy

Ilya: we should also comment

Ilya: What about "spending every minute of everyday with you is a blessing. #couplegoal #freak4freak #LoveWins"

Shane: ❤️ but tell me what is wrong with this comment

Ilya : it should be "touching you every minute of everyday ..." ?

Shane: 🐱🐱

Ilya: you put kitten !

Ilya: 😍

Shane: don't post anything before showing it to me, Ilya

Ilya: so boring Hollander

Shane: this is not what you were saying last night

Ilya: Hollander !

Wyatt: Are u guys like sitting beside each other, texting and giggling rn?

Wyatt: also I think everyone and their grandma know you two are freaky

Troy: Harris says he agrees, one does not have a secret homoerotic affair with their rival for a decade and not be freaky

Bood: half of your texts to us are just relaying what Harris says, Barrett

Bood: we should just add him to the group

Ilya: yes ! So we can ask him about Isaak and Haas

Ilya: Shane and the kid do not tell me anything 😞 I used to be favorite parent

Troy : well I was in Harris office this morning and Luca brought Isaak a cup of coffee

Troy: he said he was going to the gym and dropped by to welcome Isaak officially

Troy: but he came out with the two cups looking like a kicked puppy, saying Isaak hates coffee 😭😭😭

Bood: Noooooo

Dykstra: chin up kid !

Boyle: I was at the gym when he came in, is this why he looked so frustrated ?? 😭

Wyatt: bringing him coffee, u trying to rehear Troy x Harris nachos 😭

Luca: literally where do you learn all this slang

Luca: also do not believe everything Harris and Troy say, they were too busy sucking face to pay attention to us

Luca: very unprofessional

Troy: 😏😏

Ilya: what a mouth on him, he is brat like Shane

@OttawaCentaurs : [VIDEO]. Our team power(play) husbands ❤️ This team is grateful to witness the most epic love story of this decade.

[Instrumental of “Love Story” by Taylor Swift plays softly in the background.]

The video opens aboard the team’s charter plane. Ilya sits in his seat, earbuds in, watching a movie. Next to him, Shane is fast asleep, head resting on Ilya’s shoulder. The camera zooms in just enough to catch Ilya’s exaggerated glare at something off-screen, before zooming out to reveal Dillon and Chouinard across the aisle, trying (and failing) to stifle their laughter. Cuts to a practice clip. Shane and Ilya stand in the background, clearly arguing in intense whispers. Ilya says something sharp, then suddenly leans forward and bops Shane lightly on the nose. Shane blinks, cheeks pink, and pushes weakly at Ilya’s chest. Next, the scene shifts to Ilya looping lazily around the rink, skating slow circles with Chiron in his arms. Shane stands by the boards, still in his gear, watching him, soft and fond. A clip of Shane and Ilya racing full-speed down the ice during practice, the rest of the team lined up by the boards, shaking their heads. We reach the bridge of the song, the unmistakable sound of a roaring crowd fading in. Shane and Ilya on the ice together during a powerplay, moving in perfect sync. Ilya feeding Shane the puck from behind the net, Shane burying it top shelf, both of them grinning as they collide in a celebratory hug. Another shot, this time Shane assisting on Ilya’s. Finally, the music softens. The last shot shows them leaving the rink after practice, helmets under their arms, gloves off, still laughing about something private. As they step

through the tunnel, Ilya reaches out and casually links his fingers with Shane's. The screen fades to black with the Centaurs logo and one final line: *Love. Hockey. Team.* ❤️

@hollanov4life: This is too much 😭😭😭 whoever runs the PR team deserves a raise and probably therapy

@puckbunnyOG: the way they look at each other, true love is REAL

@CensGuy47: the best vibes !!!! let's go boys !

@HotTake25: I said they were toxic and now I feel like I kicked a puppy

@Ottawon24: the *nose bop*??? Love Story by Taylor Swift ?? My team is so cheesy and I love it

@GoalieMom57: this is so wholesome, these two must be protected at all cost

@thirsty4holzy: okay but you know what, the way Ilya glares while Shane sleeps on his shoulder?? you dropped this sir 👑

@JustaholeforLucaHaas: I'm begging the Centaurs to put a camera on these two 24/7. For science.

Bood: #TeammatesWithHollanov 🏒 Two elite hockey players. One braincell. All heart. ❤️

Dykstra: #TeammatesWithHollanov 🏒 Rozanov glares at everyone who dares breath in Hollander's direction when Hollander is sleeping on the plane

Wyatt: #TeammatesWithHollanov 🏒 the way Roz follows Holzy around, you would think they do not live together

Nick: #TeammatesWithHollanov 🏒 the only thing that can distract Hollander during hockey practice is his husband muscles and teasing and breathing

Luca: #TeammatesWithHollanov 🏒 is being inspired by how much they love and support each other

Dillon: #TeammatesWithHollanov 🏒 is seeing them share AirPods while working out in the gym and feeling single

Shane: #TeammatesWithHollanov 🏒 Being teammates with my husband is scoring goals and winning matches with my favourite person

↳ **Ilya:** ❤️

Ilya: #TeammatesWithHollanov 🏒 Being teammates with my husband is watching him being impressive and perfect and getting to spend every minute with my favourite person

↳ **Shane:** I love you. Always. ❤️

Chapter 3: Interlude #1: Luca and Isaak

Chapter Notes

Okay, I've only had Isaak for a day and a half but if anything happened to him, I would kill everyone in this room and then myself. Let me know what you think, I actually feel so excited about him and Luca. ❤️

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

Isaak was not crying. Definitely not. He was just... emotionally compromised by his own editing choices. That was all. Seeing Hollander and Rozanov being all soft and disgustingly happy, with the instrumental of *Love Story* swelling in the background, was weirdly sentimental. He'd always been a sucker for love, even second-hand. Watching these two being so openly tender with each other, knowing how hard it must've been, and probably still was, for them, being so high-profile... it got to him. Enough to make him swipe discreetly at the corner of his eye.

"You are literally employed to do this professionally," he muttered to himself. "Get a grip."

Still, he couldn't believe this was technically his job. He was getting paid to make what was, at the end of the day, a romantic highlight reel of two legendary hockey players. And for the Ottawa Centaurs team, nonetheless. Isaak's parents' team when they were still living in Ottawa for their studies. Somewhere, teenage Isaak was fist-bumping adult Isaak.

A hesitant knock broke his reverie. Isaak froze, thumb hovering over the keyboard. He had a feeling about who it was. He'd known, somehow, that this moment was coming. He looked up. Luca Haas stood in the doorway, holding two coffee cups in a cardboard tray, cheeks faintly flushed. His eyes were sharp and assessing, like they had been last week during the PR training and their disastrous interaction. He had tried to talk to Isaak at the end, but Isaak had fled. For a week, he had done everything short of physically ducking behind walls to avoid this exact moment. Apparently, fate had decided its time was up.

"Um... hi?" Isaak said, immediately hating how nervous he sounded.

"Hey," Luca replied hesitantly, shifting his grip on the tray. "Is this... a bad time?"

"No," Isaak said, swivelling in his chair. "Come in."

For a small moment, both men just looked at each other.

"You can sit, if you want," Isaak added, nodding toward the empty chair in the corner.

"Right, of course." Luca crossed the room, dragging the chair closer, the loud scrape of its legs against the floor making them both wince. He sat and picked up one of the cups, nudging

it toward Isaak. "This one's yours."

Isaak hesitated, then took it automatically. "Thanks."

"Thought the media team might need reinforcements after last night," Luca said, trying for a joke. His tone was light, but Isaak could hear the nervous edge in it.

Isaak arched his brow. "Oh, you mean when a famous actor publicly thirsted after a married hockey player whose husband happened to also be on the team, thus creating chaos? Totally normal workday. We definitely trained for this exact scenario in Sports Communications 101."

Luca's laugh was startled at first, then genuine. He tilted his head back slightly, the sound loosening something tight in the room. For a heartbeat, Isaak forgot how to breathe. With his blond hair catching the light, dimples showing, and his grey-blue eyes soft with amusement, Luca looked unfairly beautiful. With a face like that, he should not be allowed to laugh or even smile or within a five-miles radius of Isaak.

"I certainly didn't imagine this would be my life, playing professional hockey," Luca said, smiling still.

"I wasn't sure how you liked your coffee," Luca went on. His tone softened, shy around the edges. "So, I brought sugar." He gestured at the little packet beside the cup.

Isaak stared at him. His smiling face, looking perfect.

"I hate coffee," Isaak said before he could stop himself. The words came out sharp. "Always have."

Luca's smile faltered. A flicker of embarrassment crossed his face, he looked down, jaw tightening slightly. "Oh."

He inhaled softly, as if to recover, to smooth it over, but no words came. The silence that followed was heavy and uncomfortable. *You should apologize*, Isaak thought. *Be normal*. But instead, he felt that old prickling resentment rise up, something childish and stupid he'd thought he'd buried years ago. *Fuck you, Luca Haas, I never forgot a thing about you*.

Isaak had always felt things too deeply. Happiness, anger, affection, grief, everything came in unmanageable doses. He could feel himself flushing with frustration at his own pettiness, like a child whose emotions refused to fit neatly into adult restraint.

"Sorry about that," Luca said first, his voice small now. His guilt was right there, naked. "Yeah. You've always preferred tea."

Isaak blinked, guilt twisting through him. "Don't worry about it. I have no filter. I shouldn't have blurted it out like that."

Luca shook his head quickly. "No, it's fine. You were always a proper Brit. I should've remembered." He cleared his throat and, as if eager for safer ground, asked, "So... you work for the Ottawa Centaurs now?"

“Yes.” Isaak leaned back slightly. “I just finished my master’s in Graphic Design and Communications.”

“Oh wow. Where at?”

“Ottawa University.”

Luca blinked. “Here?”

“Yeah.”

“How long have you lived here?”

“Almost four years,” Isaak said evenly, trying to sound casual.

But Luca stilled, a small furrow in his brow. *Four years* echoed in the space between them.

“So you were already here when I got drafted,” Luca said slowly. “To the Centaurs.”

Isaak nodded once, deliberately neutral.

Luca’s throat bobbed. “So you knew I was here.”

It wasn’t sharp, not exactly, but Isaak caught the quiet accusation under it.

“It’s kind of hard to miss when someone joins the NHL,” Isaak said, voice light but steady.

Luca didn’t look away. His gaze held Isaak’s, steady and searching. “You didn’t think to…”

“No,” Isaak interrupted, softer now. He exhaled, deflating. “The first couple of years here were… not great. My mom and I moved after my dad died. She was a bit of a mess, and I was just trying to graduate.”

Shock rippled over Luca’s face. His whole posture shifted, shoulders sagging, eyes widening, expression raw. “Your dad died? I didn’t know. Fuck. Izy, I’m so sorry.”

The old nickname hit Isaak like static, familiar and unwanted. He forced a nod. “Thanks. I always assumed your aunt had told you. It was cancer, he was diagnosed when I was eighteen.” *Eighteen, around the same time you stopped replying to my texts.*

Luca’s jaw worked. He looked genuinely stricken now, voice low. “I wish I’d known. I would’ve…” He stopped, maybe realizing how little that mattered now. His hands tightened on the coffee cup. “I’m sorry.”

Isaak looked away. *Don’t apologize now.* He nodded again, quietly. “Thanks.”

“How’s your mom?” Luca asked after a pause.

“She’s doing better,” Isaak said. “It helped, moving here, being near her family again.”

Luca nodded slowly, lips pressed together. He seemed to want to say something else but instead just watched Isaak for a long second, eyes still sad but also soft, full of some unnamed thing that looked too much like affection for Isaak's liking.

He turned his chair slightly toward the screen, pretending to adjust the video timeline. The flickering light from the montage was easier to look at than Luca's face.

"How's your family? Your parents. Your sister," he asked finally.

"They're good," Luca said quietly. "I miss them, of course."

Isaak nodded again, more to himself than to Luca. He suddenly wanted this conversation to be over. He shouldn't have said any of this. He felt raw, stupid, exposed. Luca was probably confused about why he was acting so resentful. He felt ridiculous, clinging to old things, letting his emotions show. They'd only ever been... friends, kind of. Childhood acquaintances who'd shared Christmas holidays and sometimes a few weeks during summers. Whenever Luca and his family visited his aunt in the UK, who lived next door to Isaak. She moved back to Switzerland when they were seventeen. They'd tried to keep in touch. Well, Isaak had. Teenagers stopped talking all the time, especially when one of them lived an ocean away.

It was just that Isaak always had a hard time opening up and didn't have a lot of real friends. Luca had been different. Ever since they first met when they were five, they'd clicked in that easy, wordless way kids sometimes do. They went from playing hide-and-seek, to building Lego cities that sprawled across Isaak's living room floor, to staying up too late arguing about which *Star Wars* movie was the best. As they got older, the games changed, video games instead of Legos, long bike rides that ended at the corner shop, shared playlists and borrowed sketchbooks. Even though they only saw each other a few weeks a year, they'd been close. They bonded over comic books and a guilty love for cheesy rom-coms, the kind Isaak watched unironically and Luca pretended to hate. Both of them had always been tugged in opposite directions: Isaak, the quiet kid who lived in his head, more comfortable with a microscope or a sketchpad than with people, and Luca, also shy but athletic and cool. Isaak had been the first person to see the Luca who stayed up sketching instead of sleeping, who admitted he didn't always know who he was supposed to be.

Isaak had been the first person ever to see Luca's drawings. It was the last time they'd seen each other. Luca had shyly shown him a drawing he'd made of Isaak, of all things, saying he'd been drawing for years but that Isaak's sketches were so good he felt a bit intimidated. That winter, Isaak had spent hours helping him improve. Luca had been so hesitant then, so afraid of being laughed at for liking something that didn't fit the image everyone had of him. Hockey was loud, hard, fast. Art was quiet. Careful. And Isaak, awkward and nerdy and wholly unthreatening, had told him it wasn't stupid. That it was brave, even. That he could love hockey *and* art, that both things could be his.

But maybe Luca didn't think of those moments. Maybe they hadn't held that much meaning for him. Isaak had just always been the kind of person who felt everything too much, for too long. And it hadn't helped that his dad had started to get sick around the same time Luca had randomly stopped replying to his texts. Maybe it was childish to still feel a twist of resentment and to let it leak out like this.

He cleared his throat, trying to sound normal again. “Congrats, by the way. On making it. You did it.”

Luca’s gaze was fixed on Isaak’s face, searching. “Thanks.” He smiled, small but sincere.

“Do you still draw?” Isaak asked before he could stop himself. The words slipped out.

Luca looked almost startled, then his mouth curved. “Sometimes,” he said. “On flights. Helps clear my head.” He hesitated, eyes flicking to Isaak again. “You remembered.”

Isaak didn’t answer.

After a moment, Luca straightened, nodding once. “I should let you get back to work. I’ll take this with me, no need to waste it.” He grabbed the other cup of coffee, fingers brushing the cardboard edge a little too tightly.

Isaak only said, “Yeah.”

Luca paused at the door, hand resting on the frame. He didn’t turn around at first, but Isaak could see the tension in his shoulders, the way he hesitated like he wanted to say something more. When he finally spoke, his voice came soft and careful, almost tender.

“It’s good to see you, Isaak.”

Isaak didn’t answer right away. His throat felt tight, his heart uneven.

“You too,” he managed.

Luca’s nod was small, but the smile that flickered at the corner of his mouth was real, sad, a little helpless. Then he was gone. The door clicked softly shut.

Isaak sat there. And all the things he’d tried not to feel for a whole week rushed in like a wave.

Chapter End Notes

Alexa, play When we were young by Adele.

Chapter 4: Interlude #2: Luca and Isaak

Chapter Notes

Do not worry, this story will stay focused on Shand and Ilya being a PR disaster, with humour and banter because they deserve silly stories about them (yes, I am talking to the people somehow wanting Ilya to develop Alzheimer, it is okay to want silly and happy things guys !). I just needed to put this part out there to focus on the next Shane and Ilya part. I did not really intended to create this backstory for Luca, it sort of just happened, my mind supplying details like it was memories from a past life lol. And it suddenly felt so important for me to make it come true. This part is to understand Luca's journey and thoughts. I did say he will have his own little rom-com in this story so if you are here mostly for Shane and Ilya - do not worry, they will appear in some way or another in every part of this story but the interludes and background Isaak x Luca interactions will still happen. Maybe I will expand the universe and do a separate fic for Luca and Isaak one day. I hope you enjoy ❤️

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

Luca left Isaak's office filled with frustration, sadness, and a sharp self-hatred at his own cowardice. It must have shown on his face, because on his way to the gym, Harris and Troy both frowned at him and looked pointedly at the two untouched coffee cups in his hands.

“What happened?” Harris asked.

He just shook his head. “He hates coffee.” The attempt at a smile twisted into a grimace, and he walked off before either of them could say anything.

He wanted to go back. He wanted to walk straight into Isaak's office, take him in his arms, and tell him that of course he remembered. That pretending not to remember had only been easier than admitting how much he did. Because showing Isaak he remembered would've meant being too transparent, and maybe Isaak hadn't thought twice about him. He had looked mostly unaffected last week, not even showing a flicker of recognition. And when Luca had tried to catch him at the end of the PR training meeting, Isaak had practically fled, muttering something about being busy. Maybe Luca was just a distant memory to him now, a past acquaintance he happened to work with, sort of. So he'd convinced himself not to bring tea but coffee, trying to act nonchalant, to pretend he wasn't unravelling a little. Like he hadn't spent the past week, half losing his mind after seeing Isaak again, finding excuses to cross paths with him, subtly asking Harris for scraps of information.

Of course, he remembered.

He remembered that Isaak loved Earl Grey tea in the morning and English Breakfast in the afternoon, that he used to add two sugars and always poured too much milk, and that when he

turned fourteen, he'd stopped using sugar and added a drop of honey instead. He remembered the Christmas they'd first exchanged gifts, and how proud he'd been of the mug he'd made when he tagged along to his sister's ceramics class. It was sky blue, clouds painted all over it, because Isaak could spend hours watching the sky, playing *what do you think this one looks like* with his dad. Luca had always thought it was corny, but in a way that made something in his chest ache. He'd envied that easy warmth between them, the kind he'd never had with his own father.

He thought of the kid who used to sprawl on the living room floor, hair sticking up in every direction, launching into rants about why rom-coms were completely predictable but also necessary, "because sometimes it's good when things end the way you hope they will." Isaak had always said books were better than movies, though, because in books you could be inside people's thoughts instead of watching from outside, you could actually understand them. *And you can't do that in movies or in real life*, he'd said once. Luca had wanted to tell him, even then, that he was the smartest, wittiest, most fascinating person he knew. But instead he'd only moaned about how he hated reading, that he preferred pictures, and Isaak had called him a dummy and promptly introduced him to comics. They were eleven, maybe twelve.

The thing he missed most was the laugh, loud, unguarded, a little ridiculous. Isaak laughed so easily with him, so often that for a while it became impossible for either of them to keep a straight face whenever their eyes met. He laughed at everything, mostly at his own jokes, and it was infectious. Luca still remembered Isaak's father telling them he'd made Isaak's mother fall in love with him because he made her laugh more than anyone else ever had. *You'll know you've found the one*, he'd said, *when they make you laugh like that*. Isaak had frowned, completely serious, and said he doubted he'd ever find someone who could make him laugh more than he did himself. His father had groaned in mock despair, and Luca had nearly cried laughing.

And then one day, the laughter changed. Around thirteen, maybe fourteen, voices carried through the walls, something about how cruel the kids at school were, how Isaak had stopped going for a while. He hadn't understood everything, but he'd noticed the difference. Isaak was quieter, more careful, even with him. He didn't laugh in that unguarded way anymore. Luca had hated it, but it had also marked a new phase in their friendship. Their conversations grew more honest, sometimes even serious. The laughs weren't given as freely as before, and Luca had cherished every one of them.

At fifteen, Isaak started wearing contacts instead of glasses, and that winter Luca couldn't look straight at him without his brain short-circuiting. Those eyes, impossibly green, almost unreal against olive skin, had lived rent-free in his head ever since. When he'd seen them again last week during the meeting, his heart had nearly given out. He'd spent the entire time stealing glances, making sure he wasn't imagining it, trying to steady his pulse.

At sixteen, he'd finally worked up the nerve to show Isaak his sketches. He still remembered the way they'd sat shoulder to shoulder, Isaak's bergamot-scented hair brushing his cheek as they leaned over a sketchbook. Isaak had been teaching him how to shade eyes properly, how to draw curls, what pencils worked best for different textures. He had been trying to concentrate, really, but all he could think about was the soft curve of Isaak's jaw and the impossible temptation to turn his head, just a little, and press his lips to his skin.

At seventeen, his aunt had announced she was moving back to Switzerland. It had felt like a small apocalypse. No more Christmas breaks together, no quiet weeks stolen from the rest of the world, where expectations couldn't reach them. They started texting every day instead. Those back-and-forth became the best part of Luca's days, his teammates teasing him about being glued to his phone, insisting he had a secret long-distance girlfriend. He never corrected them.

At eighteen, everything began to shift. He started to understand things about himself he didn't have words for, the strange warmth in his chest he used to feel when Isaak smiled, the way being near him made everything else quieter, clearer. He noticed that he'd never felt that way about anyone else. Not once. His teammates dated, bragged about hook-ups, laughed, and he played along, pretending to get it, but he didn't. Attraction, for him, wasn't something that just happened; it built slowly, like trust. It needed familiarity and safety. And he'd only ever felt it with Isaak, that dizzy, grounding feeling that made him want to stay, to listen and to be known. He didn't have a name for it, only the quiet, unsettling sense that he was different in a way he couldn't explain.

And then, as quickly as realization came, so did fear. He'd grown up in locker rooms, surrounded by laughter that was easy until it wasn't. He learned to laugh along, to fit the mold, to never say too much. The guilt followed him everywhere.

He still remembered that day one of his teammates mocked another boy, smaller, quieter, the kind of target Isaak might have been. He'd heard them talk, planning, boasting, and he knew what was coming. But stepping in would have drawn the spotlight, and what if everyone noticed how different he was? So he hadn't done anything. The boy transferred schools soon after, and Luca wondered, sickly, if maybe he wasn't that different from the cruel kids Isaak's mom had mentioned all those years ago.

He had hated himself for it, for being different, for being cowardly, for how much of his life was built on pretending and passiveness. And the more disgusted he felt, the less capable he became of facing Isaak, the one person who had always seen through him, who might have forced him to stop hiding. He told himself he just needed time. So he stopped replying to Isaak's messages, *just for a while*, he'd said to himself, *just until I can be better, braver*.

The silence lasted months. Then years.

He threw himself into hockey, the only thing that could pull him out of his own head besides drawing. He was good, NHL good, and the way his father beamed with pride, talking about how his son was going to make it to the big leagues, made him almost forget the disappointed looks that used to follow whenever he was caught sketching. Almost forgot the sharp reprimand when, at ten, he'd wanted to try his sister's nail polish. So he buried himself in routine and ambition.

Nineteen was a blur of noise and exhaustion: endless travel, training, pressure, a thousand voices telling him what kind of man he should be. He tried to focus on hockey, on getting better, on becoming someone worth respecting. And every time he picked up a pencil, he thought of Isaak.

At twenty, he was drafted. Ottawa. He'd tried to reach out then, how could he not? He'd made something of himself, and now he was in the city Isaak used to talk about with such fondness. The stories about his mom growing up here, meeting his dad in college, introducing him to ice hockey and almost breaking up with him when he joked the only hockey he knew was played on a field. It felt right to be here, like he'd circled back to something that now belonged to both of them. He knew Isaak sometimes visited his family on his mother's side during the summer, so Luca felt excited about the possibilities. He could finally look Isaak in the eye again, maybe not feel so unworthy of his attention. But Isaak had changed his number, vanished from social media, disappeared like someone who had finally learned how to protect himself.

Homesickness hit hard. He forced himself to make friends. He learned words he hadn't known before, names for feelings he'd only ever sensed in fragments. He realized that for some people, not just him, attraction didn't appear out of nowhere; it grew from connection, from knowing someone's mind before their body. It was slow, deliberate, rooted in trust. He didn't know the word *demisexual* then, but when he finally heard it, it felt like recognition, an answer he'd been waiting for without knowing he'd asked a question.

Playing alongside Ilya Rozanov was surreal. Ilya had been on posters in his childhood room, a mythic kind of athlete, loud, fearless, magnetic. But what struck him most when they met wasn't the legend, it was the ease. Ilya existed like he didn't owe anyone an apology for who he was. He saw the world differently. With Shane Hollander, he ran a summer camp that welcomed everyone, kids who loved hockey but didn't always fit. Once, he'd caught Luca sketching and hadn't teased him or asked him to explain. He'd told him that it was a cool skill, taught him being different was not bad, it was better even.

That first season, he'd heard the rumors that Shane Hollander, perhaps the greatest hockey player alive, was gay. It had made Luca's heart stutter, cracking something open in him. Hope and fear tangled together. But Shane Hollander was *the best*, so maybe that was why he could afford not to fit the mold the way Luca never could. Maybe greatness bought you freedom.

Almost twenty-one, Luca, with the rest of the world, watched as his captain kissed Shane Hollander like it was the most natural thing in the world, like he would die if he didn't. They announced they were a couple, got married, and were now playing together. They weren't afraid of being soft or tender, of being *seen*. And they were still the best players in the league. For the first time in his life, Luca felt something close to peace, the sense that maybe all his contradictions could coexist.

And every day, the bad ones, the good ones, the ones where he doubted himself and the ones where he learned to understand himself a little better, one person remained constant in his mind. The first boy who had told him, long ago, that he didn't have to think so hard to simply *be*.

He wished he had believed him all those years ago. But Isaak had always been the wiser one.

And now here he was again, five years older, calmer, harder to read, and Luca couldn't stop cataloguing the differences. The way he carried himself now, less shy, more contained. His voice, a touch lower. His humor, sharper. But when he'd smiled, even though it had been slightly strained, Luca had come undone inside, just like he used to.

He hated himself for all of it. For the silence, the cowardice, the easy excuses. For the fact that Isaak had lost his father and he hadn't even known. For standing in front of him today and pretending the past was something he could joke about. For missing him in the present tense, when he'd forfeited the right to do so years ago, when Isaak had needed someone, and he'd been too busy being who everyone else wanted him to be.

Chapter End Notes

Alexa, play Take me back to the night we met by Lord Huron.

Chapter 5: Freaky

Chapter Notes

I had this idea before this week promotional videos lol but still grateful for them for feeding my inspiration ! Also, sorry for the Buffalo slander. Thank you so much for all the love for Luca and Isaak 💖💖💖.

I think I will try to alternate between Ilya + Shane chapter and Luca + Isaak interludes from now on. Still do not have a clear schedule, PhD is kicking my ass 😞

The trigger:

"Okay, how are we gonna do this ?"

Shane and Ilya stood in their hotel room, staring at what had once been a perfectly functional bed. Now, one of the legs had snapped clean off, and the mattress leaned downhill toward the floor.

Ilya, was wrapped in a towel, and still looking far too pleased with himself, shrugged.

"This is what happens when you are too enthusiastic," he said, smirking. "We are very strong men, *moya lyubov*."

Shane turned to glare at him, but his scowl faltered halfway in favor of checking out his half-naked husband. "This is mostly your fault anyway. Oh my God, what if this ends up on the Internet?"

"Why do we care if it goes out?" Ilya asked innocently, spreading his hands. "People know we are married, Shane. They know we have sex."

"Yes, but not *break the bed* sex! And in *Buffalo*!" Shane rubbed his face. "We are never going to hear the end of this."

"This is good problem to have," Ilya purred, coming up behind him and sliding his arms around Shane's waist. "It means we are still... passionate."

"Right," Shane said flatly, though he couldn't help leaning into the embrace. "We have to tell someone. We can't just leave it like this."

"It's okay," Ilya said, kissing his shoulder. "We tell hotel and we pay. No one will know."

"That's not how this works," Shane said, massaging his temple. "We need to tell Coach. Or the travel manager. And probably Harris."

“Why? We call front desk, say we pay for new bed. Done.”

“Ilya, it’s a team booking. They’re going to report it.”

Ilya frowned. “You tell, then.”

“What? No, you’re the captain!”

For the first time, Ilya’s confidence wavered. He looked at the bed, then muttered something under his breath.

“What?” Shane asked, suspicious.

“They will wonder,” Ilya said, folding his arms, “why we were so... enthusiastic after such boring game. Was not even good win.”

Shane blinked at him, then started laughing. “Oh my God, you’re *shy!*”

“I am not shy,” Ilya said quickly.

“You’re worried they’ll ask why you were so worked up?” Shane grinned. “Everyone already knows you’re obsessed with me.”

“I am not...”

“You *so* are.” Shane leaned up to kiss his cheek. “Don’t worry, husband. Your reputation is safe. I won’t tell them why you were feeling so.... performative.”

Ilya groaned, hiding his reddening face against Shane’s neck, “Okay, but we tell Coach together.”

Coach Wiebe was halfway through his first coffee in the hotel conference room, looking over at some things on his laptop, when the door opened and the Rozanov-Hollander duo shuffled in. They were looking uncharacteristically sheepish.

He set down his mug slowly. “Morning,” he said, eyes narrowing, already suspecting something must have happened... again.

Wiebe was really grateful for Shane Hollander joining his team. First, he was a hell of a hockey player and it was every coach’s dream to train players like him. Second, Wiebe had been worried about his captain’s mental health last season, and now seeing him so radiant and cheerful because he was living and playing with his husband - well, it warmed Wiebe’s heart a little, and it certainly was good for team morale.

It was also incredibly funny to see Rozanov following Hollander around, literally everywhere. Sometimes, Wiebe wondered how they didn’t get sick of each other. But having these two on your team had brought a very special kind of chaos, especially PR-related, and while it was entertaining for most, it was also a bit of a headache for management and staff.

And right now, staring at the two men before him, Wiebe could feel a new headache forming.

"What is it?" he asked cautiously.

Ilya, as usual, didn't bother with preamble. "We broke the bed."

There was a pause long enough for Wiebe to reconsider every life choice that had brought him to this moment.

"The bed?" he repeated weakly.

Shane nodded miserably. "Yes. It can be deducted from our salary, of course."

Wiebe stared, then rubbed his face and exhaled slowly. "I'm not going to ask. Neither of you are hurt, right?"

"No," they chorused.

"Good." He blew out another slow breath. "I'll liaise with the others and let Harris know, maybe we can stop this from leaking to the media. You two go get some breakfast. We leave at ten-thirty."

They nodded solemnly. "Thanks, Coach."

After they left, Wiebe sent a quick email to the travel manager and Harris. But as he typed, a thought crept in uninvited. Everyone knew Rozanov and Hollander were probably... *active* on the road, they were married, after all. But they'd never broken furniture before. This was a high-end hotel, too. Couldn't have been faulty furniture.

He frowned, thinking to himself, "What on earth caused *that* level of enthusiasm?"

The hotel restaurant was already loud when Shane and Ilya walked in. Cutlery clattered, easy chatter and laughter after a comfortable win last night. But the moment the Centaurs spotted them, the noise died instantly, and then the room exploded in applause and whistles.

"Oh, come on," Shane groaned, his face turning red fast.

Wyatt was grinning wide. "Congratulations on a record-breaking performance, gentlemen."

Ilya's expression didn't change, but a faint pink touched his cheeks. "Of course. We are the best at everything."

"We are not discussing this," Shane said, sliding into the nearest chair. "How do you even know? We told the coach like fifteen minutes ago."

"Harris got the email while on a call with our boy here," Wyatt said, clapping Troy on the shoulder.

Troy smiled sheepishly. "To defend Harris, he didn't know people were listening."

Luca side-eyed him. "You put him on speaker, dude."

"Okay," Bood said, leaning forward, "but real question: what was the occasion? A 2-1 win against Buffalo isn't exactly parade-worthy."

Shane sank into his seat, wishing for spontaneous combustion. "You're all insufferable."

"We're not telling you anything," Ilya said flatly.

Wyatt narrowed his eyes. "I would've thought you'd be bragging about this, Roz."

Luca snorted. "That means the reason must be embarrassing for him."

Bood grinned. "So we just have to bribe Shane."

"Let us guess first!" Dillon called from the next table.

"I'm starting a betting pool," Wyatt announced, pulling out his phone. "Fifty bucks each!"

Ilya snorted, amused by his team's antics but also at the idea they thought they could bribe his sweet, shy husband.

"What will you give me if I tell you?" Shane asked Bood seriously.

Ilya gasped, turning toward Shane, betrayal written all over his face.

"You said you were not going to tell!"

Shane laughed, his face red. "Well, maybe we can get something out of it!"

Ilya pouted, pretending to be annoyed, though it was ruined by the fact that he was still holding Shane's hand.

"I already have everything I need," Ilya said, earning a round of dramatic "Awwws" from the table.

Shane kissed him quickly on the cheek. "I love you. Don't worry, I'll get us something good."

"You should get Harris and his team something good. You keep their blood pressure up," Dykstra joked.

Ilya hummed, unconcerned, buttering a roll. "He should thank us. Keeps his job exciting."

Before Shane could respond, Ilya's phone buzzed on the table. "Harris," he said.

He accepted the video call and propped the phone against a napkin holder. The others leaned in shamelessly, not even bothering to hide they were listening.

Harris appeared on-screen, looking both amused and exasperated. "Good morning, gentlemen," he said dryly. "I assume you already know why I'm calling."

Shane groaned quietly.

"So the bed," Harris interrupted. "The booking's under the team account, and anything marked as damage automatically gets reported to management."

"Hi, boys," said another voice as Kayla leaned into frame, hair up, mug in hand. "That means, sorry to break it to you, that we can't prevent a leak. It's not protected information. As soon as it's logged, it's fair game if a staff member talks."

Shane pressed his lips together, grimacing. "So it will end up online."

"Most likely," Kayla said. "We can't make them sign an NDA retroactively. We'll update you if it goes public. Please, please don't comment online."

"New betting pool! Under what hashtags will it trend?" Dillon shouted.

"Freaks for freaks!" Nick added, grinning.

Harris and Kayla frowned simultaneously. "Is the whole team listening?"

"Yes, because this team has no boundaries," Shane replied. "And also, thanks to your boyfriend," he added, pointing his spoon at Harris, "they all knew what happened like ten minutes after we told the coach."

Harris had the decency to look remorseful. "Wiebe sent a mail with the subject line '*Broken bed - Buffalo*.' Of course I reacted out loud, and I didn't know Troy was casually talking to me in front of everyone, on speaker!"

He paused, sighed, and muttered, "Okay, I see your point about the boundary thing."

"This could be a sponsor opportunity!" Kayla said brightly. "We should reach out to bed and mattress brands!"

"No!" Shane said immediately, as the table howled and Ilya visibly contemplated it.

"Hollanov sounds Swedish," Luca said. "I could totally see IKEA releasing it."

A quick burst of laughter came from the phone, followed by a teasing voice: "Tested for every kind of overtime," followed by another loud burst of laughter and a muffled, "Sorry!" that didn't sound sorry at all.

Harris closed his eyes briefly. "Isaak," he said slowly, "you are not helping."

Then, to Shane's horror, he added, "But good ideas, team. Let's write them down. Talk to you later, boys. Don't break any more furniture!"

"Yes, thank you, Harris. Bye," Ilya said. Then, turning to Shane, he waggled his eyebrows. "Would be funny, yes? A bed named after us."

Shane rubbed the nape of his neck, smiling softly at him despite his exasperation. "If it makes you happy."

Ilya leaned in and gave him a quick peck, because how could he not. The rest of the table groaned loudly.

"You guys are impossible," Dykstra said.

"Yes, and the love sickness is spreading to others," Troy added. "You should've seen Haas's face when he heard Isaak on the phone. He looked like a puppy with his favorite treat."

Luca, red faced, glared at him. "Shut up, I did not."

"You did so, kid. Why haven't you asked him out yet? Is not liking coffee, like, a deal breaker for you?" Wyatt teased, leaning back in his chair with a grin.

"Is 'hates coffee' code for something, maybe?" Dykstra added, laughing.

"Leave him alone, guys," Shane said, tone gentle but firm.

Wyatt narrowed his eyes, resting his chin on his hand. "Not fair, Holzy. The kid tells you stuff, and you hoard the gossip."

"It's okay, you ask Shane for advice," Ilya chimed in smoothly. "After all, he managed to get me. And you are the same, blush like tomatoes and you love your men with accent."

"Boundaries, guys" Shane said firmly, giving Ilya a look that made him bite back a smile, "we need them."

"Yes," Luca echoed gratefully.

Shane turned to Wyatt, "I'll tell you the truth if you promise not to tease Luca in front of Isaak or vice versa anymore, okay?"

Wyatt mock-gasped dramatically. "Cold, Hollander. *Cold*."

Luca smiled, a little embarrassed but warmed by the protectiveness. "It's okay, guys. I just don't want him to be uncomfortable, yeah?"

The team immediately broke into a chorus of exaggerated coos, calling him a *good boy* and *too sweet*, making Luca groan and duck his head, his ears bright red.

Ilya leaned closer to Shane, voice low. "You are so sweet to the kid," he murmured. "Is okay if you tell them. But you tell me what you know when we get home."

Shane smiled softly. "I know nothing, really. You said he looked a bit sad lately, I just wanted to get the team off his back."

Ilya hummed, brushing his thumb over Shane's knuckles under the table, while the comforting chaos of their team swirled around them again.

Tweet from a local sports reporter:

“Rumor from hotel staff in Buffalo - Ottawa Centaurs players reportedly broke a bed last night. No injuries, but maybe some post-win celebrations went too far? 🙄”

Within minutes, the replies flooded in:

@thirsty4holzy: We all know *which* couple that was 😂

@Ottawon24: Absolute legends. But this kind of celebration for beating *Buffalo* tho???

@hollanov4life: Hollanov x IKEA collab, let's make it happen @OttawaCentaurs

↳ **@puckbunnyOG:** A Canadian brand would be better #ProudlyCanadian

↳ **@hollanov4life:** Let the rest of the world have Hollanov beds too!

↳ **@HotTake25:** As long as it's not an American brand.

↳ **@IKEACanada:** IKEA is global! And we love hockey. “HÖLLANÖV” has a nice ring to it, give us a call, @OttawaCentaurs 😊

↳ **@KaylaChen:** we have *so many* slogan ideas 🙄

↳ **@Endy:** are we chopped liver to you???

↳ **@SleepCountry:** I get you girl @Endy 🤨 #SturdyEnoughForOttawaCentaurs

@MrsRozanov12345678: Man, to be a fly on that hotel room wall

@puckbunnyOG: These two are *freaaaakyyy!*

@JustaholeforLucaHaas: Don't be shy, @MarriottBuffalo, drop the incident report 🙄

The Ottawa Centaurs Group Chat:

Wyatt: Alright, team. Place your bets. Why did Hollanov get freaky in the sheets last night?

Shane: oh my god

Ilya: 😎

Bood: Fight and make up sex. All the way. 🔥

Dykstra: No way. One of them was jealous. Did you not see the scratch marks on Roz back after that actor flirted with Holzy? Not to mention Hollander's hoarse voice 🙄

Dillon: no reason needed, they're just shameless freaks

Troy: Maybe it was an anniversary or something, they're disgustingly sweet.

Luca: Roz is a secret softie. Shane probably told him he wants kids and he lost his mind

Wyatt: 😂 You might be right

Nick: 😂😂😂

Nick: No, that's it. Roz was trying to get Hollander pregnant 🙄

Wyatt: I think u all underestimate Hollander. It's always the quiet ones. I bet it's Roz who told him he wants kids

Shane: I already have to deal with you lot. Why would we add kids now?

Bood: You can't join the speculation, Hollander! Not everyone's placed bets yet!

Young: I think they were just really horny. Also Holmber and I deserve the pot, our room was next to theirs.

Holmber: Yeah, we're traumatized. It was mostly them moaning about how much they love each other so definitely the anniversary or kids thing.

Luca: Not fair! You can't all steal my idea.

LaPointe: Hollander was looking at tattoos on the bus. He's getting one for Roz, and Roz is a lovesick, possessive fool.

Dykstra: Not fair! You hid essential info!

Wyatt: No take backs. Rules are rules!

LaPointe: 🙄

Boyle: Sucks to be you. But they're totally getting matching tattoos, you *know* they'd get all riled up about that.

Bood: Alright, I think we're done. Who won?

One hour later...

Bood: Roz ? Hollander ?

Nick: It's been an hour 🙄 U don't think...

Dykstra: This level of horniness is concerning

Boyle: They're probably breaking lamps and tables as we speak

Dillon: 😂

Wyatt: 😂

Bood: 😂

Thirty minutes later...

Shane: Boyle won. I agreed to get tattoos on our ring fingers, since we don't wear our rings during hockey season.

Bood: Roz, you big romantic oaf

Wyatt: Lisa's squealing at the romance. You're putting all of us to shame 😞

Dykstra: We get it, guys. You're in love 😏

Troy: I'm definitely telling Harris this, just so you know.

Chapter 6: Interlude #3: Luca and Isaak

Chapter Notes

I was supposed to review this draft and post it this weekend but today was a horrible day (I live in Europe btw, so it's 9pm for me rn) and I needed to feel productive. So, enjoy



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

Luca had never realized how small a team facility could feel, until actively trying to avoid one specific person.

A ball of lead has been sitting in his stomach since his last conversation with Isaak. He felt like shit, too cowardly to face him, and almost certain, Isaak wanted nothing to do with him anyways. Maybe seeing Luca was just a reminder of how badly he'd been let down, or worse, maybe he didn't care at all.

Whatever the truth was, Luca didn't feel brave enough to find out. Not yet.

Walking past the media office meant looking straight ahead. Not glancing through the glass wall, at the shape of Isaak's shoulders bent over his computer, or the way he pushed his hair back when he was thinking. And he certainly didn't notice that when Isaak worked late after matches, he swapped his contacts for glasses, looking so much like the kid he used to be.

Sometimes Isaak was the one crouched in the tunnel on match day, camera strap across his chest. He'd lift the lens, his face hidden when Kayla would wave Luca closer. "Come on, Haas, one photo for socials." Luca would straighten his tie, try to smile, try to control the frantic beating of his heart, because this was the closest he could get to looking Isaak in the eye. "Got it," he would say, tone neutral, and Luca would hang on those two words until the next time.

Sometimes Isaak was in the cafeteria, chatting with Harris and Troy. Luca would listen from a few tables away, just to the sound of his chuckles and teasing tone. Isaak was there too when Luca went grocery shopping, spending an embarrassingly long time in the tea aisle, thinking about what-ifs. He was there when Luca went on late walks and looked up at the sky, cataloguing the clouds. Then he'd realize maybe Isaak couldn't bear to look at clouds anymore, not since his father passed, and the thought would make his stomach twist.

Sometimes, he was at practice, near the glass, filming warm-ups. They'd greet each other with a nod, performing indifference. Luca would pretend he wasn't skating closer every time someone stopped to chat with Isaak, hungry for scraps of information about his life he didn't deserve to know. He could swear he felt the burn of Isaak's gaze on him, and sometimes, when he looked up, their eyes met for half a second. Isaak always looked away first.

He was also there in the teasing from his teammates, their jokes about Luca's "little crush," their ribbing about why he hadn't made a move yet. Luca loved them, but he was terrified Isaak might overhear. He wanted to tell them to shut up because he didn't want him to feel uncomfortable, and didn't want to hurt him again.

Then there was that morning with the call about the broken bed chaos in Buffalo. Luca had made a dumb joke about IKEA releasing a Hollanov bed, and hearing that familiar laugh spill through the speaker - loud, unguarded, ridiculous - had almost stopped his heart. A sound that belonged to another time, before guilt, distance, and unspoken words. When Isaak doubled down on the joke, teasing, it left Luca half smiling and half gutted. Because here he was, five years later, and his heart still belonged entirely to the first boy he had ever loved.

Thinking about Isaak wasn't new to Luca. Almost every year of his life circled back to a memory of him. Even during those five years of silence, Isaak had never really left. He was there when Luca signed his first contract. He was there on buses and flights, when Luca sketched in the corner of his notebook instead of sleeping, sometimes drawing Isaak's face from memory and imagining what he looked like now. He was there in quiet hotel rooms, when Luca would look out at city lights and imagine Isaak somewhere, maybe awake too.

He used to tell himself that remembering was enough, that those memories were all he needed. He'd think about the way Isaak had always believed in him, and it steadied him through the noise and pressure of the league. He'd imagine Isaak happy, still seeing the world the way only he did. And sometimes, he'd imagine Isaak thinking about him too. Maybe watching his games, maybe proud, maybe wondering if Luca ever thought of him.

He had always known Isaak was irreplaceable, too singular, too sharp and kind and alive, even in memory, to ever fade. A part of him had always believed, quietly, that one day they'd find their way back to each other. He just never believed he deserved to. He had spent years missing Isaak without realizing that maybe, somewhere, Isaak had been missing him too.

Luca also knew his teammates had started to worry, just a little. He could feel Roz's perceptive gaze lingering whenever he went quiet on days Isaak attended practice. He could see Troy's frown when Luca chose another table if Isaak was already sitting in the cafeteria. He overheard Bood's concerned voice asking Shane if everything was alright, after he had told the others to ease off the teasing that day in Buffalo.

The only redeeming thing was that Luca was playing the best hockey of his life. Maybe the frustration, and the way he threw himself into training to avoid feeling anything, was paying off. But he knew his teammates wouldn't tolerate his "sad puppy face," as Wyatt called it, much longer.

So when Shane sat down beside him in the locker room after morning skate, Luca wasn't surprised. He knew a talk was coming. And he knew it would be Shane.

The room was half-empty, the air still damp with sweat and cold. Shane didn't say anything at first, just unlaced his skates, quiet and methodical.

Finally, he said, "So, what's going on?"

Luca didn't want to talk about it. He fiddled with his tape and avoided Shane's eyes. "Nothing."

"Luca," Shane sighed. "You don't have to tell me everything, but it's obvious. Your game isn't suffering, but that's because you're burning off something on the ice instead of dealing with it. We just don't want to see you crash when you eventually will."

Luca almost smiled. It was very clear Wyatt or Roz had briefed Shane on what to say. Shane Hollander was many things, but "emotionally perceptive" wasn't one of them. Well, except when it came to Rozanov, that probably came from spending every waking minute together.

Luca had first met Shane at his wedding to Ilya, then again at Bood's preseason barbecue. Both times, he'd been starstruck, but also weirdly relieved and excited to recognize parts of himself in Shane. Not the anxiety exactly, but that same hyper-awareness of being watched, of trying not to stand out in the wrong way. That pause before letting yourself relax, waiting to confirm the space was safe.

Playing with him later, Luca recognized something else: the obsessive drive to be irreproachable so no one could question him. The preference for silence over locker-room noise, the way he side-eyed loud poker nights, smoking pot and heavy drinking. They both knew what it felt like to never quite fit the "hockey bro" mold.

Luca smiled faintly. "Did Roz tell you to say all that?"

Shane rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to lie, yeah, our captain gave me instructions." He laughed once, then looked at Luca again, softer. "Would you prefer to talk to Ilya instead?"

"Fuck, no," Luca said immediately, and both of them laughed.

Another thing: Shane was gay, and Luca knew how hard it had been for him at first to accept it. Luca admired Ilya, but in a different way. People wanted to *be* Ilya, unapologetic, loud, confident. He'd had his struggles too, but he'd never seemed to question who he was, or wonder if it was okay to be the way he was, not like Shane or Luca had. So Luca found himself opening up more easily to Shane, which Ilya pretended to resent but was mostly proud of.

"Look," Shane said, quieter now, "talking from experience, it looks like you're punishing yourself. And whatever this is, that's not going to fix it."

Luca stared at the floor, jaw tight. "Right. Yeah."

Shane hesitated, then asked, "Is this about Isaak? Because we're all kind of confused about what's going on."

Luca exhaled slowly. "We kind of... grew up together. We were close, and I sort of disappeared on him."

Shane's brow lifted, but he didn't interrupt.

“He also lost his dad,” Luca said. “And I wasn’t there. I didn’t even know until now. Now he’s here, working with us, and I don’t know how to even start.”

“What do you want from him?” Shane asked.

Luca shrugged. “I just... miss him. I always have.”

Shane’s gaze softened. “Then tell him that. Sometimes, what the person you hurt needs the most, is you. So maybe just start by showing up again.”

Luca looked up, hesitant. “You really think he wants that?”

“Kid,” Shane said, smiling a little, “you’re not the only one moping around. Trust me, I know he wants that. Well, at least that’s what Ilya thinks,” he added, lightening the mood.

“Could you maybe not tell anyone yet?” Luca asked. “You know how the guys are, I don’t want someone making a joke or something.”

“Of course!” Shane said. Then, after a beat, “Uh... even Ilya?”

Luca almost rolled his eyes. “Look, you can tell him if it doesn’t sit well with you to hide something. God knows you two do everything together, you’re practically the same person.”

Shane spluttered, his face flushing. “We don’t do everything together ! ”

Luca laughed. “Sure, Shane.”

Isaak had always thought he was good at compartmentalizing.

It came with being a bullied kid, he figured. His parents had always said some people could be cruel, that not everyone would understand someone a little different from themselves. That he couldn’t let others’ opinions turn him away from who he was. So he’d tried, but all he’d really learned was how to detach. To stop expecting kindness.

It came with drawing too, and later filming and photography- trying to capture people at their best, their most human, without ever letting his own feelings bleed into the frame. He was grateful for that skill. It was what helped him when his father passed, when his mother’s grief was so vast it filled every room, leaving no space for his own.

But lately, no amount of work could keep his mind still. He’d known that taking this job meant facing Luca, but he hadn’t realized how not ready he was. And avoiding him was impossible.

Sometimes, when crouched in the tunnel, camera strap tight across his chest, he could feel Luca’s presence before he saw him. The camera was supposed to make him invisible, a lens between him and everything else. But whenever Luca passed, Isaak’s focus faltered. He’d walk through the tunnel in his suit, composed but still all quiet nerves, adjusting his tie before

every photo, smile never quite natural, like he still hadn't learned how to be comfortable with the world watching.

In the cafeteria, Isaak would sometimes catch him intentionally sitting at another table, not far, just close enough to listen. It made him self-conscious, suddenly aware of every word, every half-laugh. He missed the way they used to laugh together: Luca's terrible attempt at a British accent, trying to be suave while red ears betrayed him. They would laugh until they stomach hurt, until his mum poked her head in to tell them to keep it down.

Sometimes, while filming warm-ups, he'd see Luca at the edge of the frame, fast, sure, magnetic, and he would force himself not to follow with the camera. They'd exchange brief nods when their eyes met, each pretending indifference. Isaak was better at it, but not by much. He'd always known Luca wasn't cruel, just afraid. Afraid of being seen too clearly, or of realizing how much he wanted. Isaak understood that fear more than anyone, so it quietly devastated him to realize Luca was still afraid, even with him.

He'd been half-awake, tea in hand, during the "broken bed" video call from Buffalo. He'd smiled at the chaos, laughter, groans, voices overlapping, and then that familiar voice came through the phone, joking about IKEA releasing a Hollanov bed. His chest loosened instantly. Relief, amusement, something else. It was good to know Luca could still joke, lately he looked more like a brooding novel hero than the soft, sweet, awkward boy Isaak remembered. And the joke, perfectly weird, a little European, made him laugh out loud before he could stop himself. For a second, everything felt too familiar, too easy.

As the days went by, Isaak accepted the truth: being near him again hurt, but being away had hurt worse. He'd spent five years rebuilding himself, piece by piece, learning how to be fine without the boy who'd once been the center of his winters, the only one who'd ever made him feel truly safe. But it wasn't healthy, he knew, to depend on someone that way. Luca had been everything to him while Isaak had just been one friend among others.

He yearned for the easy bond they used to have, and then berated himself for ruining the chance to have it again when Luca came to him a few weeks ago, for being too cold, too distant, too childish in his resentment.

He told himself it didn't matter anymore, they'd both changed, some things weren't meant to circle back. And yet, some part of him, the one that still kept the sky-blue mug Luca made him, tucked in a drawer at his desk, refused to believe they were finished. It just seemed that neither of them knew how to start again.

Watching Luca during matches had become Isaak's favorite thing. He'd avoided hockey for years before taking this job, mostly because of his parents. His mother still couldn't bear anything that reminded her of his father, and Isaak had followed her lead. She didn't even know that Luca played for the Centaurs now. When he told her he'd accepted the position, she'd been confused, almost angry, like she couldn't understand how he wasn't drowning in memories.

But that wasn't how Isaak grieved. He'd started to seek the reminders, to look at clouds and imagine what his dad would have said they looked like; to smile when he caught his reflection while wearing his glasses, seeing how much he resembled him; to take comfort,

even, in seeing Luca again. Because Luca was tied to so many memories: late-night hot chocolate talks while his mum worked night shifts; his dad also kissing Luca goodnight when he stayed over; mornings at the town rink when they'd race across the ice, laughing, while Isaak, not that good on skates, watched from the edge. Watching him on the ice now, at ease and focused, Isaak knew his dad would have been so proud.

Today, he was watching the match, tablet and pencil ready. When Kayla had discovered his drawing skills, she suggested a new social feature, Centaurs in Lines, where Isaak would sketch a game highlight after every home match. The Centaurs were playing Florida that night, and Luca was on fire. Isaak knew that he'd end up drawing him, like some kind of cosmic joke.

Luca scored an incredible overtime goal from a clean assist by Troy, and Isaak's hand moved automatically, almost hungrily. He could feel Harris and Kayla watching, impressed by how fast he worked, not knowing he'd had years of practice sketching this exact face.

He focused on the sharp jawline, the flush in his cheeks, his bright eyes, that boyish grin breaking through his composure. His hair was damp under the helmet, his stick lifted briefly to the crowd. Isaak added the blurred figures of teammates in the background, racing toward him to celebrate.

When he finished, he smiled, proud of the final result. For once, he hoped his own feelings might show through the lines. He hoped Luca would see it, really see it. Because even now, he still seemed unsure about his own worth, about his place in the game and the world. And Isaak wanted him to know that, to him, Luca had always looked destined for something extraordinary.

Luca planned to ride this high for at least a day, maybe two. The morning talk with Shane had left him lighter, and for the first time in weeks, he felt something close to courage. And then tonight, two goals, one of them in overtime, the kind that makes the whole arena cheer as one and tilt towards you. For a moment, he'd remembered that he was actually good at this thing, great, even.

He had finished showering and was just pulling on his shirt when a sudden burst of noise came from across the room.

"Holy hell, that's beautiful," Wyatt said, voice sharp with awe.

Luca looked up. Half the team was crowded around Troy, fixed on the phone he was holding in his hands.

"He drew that?" Dykstra asked.

Bood hummed, also in awe. "He did. Talented guy."

Roz leaned forward, squinting. "Next time I will also score a beautiful goal so he will draw me."

Shane rolled his eyes. “Yeah, and also scoring goals is literally your job, so you might want to keep doing that, anyways.”

Roz muttered something in Russian that made Shane flush pink to the ears, and Wyatt groaned dramatically.

“Stop flirting, for the love of God,” Wyatt said, only half kidding. “We’re making a flirting and PDA jar, I swear. Ten bucks per offense.”

He turned, scanning the room. “Hey, Haas! Kid, come here. You gotta see this.”

Luca hesitated but curiosity tugged him forward. Troy angled the phone toward him. The screen showed a post from the Ottawa Centaurs’ official twitter account. Its caption read, “4–3 win tonight! Haas’ OT beauty is one to remember. #CentaursInLines.”

He recognized Isaak’s style immediately, the delicate lines and touch, the quiet precision that somehow captured motion and feelings all at once. He always spent the most effort on people’s face and expression.

And there Luca was, all flushed and alive, eyes bright with joy. He looked at ease and confident.

“Looks just like you,” Troy said, grinning.

“Man’s talents are wasted here,” Dykstra added, whistling low.

Ilya nudged him, his grin fond and teasing. “You like it, Haas? Isaak drew it.”

“I know,” Luca said, and his voice came out smaller than he wanted, rough at the edges. Concern flickered on Ilya’s face but he didn’t say anything, for once.

“He really drew you beautifully,” Shane said, tone gentler now. “You should tell him.”

Luca did not answer right away. The drawing held him still, every line filled with care, every detail making his heart ache with regret and hope. It felt like a hand on his heart, like being remembered in a language only the two of them had ever spoken, of how Isaak had always seen the best about Luca.

He didn’t bother with his tie and jacket, handing the phone back to Troy with hands shaking only a little.

“Yeah,” he said finally, voice low but sure. “I think I will.”

Grabbing his bag, he left before anyone could say anything else.

Isaak was in his office, packing up for the night. The arena was quiet now, most lights dimmed, the hum of the rink reduced to a distant echo. He’d checked the team’s feed, curious about the reaction to his first sketch for the Centaurs, and had been thrilled at the praise for

the artist and at how much the Ottawa public seemed to love Luca. He was also irrationally annoyed by the flood of people thirsting over him.

He was slinging his bag over his shoulder when hurried footsteps echoed down the corridor. Then Luca appeared, flushed, breathless, hair still damp and disheveled, shirt collar open. He looked like a romantic cliché and if Isaak wasn't completely panicking at the thought of being alone with him, he might have actually swooned.

"Hey," Luca said softly.

Isaak blinked. "Hey."

"You're leaving?"

"Just about." A hesitation, then, "You played really well today."

"I saw your drawing." A step closer. "It's beautiful. Thank you."

Isaak spluttered, thrown off. "Oh... thank you. But really, it was more what I was drawing that was beautiful." He paused, realizing how that sounded. "I mean...the moment. The moment was beautiful."

Luca huffed a small laugh but didn't look away. His brows furrowed into a pleading expression, "Isaak, I'm so sorry." The words rushed out, unstoppable. "Of course I remember. I never forgot a thing about you -"

"It's okay," Isaak cut in, instinctive, too quick. "Really, it's -"

"It's not." Luca's voice was steadier now, "It's not okay." He took another step forward, the desk the only barrier left between them.

"I didn't want to look like some fool still clinging to childhood memories. Not that they aren't worth clinging to - they are. I missed you. I missed you so much, and it doesn't erase what I did, disappearing like that."

He looked down, gathering himself, then met Isaak's gaze again, his eyes shining with unshed tears. "You have to know I hated myself for it. I hated a lot of things about myself, then. You were my best friend, Isaak." His voice cracked on the next words. "And when I found out what you'd gone through... I couldn't believe I wasn't there. I had always told myself you didn't need me, that you were fine, that I didn't deserve to reach out. I didn't even deserve to miss you."

A tear finally escaped, and he swiped at it angrily. "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

Isaak's throat was impossibly tight. Hearing the words he'd wanted for years was a physical ache. "Luca, it's okay," he tried again, softer, trying to downplay the storm in his own chest, not ready to admit how hurt he had been, even as his vision blurred.

"No." A firm shake of Luca's head, his own tears now mirroring Isaak's. "It's not. I hate thinking about everything I missed. Everything you needed from me, and I wasn't there."

This time, he moved around the desk and caught one of Isaak's hands in both of his, holding them tight against his chest, where his heart was hammering. "You were my best friend. You still are, if you'll let me." His voice dropped to a raw whisper, pleading. "Please, Izy. Let me make it right. Let me try again."

Isaak couldn't speak. His mouth opened, but no sound came out. He could only feel the frantic beat of Luca's heart under his palm. Then, something inside him gave way.

He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Luca's shoulders, hugging him hard enough to make them both stumble.

"Missing someone isn't something you earn, you fucking idiot," he muttered into the warmth of Luca's neck. "You just do."

Luca laughed, a wet, shaky sound, and clutched him tighter, both of them releasing a breath they'd been holding for years. Their faces were pressed into each other's shoulders, neither willing to let go.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Shut up," Isaak said thickly. "I'm sorry, too."

"You have nothing to be sorry for," Luca said immediately, voice firm, right in his ear.

"Sorry for being all British diva on you the other day, 'I hate coffee,'" Isaak said, mimicking himself in an exaggerated posh accent.

Luca laughed for real this time, and Isaak joined him, feeling so relieved.

"I deserved that," the words muffled into Isaak's shoulder. "I was actually going to bring Earl Grey, but I chickened out."

"Then next time, bring the tea, dummy," Isaak muttered, smiling.

He pulled back first, clearing his throat. Luca's smile was small and sheepish.

"I should go," he said. "Promised Mum I'd grab dinner."

"You live with her?" Luca asked softly.

"Yeah. Otherwise I'd worry too much. But we've got our own space."

"I'm really sorry about your dad."

Isaak smiled, sad and sincere. "He would've been proud of you, you know."

Luca's eyes went glassy again. "You too, Isaak. He would've been so proud."

Isaak squeezed his hand. "Okay, enough crying. If one of your teammates sees me making their golden boy cry, I'll probably get fired."

“They treat me like a kid,” Luca laughed weakly, embarrassed.

“Rightfully so.” Isaak smiled.

He made way for the door, turning off the lights and closing the office behind them. They walked toward the stadium exit in a comfortable silence, neither of them wanting to say goodbye just yet.

“We’ve got a day off tomorrow. Maybe we could do something?” Luca said as they reached the doors.

Isaak rolled his eyes playfully. “The players have a day off, Luc. We, common people in the media team, don’t.”

“Then we can grab lunch at the cafeteria, I was planning on coming here to work out anyway.”

Isaak snorted, “Okay, big athletic guy.”

Luca smiled at him, fond and helpless, and Isaak was sure his own face was doing something equally embarrassing.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then?”, Isaak said.

“Right. Goodnight, Isaak.”

“Goodnight, Luca,” Isaak replied softly and then, forced himself to walk toward his car before he did something stupid like inviting Luca home for dinner with his mum.

Once inside the safety of his car, he realized his heart was racing, and he was still smiling. A smile that Luca, his Luca, had put there. And fuck if that didn’t make him so happy and terrified at the same time.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Isaak and Luca are both dummies thinking the other does not care as much while they are both in fact equally obsessed with each other, like you’re my favorite thing to draw and you make me laugh like no one else type of obsessed with each other 😞. Also, Alexa, play I miss you, I’m sorry by Gracie Abrams and Bite My Tongue by Cassandra Coleman.

Chapter 7: Full House

Chapter Notes

You asked for it, I delivered 🤪 (or at least tried to !). Also shout out to @PinkLetterDay for inspiration for the flower comment 🌸

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

“So I made joke,” Ilya said, “that next time Isaak should do thirst trap for Luca. Because he is single. Was funny and informative. Let Isaak know Luca is single.”

“Okay,” Hayden said slowly, “but how do you know Isaak was even interested? Maybe you just put him on the spot like an asshole.”

“No. I know,” Ilya said, smug. “Am very perceptive. Haas keeps looking at him, Isaak keeps avoiding his gaze. Like little kids with crush.”

“Right,” Hayden muttered. “And what’s the story with the coffee?”

“Haas brought him coffee in his office but came out looking like sad puppy and said Isaak hates coffee. Is confusing since then. They avoid each other but keep looking at each other. Kid’s been very frustrated and sad these days.”

“And Isaak’s the one who drew that picture of Haas from your last match?”

“Yes! And Haas left the locker room saying he is going to speak with Isaak. Very dramatic exit. He hasn’t answered any of our messages since last night! We don’t know what happened!”

“Hmmm.” Hayden tilted his head. “Maybe he doesn’t have great news. Maybe ‘I hate coffee’ was like... code for something? And why were they even avoiding each other after, allegedly, two conversations?”

“They grew up together,” Shane said from the kitchen island, voice calm, cutting fruit with surgical precision.

“WHAT?!” Ilya and Hayden shouted in unison. Shane jumped, the knife nearly slipped from his hand.

“Jesus,” Shane muttered, glaring.

They’d been sitting at the kitchen counter for about ten minutes now, gossiping like a pair of bored retirees. Hayden, benched for a month with an injury, had driven from Montreal to spend the day with Shane. He’d arrived that morning while Shane was out on a late run, and

when he saw Hayden's car already parked outside, he'd felt a flicker of apprehension. He was half sure that his husband and his best friend were already at each other's throats because he had not been there to referee.

Instead, when he stepped inside, he was greeted by the bizarre sight of Hayden showing Ilya videos of the twins' dance recital on his phone. Some harmless ribbing did happen when Shane had hugged Hayden first, with Ilya loudly protesting that the husband should always be greeted before anyone else. They both eventually followed Shane into the kitchen, all too relieved he was back, because Hayden was clearly running out of kids' videos to use as neutral conversation material.

While he began to pull out ingredients to make a late breakfast, Ilya asked about his talk with Luca yesterday, eager for updates. But before Shane could answer, Hayden, curious, had asked what was the story with Haas, and Ilya had started a full recount.

"Yes," Shane started, "before I was interrupted with all your questions, Hayden," he said pointedly, "I was saying, yesterday, I spoke to Luca, like we'd discussed. He told me Isaak's actually a childhood friend. Luca kind of... cut contact with him for no reason. He's always felt guilty about it. And he also found out that during that time, Isaak lost his father. So he's been dealing with all that guilt, and... yeah. He missed him, but didn't know how to face him again."

Shane went back to slicing the apples, the quiet thud of the knife filling the silence. When he finally looked up again, both men were gaping at him.

"What?" Shane frowned.

"What do you mean what?" Hayden shouted. "Tell us more! Like how did they grow up together? Are they exes?"

"When was last time they spoke?" Ilya demanded. "And Isaak is not British? He has accent."

"Wait." Hayden blinked. "He's British, and Haas is Swiss, right? So maybe they're not into each other, Rozanov. Maybe they're just Europeans."

Ilya shot him a long, unimpressed look.

"It's a thing," Hayden insisted, "Jackie showed me the song."

"What else did he say?" Ilya pressed, ignoring him. "When exactly did they stop talking? Did they write letters? Was there a fight? Did one of them confess feelings and the other run away?"

Shane gave him a flat look. "Ilya. I did not push. I just told him that he should tell Isaak what he feels, is that simple. Tell him he is sorry and he misses him."

"Next time," Hayden said, serious now, "you should ask follow-up questions. We'll make you a list."

"Yes." Ilya nodded firmly. "For once, I agree with Pike."

“What kind of questions ?”

“Like you should have asked for any key details that he had not told you yet !”, Hayden exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air like it was obvious.

“Wow, very precise and helpful, Hayd,” Shane replied dryly.

Before Hayden could argue, both Ilya and Shane’s phones buzzed at once.

Ilya picked his up first, eyes narrowing at the screen. “Team chat,” he said, scrolling. Then his eyes went wide. “Oh.”

“What?” Shane asked warily, approaching the counter.

Ilya turned the phone so they could both see the message from Dykstra.

Dykstra: Haas and Isaak are sitting together in the cafeteria. They’re laughing.

Another message came in a second later:

Boyle: No, they are giggling. I repeat, giggling.

“They are giggling,” Ilya said, sounding personally moved. “This is very big development.”

Shane gave a small smile. “Good. Maybe they’ll both stop moping.”

Hayden leaned over, “Ask them, how close are they sitting. And are they next to each other or face to face.”

Ilya began typing furiously.

“Face to face.”

“Hmm. Face to face is more intimate,” Hayden mused, “ interesting.”

Before Shane could appropriately process this whole new side he was seeing of his best friend and his husband, his phone rang, Farah’s name flashing on the screen. He answered.

“Hi Farah, what’s up?” Shane said. “Oh okay, well, let me put you on speaker, Ilya is right here.”

“Hi Ilya,” Farah’s voice came through, “So, quick thing, Architectural Digest reached out. They want to do a house tour with you two.”

“What exactly does that entail ?”Shane asked.

“You know, camera crew, walk through your home, show off the space, talk about décor, domestic bliss, all that.”

“Why?” Shane asked, genuinely baffled.

“Because people find you interesting,” Farah said. “Marriage, charity work, cute dog, playing for the same team. Also it is not exactly a secret where you two live.”

“Oh my God, Shane, yes!” Ilya interrupted, already beaming and standing up to come up to Shane’s side. “Is perfect.”

Shane rubbed his face. “I don’t know. Isn’t that... too much?”

“It’s not invasive,” Farah assured. “No deep questions, and of course I talked with Harris, someone from the Centaurs PR team would be with you.”

Ilya leaned into Shane, linking his arms around his waist. “We don’t have to tell them everything. Just show we are cute, domestic, normal couple. No need to tell them what we do in trophy room.”

Shane turned scarlet instantly. “Ilya!”

Hayden groaned. “Gross.”

Farah sighed on the phone, “Too much information, guys.”

Ilya ignored them and kissed Shane’s cheek, “Say yes Hollander.”

“Okay,” Shane muttered, not able to deny anything to Ilya while he looked so excited.

Farah chuckled. “I’ll confirm then, November 23rd?”

“Sure,” Shane said weakly, resigned.

“Wait,” Hayden cut in, frowning. “That’s the weekend you two promised to babysit Arthur while Jackie and I take the girls to their dance camp.”

Shane froze. “Right. Yeah, we did say that.”

Ilya waved a hand dismissively. “Is fine. We can do both. Arthur will charm camera people. He is star material, how do you say it Shane, apple fell very far from the tree.”

“Fuck you,” Hayden said flatly.

Shane sighed, already feeling the coming chaos.

The trigger:

Shane had been up since six, moving through the house - straightening pillows, wiping nonexistent smudges off the countertop, and most importantly, double-checking that there were no bottles of lube in plain sight in any of the rooms.

“Shane,” Ilya called from the hallway, “is eight thirty in morning. The camera people are not awake yet.”

“They’ll literally be here at ten,” Shane replied.

“Yes. Almost two hours, you can relax and eat something,” Ilya said, yawning, padding barefoot into the living room wearing sweatpants and an old Boston sweatshirt. “You are making house too clean. Feels like hotel.”

“I love hotels!” Arthur exclaimed from the couch, watching cartoons and eating his cereal. Every time the bowl wobbled slightly, Shane had a minor heart attack thinking about milk stains, but he had not be able to deny Arthur’s pleading expression when he’d asked if he could eat in the living room. The boy was just too cute in his little pajamas.

Ilya smiled down at him. “Uncle Ilya and Shane’s house is always your hotel, Arthur. Whenever you want to come.”

Shane smiled at Arthur’s delighted gasp and tried not to melt at the sight of Ilya being so gentle with him. God, he couldn’t wait to have kids with him.

“Remember, Arthur,” Shane said gently, “people are going to come and film for about two hours, okay? And your parents don’t want you to be on camera, but you can always come get us if you need something.”

“So I hide?” Arthur frowned.

“No, sweetheart,” Ilya said softly, sitting beside him. “It’s okay if you are with us. They can hear your voice, even show your tiny hands, but they will not show your face. Today, you are mysterious child, like ghost.”

“I love ghosts!”

At that moment, the doorbell rang.

Anya barked and Arthur leapt up, “I’ll get it!” he shouted, sprinting for the door.

Shane winced. “Wait, Arthur - !”

But it was too late. The door swung open to reveal Kayla, holding a coffee cup.

“Well, hello there,” she said, smiling down at him. “Are you the man of the house?”

Arthur blinked up at her. “No, silly. It’s Uncle Shane and Ilya’s house. I am the ghost!”

Kayla laughed. “Good to know.” She looked up at Shane and Ilya, who had appeared behind him. “Hey, guys. Who’s this cutie?”

“It’s Hayden’s son,” Shane explained. “We have him this weekend, we’d already agreed before the shoot was scheduled, so - ”

He was interrupted by Kayla’s loud gasp. “Hayden Pike is here? He is so hot!”

“Uhh...” Shane started, not sure what to say.

“I thought you had better taste than that, Kayla,” Ilya said with an offended look.

“Why is Daddy hot? It’s November,” Arthur frowned.

Shane let out an exasperated sound, tapping Ilya’s shoulder. “I’ll let you handle that. Kayla, come on, let’s sit in the kitchen.”

Kayla followed Shane through the living room, stepping carefully around Anya’s toys and the camera-ready perfection Shane had spent hours curating.

“Everything looks great,” she said, glancing around. “You two really didn’t have to go all out. This house is beautiful.”

“Thanks,” Shane said, rubbing the back of his neck. “Just wanted it tidy.”

Ilya joined them then and leaned against the counter beside Shane, arms crossed.

“Yes, he’s been up since six, my husband,” Ilya drawled. “I had to stop him from cleaning the roof and the trees by the gate.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “Shut up.”

Kayla smiled. “It’s okay to be a little nervous. Don’t worry, if at any point you say something you’d rather not include, or if there’s a part of the house you don’t want shown, you can always ask. You’ll also receive a copy of the full edit before it airs on their youtube channel, so you’ll have final approval before anything goes public.”

“That’s good,” Shane said.

Kayla nodded. “We just want you both to be comfortable. You only need to show us the home you created together.”

Ilya reached for Shane’s hand, his thumb brushing lightly across his knuckles. “Easy,” he said softly. “We can do that.”

“Also, please, Ilya, no unhinged comments.”

“I am only human, Kayla.”

Kayla sighed. “I’ll let the crew in when they arrive and brief them. You two can just finish your breakfast and breathe for a minute.”

She stepped away to take a call, and for a moment the kitchen was quiet again, sunlight spilling across the counter.

Ilya hugged Shane and swayed them slightly. “See? Is not so scary. We just be us.”

Shane exhaled slowly, hugging back and resting his head on Ilya’s chest. “Yeah,” he said again. “Just us.”

By the time the doorbell rang again, Shane was actually feeling relaxed. People had been in his and Ilya's business since forever, but at least today, they controlled the narrative.

A small production team filled the entryway: two camera operators, a sound technician, and a director, a woman with sharp eyes and a warm smile.

"Morning, guys," she said brightly. "It's an absolute honor to meet you both, Mr. Rozanov and Mr. Hollander."

"Nice to meet you," Shane said, shaking her hand. "Please, call us Shane and Ilya."

"Elena," she introduced herself, lifting the clipboard tucked under her arm. "So, here's how this will work. We'll start with you opening the door to us on camera, then move through the house room by room, living room, kitchen and dining area, gym, trophy room, the bedrooms, and we'll finish outside in the backyard. If anything makes you uncomfortable or you want something cut, just give us a heads-up."

"Perfect, Elena. Thank you," Kayla said, stepping forward. "Quick note, Shane and Ilya are watching a friend's child today, and we'd prefer if his face isn't shown."

Elena nodded easily. "Yeah, no problem at all." She turned to her team. "Let's start from the top. Everyone ready?"

The first stop was the living room, bright with open curtains, morning sunlight spilling across the rug and the wide windows overlooking the Ottawa River. The space felt warm and lived-in: a plaid throw blanket folded on the couch, Anya's bed and toys scattered near the coffee table, Arthur's miniature cars and Legos in a corner. A large TV also sat, in front of a wall covered with pictures.

"This is where we spend most of our time," Shane said, hands loose in his pockets, voice a little reserved. "Relaxing after a match, watching games, or just decompressing after training."

"We also do other things not involving hockey," Ilya added, deadpan. "Well, I do. I play video games and watch dumb movies while my husband reads books about, guess what, hockey."

The crew laughed, the sound easy and genuine. Shane felt himself relax even more, grateful for how easily Ilya filled a room.

Suddenly, Arthur appeared at the edge of the frame, stomping dramatically. "Uncle Shane, Anya stole Chompy and she won't give it back!"

As if on cue, Anya trotted in, tail wagging, the toy clamped proudly in her mouth. She hopped onto the couch, circled once, and curled up, her prize still between her teeth.

“Give it back, Anya,” Ilya said, crossing the room. He plucked the toy gently from her jaws, his voice both firm and affectionate. “It is not for you, my girl.”

Shane crouched beside Arthur. “We’ll have to wash it before you can use it again, bud. I’m sorry.”

Arthur’s lower lip trembled. He looked seconds away from tears.

“It’s okay, Arthur,” Ilya said smoothly, scooping him up. “You come with us on the house tour, and we wash Chompy together after, yes? Maybe have a water-car race in the bathtub.”

Arthur sniffed, then nodded solemnly. “Okay.”

Shane smiled softly. “Good deal.” He looked toward Elena. “Is it all right if he joins, as long as you blur his face?”

“Of course,” Elena said, smiling. “The more the merrier.”

She gestured toward the wall of framed photos. “Can you tell us about these?”

Shane hesitated for half a beat, then looked at Ilya. “Uh, sure.”

Ilya moved closer, brushing his fingers along the first frame. “This one was taken during our first year running summer camp in Ottawa. Shane’s mother took it. Very tired that day, but also very happy.”

Next to it was a smaller photograph, the paper slightly faded from years of being handled and loved: a young Ilya in hockey gear beside a woman with the same bright eyes, curls and smile, her arm around his shoulders.

“This is my mother, Irina,” Ilya said softly. “She always attended all my matches.”

Shane’s hand found his, giving a small, steady squeeze.

“This one’s me with my parents,” Shane said, pointing to the next picture. “I was four. It was an Ottawa opening season game. Ilya thought it was funny to hang it here.”

“Is cute !” Ilya said simply, earning another round of laughter from the crew.

Then came a photo of Ilya in his Bears jersey, hoisting the Stanley Cup, sweat still glistening on his face.

“My first Cup,” Ilya said proudly. “Also won MVP that year. Two things I did before Hollander.”

Shane shot him a look, amused. “Yeah, yeah. Remind me who won Rookie of the Year again?”

Beside, hung another shot: Shane, JJ, and Hayden in Montreal jerseys, arms around each other, beaming with the Cup between them.

Arthur, still on Ilya's hip, pointed at it immediately. "That's my daddy!", making all of them laugh.

"That's right," Shane said, ruffling his hair. "That was my first Cup with the Voyageurs."

Next came their wedding photo, it was taken by Jackie during their first dance. Ilya and Shane were grinning at each other, looking into each other's eyes.

"Oh, that's beautiful," Elena said. "That was your wedding in the backyard, right?"

Arthur shook his head seriously. "No! They got married at my house. My sisters were the wedding people."

Shane sighed, smiling. "Technically true. We, uh, had a pretend wedding with the Pike kids before the real one."

Ilya nodded solemnly. "Arthur wore his best fireman suit."

"Yeah!" Arthur shouted proudly, prompting more laughter.

Then the camera lingered on the next photo, both of them younger, facing off with foreheads almost touching, both of them smiling and eyes crinkling, as they failed to contain their laughter.

"Oh," Elena said, intrigued. "That's from your rookie-year commercial shoot, right?"

"Yeah, just before our rookie season," Shane confirmed, voice soft and fond.

"I gave that one to Shane last Christmas," Ilya said. "We were supposed to look intense but was not possible, kept laughing."

Shane's gaze lingered on the photo. "That was also the day we first kissed."

The words slipped out before he could stop them. Silence bloomed for a beat, Elena's eyebrows lifted, Kayla's eyes widened, but Ilya just looked at him, surprised but soft.

"Yes, it was," he said quietly.

The crew exchanged a few quick, delighted glances behind the cameras, this video was going to break their viewing record.

Elena smiled gently. "That's a lovely story."

As the segment wrapped, Shane gestured toward the room around them. "This is probably my favorite space. It's where we host friends, family... it feels lived in."

"And where you proposed," Ilya added easily.

Shane blushed but didn't look away. "Yeah. That too."

Arthur frowned, puzzled. "What did he propose?"

“Trophy room,” Elena whistled. “This is impressive.”

“Thank you,” Ilya said, sweeping a hand grandly toward the displays. “This is where my husband keeps reminders of how overachieving he is. Three Stanley Cups, Olympic medal, MVP awards, Rookie of the Year...”

“Okay,” Shane cut in, already blushing. “You’ve got a Cup too, Rozanov. Calm down.”

“Next,” Ilya said, grinning, “we add one we win together, yes?”

“Yeah,” Shane said quietly, eyes meeting his. “That’s the plan.”

Elena’s expression softened. “That’s... actually very sweet.”

“My daddy has three Cups too,” Arthur chimed in, making the crew laugh once again, while Shane shot a warning glare at Ilya to stop him from saying anything.

When the crew shifted to film another angle, Shane spotted a box of leather wipes beside the couch. His stomach dropped. Kayla caught it instantly, gave him a flat look, and without missing a beat, slid the box out of frame.

She mouthed, *You’re welcome*. Shane tried not to groan aloud.

Their bedroom was simple, serene, warm wood and colors, sunlight pouring through the windows that framed the river.

“This room,” Ilya said as they entered, “is where we spend most of our time, not the living room. For obvious reasons. Shane was lying earlier.”

Shane groaned. “You’re impossible.”

The adjoining ensuite drew appreciative murmurs from the crew. Stone tiles, a deep soaking tub, and a wide shower.

“The tub’s Ilya’s favorite place after games,” Shane said.

“And sometimes,” Ilya added, “Shane joins me,” making both Kayla and Shane glare at him.

The last stop was the backyard. The air was cool and clear, the late-autumn sky pale blue above the slow sweep of the Ottawa River.

“This is gorgeous,” Elena said quietly as the camera panned across the water.

“It’s one of the reasons we chose this place,” Shane said. “You can see the river from almost every room.”

“It reminds me a little of Russia,” Ilya said serious. “The stillness. The nature. But better, because Shane is here.”

The crew actually let out audible “Aww” at that and Shane felt his throat tighten with emotion. Acting on impulse, he leaned over and kissed Ilya’s cheek.

“Yuck,” Arthur said from Ilya’s arms.

Elena smiled, “So you helped Ilya find this house when he moved to Ottawa?”

Shane blinked, realizing what he’d just admitted. “Uh, yeah, I guess I did.”

Ilya’s grin turned slow and smug as he slid an arm around Shane’s waist. “Of course he did. I change country for him, he better help me find a nice place.”

The crew laughed, Kayla shook her head fondly, and Shane, still flustered, let the warmth of it all sink deep into his chest, grateful that they could share this life they had built together with the public, on their own terms, for once.

One week later, the video drops.

[**Sport Illustrated**] “2 MVPs, 1 Home : Hollander and Rozanov display impressive career and relationship memorabilia in domestic house tour video.”

[**ESPN**] “House Tour Video Rewrite Hollander-Rozanov Timeline or Why it’s time Montreal apologise to Shane Hollander.”

[**RDS Montréal**] “It smells like regret in Montreal: Why are Voyageurs fans suddenly apologizing to Shane Hollander ?”

[**OutSports**] “‘I changed country for him’: house tour video gives us insights about Rozanov and Hollander relationship that will make you swoon.

Twitter:

@hollanov4life : SINCE THEIR ROOKIE YEARS 🤔HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO GO ON WITH LIFE NOW THAT I KNOW THIS

↳ **@puckbunnyOG**: and they used to call you crazy when you said Ilya looked way too devastated when Hollander went down during that match !

↳ **@MrsRozanov**: their whole rivalry was just foreplay like ??? 🤔

↳ **@hollanov4life**: yeah not Ilya saying he won the cup before Shane and Shane reminding him he won the Calder

↳ **@MrsRozanov**: and then Ilya bragging about his successful husband in the trophy room and saying the next trophy is one they will win together 😭 kill me please

↳ **@hollanov4life**: I can't do anything but rewatch this video over and over again. Shane grabbing Ilya's hand when he talked about his mother 😭 Ilya being soft with Arthur Pike 😭
FAKE PRETEND WEDDING WITH KIDS 😭 BACKYARD WEDDING 😭 SHANE
PROPOSING AT ILYA'S HOUSE 😭 ILYA SAYING HE MOVED TO CANADA FOR
SHANE 😭

↳ **@puckbunnyOG**: ILYA GIVING SHANE A PICTURE OF THEM FROM THE DAY
THEY FIRST KISSED FOR CHRISTMAS 😭 THE DOMESTICITY. Rozanov is just a big
romantic softie 😭😭😭

↳ **@Hollander81**: okay but are we gonna address the leather wipes that can be seen near the
couch in the shot of the trophy room at 14:46 😭😭

↳ **@MrsRozanov**: omg they are freakyyy. Well knowing now that they were hooking up
their entire career, it does not surprise me anymore 😭😭

↳ **@QueerHockey**: Okay but can we seriously THINK about the narratives, the
YEARNING, the SECRECY 😭😭 like were they hooking up every time they played each
other ? When did they start catching feelings ? When did they decide to give it a real shot ?
My heart is so full but breaking at the same time imagining them PINING and HIDING for
like 10 years ❤️ ❤️ ❤️

↳ **@letsgocens**: okay but that means than there was potentially a time during which Shane
Hollander was handling both Rose Landry and Ilya Rozanov

↳ **@Ottawon24**: what a legend. MVP on and off the ice

↳ **@Gays4Hockey**: this is killing me because Shane Hollander is a total fucking babe but
let's be honest, this man is an anxious flower how the hell did he score these two 😭

↳ **@hollanov4life**: like you said, my baby is a flower, he just gets picked up

@MrsRozanov: guys, I went back to look at different women Roz had been seen with
before 2017 and the number of them that have dark hair and freckles 😭😭 like this man
was down bad since the start 😭😭

@Hollander81: joke's aside, this video tells us they have been involved since the
BEGINNING, potentially in love for most of it and Shane Hollander still led Montreal
to 3 Stanley Cups during that - each of these times, beating the man he was in love with.
@VoyageurdeMontreal - you owe Shane a well-deserved apology, you homophobic
cowards

↳ **@VoyageursUltra:** say it louder. @ShaneHollanderHockeyPlayer WE ARE SORRY KING. WE WERE JUST FEELING BLINDSIDED

↳ **thirsty4Holzy:** yeah they better beg on their knees and give him a proper tribute next time the cens are in Montreal 😞

↳ **@Voyageur24:** I feel sick thinking about how this city treated him. We are sorry Holzy @ShaneHollanderHockeyPlayer

↳ **@HaydenHive:** led our franchise to 3 Cups while in love with the opponent, he is a legend, please come back to us @ShaneHollanderHockeyPlayer, we are sorry 😞

@puckbunnyOG: ARTHUR PIKE SOUNDS LIKE THE CUTEST KID ALIVE I'M GONNA PASS OUT.

↳ **@HaydenHive:** actually let's talk about HAYDEN PIKE raising the kindest little dude?? dad of the year!!!

↳ **@ilyaslawyer:** well let's not forget that he also has a MOM that probably does the most of the raising

↳ **@HaydenHive:** yeah not discrediting Jackie, but how cute Arthur was mentioning his daddy every time 😞

↳ **@puckbunnyOG:** I wish we could have seen Hayden in the video, I bet he would look even hotter being all fatherly 😞

↳ **@ilyaslawyer:** why are we making this about pike, this is hollanov content

↳ **@HaydenHive:** calm down, we contain multitudes, let us be thirsty for multiple men

@Rozander81: GUYS GUYS we know they were engaged when they were outed, SO DO WE THINK SHANE PROPOSED AFTER THE PLANE INCIDENT 😞😞

↳ **@QueerHockey:** i told you, THE POSSIBILITIES, THE NARRATIVES ❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️

↳ **@thirsty4holzy:** someone get in touch with Netflix idk, this is THE love story of our generation

↳ **@ottawa4hollanov:** no someone gets in touch with Crave, this love story is PROUDLY CANADIAN AND CANADIAN ONLY

↳ **@MrsRozanov:** what the hell is Crave ???

The Centaurs Group Chat:

Bood: @Shane @Ilya soooo you did not warn us that you were going to break the internet

Wyatt: I can't believe you just dropped a relationship timeline like that

Shane: wasn't planned ok, it slipped out

Ilya: is good, now everyone know Shane was always mine

Shane: 😏 yeah while you were making your way though the women of North America

Ilya: but my heart was always yours Shane Hollander, love of my life and Rose Landry's ex

Dykstra: 🤔🤔

Wyatt: 😏

Troy: Voyageurs fans are crawling back btw

Boyle: yeah twitter's full of "we're sorry king" 💀💀

Ilya: too late, fuck them, they don't get forgiveness that easy

Shane: I admit I feel divided about this

Ilya: u be divided my love, I will hold grudge for you ❤️

Wyatt: Roz beefing with a whole city 😭

Bood: yo also ppl are wild for Hayden Pike right now 😭

Dykstra: yeah "#TeamDaddyHayden" is trending, this is so funny

Nick: how does man not even show his face and still steal your spotlight 😭

Shane: omg don't start, Ilya's been complaining about this all morning

Bood: kinda funny though. you do all this romantic crap and some guy gets thirst-posted because his kid is sweet 😭😭😭

Ilya: not funny

Wyatt: hilarious actually

Dykstra: leather wipes though 😈

Shane: stop

Boyle: 🙄

Wyatt: every time I think your two can't get freakier

Young: we should also all thank Hollander for bringing Roz to us !

Bood: yeah we should just make Hollander captain at this point

Wyatt: the man was carrying two franchise at the same time when you think about it

Ilya: 😏

Chapter End Notes

The song Hayden mention is this : <https://youtu.be/oywhaWk03Ho?si=m5S4NzcwUKzqYmh3>

Chapter 8: Tribute

Chapter Notes

PLEASE I BEG YOU, TRY TO LISTEN TO "The Future is Cancelled" by Giant Rooks (at the end of the video described in this chapter, the part of this song as from 2:09 plays) - i think it will make the reading experience better !!!

Also Hi ! I know I said I was going to do one Shane + Ilya chapter and then one Luca + Isaak but well gues what i am a LIAR. Srsl tho, thank you so much for all the love for this story I have gotten so much comments and I promise I will try to reply to them all . This is not the chapter I had planned for Shane and Ilya, and there is no real PR situation, it just felt like I needed to write this before moving on from the previous chapter where everyone learns they have been together for their entire carrers. I hope you enjoy !

Ottawa was playing the Voyageurs and had the 1–0 lead. A break in play was called, they were ten minutes into the third period, and most of the players were currently scattered across the ice, skating in loose circles. Shane stayed on the bench, leaning forward slightly as he unfastened his helmet strap, letting the air cool the sweat on the back of his neck. He had been so anxious before the match. Hell, he had been anxious since the start of this road trip, and not even Ilya had managed to calm him down this morning. Shane had not known what to expect. He had feared boos, obvious disdain from his former teammates. Instead, he had gotten cheers when his name was called, although a small number of his former teammates still avoided his gaze. The most painful part was seeing Hayden opposite him. You didn't play side by side with someone for ten years and move on easily. He let out a breath. He was okay, he had made it until now; he'd survive this match.

He startled when the arena lights suddenly dimmed without warning, sweeping across the stands in a coordinated fade that instantly drew the crowd's attention and brought a hush through the whole stadium, audience and players alike. A heavy silence settled, making the gentle piano melody that began over the speakers seem even more delicate.

Shane's pulse quickened, realising what was happening. He lifted his head toward the Jumbotron that lit up and found himself staring at official footage of himself from last season. He was wearing his Montreal jersey, seated against a dark backdrop with the Voyageurs emblem behind him, his eyes serious as he looked straight at the camera.

The Jumbotron split into dual displays, the right showing Shane's live reaction while a voice offscreen began, "Ladies and gentlemen, the Montreal Voyageurs are pleased to welcome back Shane Hollander, former captain and three-time Stanley Cup Champion." The camera caught the exact moment his expression tightened and his breath stilled as he tried to process the enormity of what he was seeing.

On the left, the footage transitioned to his draft year, showing him at eighteen with his bright, eager expression as he shook hands with management and held up his jersey for the cameras.

The music became louder and more dramatic, commentators' voices and cheers layered on. Early career highlights, assists, goals.

"Here comes Hollander - look at that speed - and he scores!"

Shane couldn't look away. He saw his own eyes glisten under the lights on the screen, and one tear escaped before he could wipe it away. Another followed. Ilya quietly stepped into the space beside him. He slipped off his glove, reached over, removed Shane's as well with a gentle tug, and intertwined their fingers, the gesture careful and grounding.

Players who had been skating during the break began drifting slowly toward their benches, drawn in by the tribute. The ice gradually cleared as the montage continued, showing him winning Rookie of the Year and transitioning to the years after that - goals, assists, becoming captain, hat-tricks, overtime celebrations, playoff highlights with crowd reaction woven in. Hundreds of fans in red jerseys pounding the glass, children lifted onto shoulders. The energy built gradually until Montreal was winning the Cup. Once. Twice. And then, again.

"Montreal are the Stanley Cup Champions!"

"Hollander hoists the Cup for the second time!"

"And there's the captain, leading his team to glory once again!"

The screen suddenly turned black and a soft voice entered gently.

You had to leave, I chose to stay...

The montage shifted effortlessly to community moments. Shane giving pucks to kids, waving to the crowd, celebrating with them.

You and me down by the station...

Clips of Shane with his teammates, laughing with Hayden on the ice, celebrating goals, Shane welcoming rookies.

Waiting for the rain to fall...

Even then, you never told me,

I should have returned your call...

Shane adjusting a child's helmet strap, laughing as a group of kids swarmed him on the ice, listening closely as a young fan spoke animatedly to him during a hospital visit. The video shifted again, focusing on short press clips of Shane speaking with reporters, moments where he offered measured, sportsmanlike answers even after difficult losses. A brief segment from the charity announcement he and Ilya had made together appeared next, both of them in suits.

More players had gathered now. Ottawa's entire bench had fallen silent. Montreal's bench had begun standing, one after another. Led by JJ, a few stepped out onto the ice and formed a

loose, respectful line along the blue line.

Too caught up in my own business...

The montage transitioned to a sequence of fan-submitted clips. People of all ages appeared holding signs in various parts of Montreal. Some were filmed in their living rooms, others outside neighborhood rinks, and others against familiar city landmarks. A teenager held up “THANK YOU FOR EVERYTHING HOLLANDER.”

You were so goddamn alone...

A woman in a worn Voyageurs coat displayed “FOREVER OUR CAPTAIN.”

Going back through all these pictures...

A group of friends crowded together on a balcony held up “WE LOVE YOU SHANE” in bold marker.

I just wanna take you home...

An older man, clearly emotional, stood in front of a metro station with a sign reading “WE’RE SORRY KID.”

The future is cancelled...

The music lowered and Hayden appeared, standing in a locker room with his hands clasped in front of him, speaking directly into the camera. “Hi Shane, it’s me.”

***I spend all my days,
Collecting your memories,
I’ll be on my way to see you again...***

“I just wanted to say... it was an honor. Playing with you. Growing up with you. Being your best friend. Thank you for everything. And I am sorry I didn’t do more.” He paused, visibly emotional. “I love you, man. Here’s to many more years.”

***I just wanna rest inside your hands,
Somebody take this pain away,
You had to leave, I chose to stay...***

A drone shot of a crowd in front of the Montreal rink. The camera moved slowly through the people until it reached the very front, where a small boy stood holding a sign almost as tall as he was. The writing was uneven but clear: “WE’RE SORRY. GOOD LUCK IN OTTAWA!”

The last images on the Jumbotron slowed: him in his #24 Montreal jersey, filmed from behind, walking down the tunnel after a game. The clip held long enough for the arena to grow impossibly still. The screen turned to black, but Shane’s face - shaking, tears streaming, visibly moved - stayed visible in the live shot on the other half. Ilya still held his hand, his other hand rested on Shane’s helmet, his head tilted toward him as he whispered something only Shane could hear.

Applause grew gradually, gaining strength, becoming something steady and unambiguous.

Shane remained seated, his eyes wet and unfocused as he looked upward, letting the sound settle around him. The moment was enormous and complicated and overwhelming, but he stayed still, breathing through it while Ilya steadied him with whispered, loving encouragement.

After a moment, he forced himself to stand up and raised his stick to the crowd.

Press:

[ESPN International]: “Voyageurs Deliver Emotional Tribute to Former Captain Shane Hollander.”

[The Athletic]: “A Decade of Hollander: Fans, Players, and an Entire City Reckon With His Legacy.”

[OutSports]: “Hollander Tribute Goes Viral: Canadian Hockey, Romance, and a Whole Lot of Feelings.”

[La Presse]: “Réconciliation : Montréal célèbre Shane Hollander dans une vidéo hommage bouleversante.”

[BBC Sports]: “Hollander Tribute Video Goes Viral: What Is Happening in Canada Right Now? A Recount of a Heated Rivalry That Shaped Hockey for a Decade.”

Twitter :

@VoyageursUltra: I can't lie... that was the best tribute this franchise ever made. I'm crying and I DESERVE it 😭

↳ **@Voyageur24:** The way JJ led the team to the blue line?? I'm sick.

↳ **@letsGoVoyageurs:** Montréal really said “we lived long enough to become the villain and then the hero again.” I guess growth is real 😭

↳ **@puckbunnyOG:** Do NOT talk to me rn I'm still thinking about that kid holding the “WE'RE SORRY” sign. Cinema.

↳ **@HotTake25:** They only made this tribute *after* he left lol ok 😏 Also, only a message from Hayden?? The others have nothing to say??? Bunch of cry babies

↳ **@VoyageursUltra:** Yeah and??? I'll take my PR healing where I can get it 😭

↳ **@Voyageurs24:** And the music choice?? Montreal knew EXACTLY what they were doing. They let this man down so bad and they know it 😭

↳ **@Voyageurs56:** I'm still mad he left us but goddamn even I cried 😭

↳ **@Hockey4life:** Am I the only one who thinks it was too dramatic?? Relax he didn't die.

↳ **@VoyageursUltra:** take your cold ass to sleep grandpa

@hollanov4life: ILYA ROZANOV HELD HIS HAND THE ENTIRE TIME AND GLARED AT ABSOLUTELY NOTHING DURING THE WHOLE VIDEO 😭😭😭
KING OF SUPPORT

↳ **@MrsRozanov:** That man did *not blink once*.

↳ **@puckbunnyOG:** Rozanov sitting there like: "you are making my husband cry again so I will destroy this city stone by stone."

↳ **@ilyaslwyer:** he meant it too

↳ **@ottawa4hollanov:** i am actually dying, look at Roz fueled by pure rage while gently holding Hollander's hand

↳ **@hollanov4life:** And him whispering to Shane at the end??? What was he saying??? I am devastated by their love 😞💔

@HaydenHive: HAYDEN PIKE CONFESSING HIS LOVE FOR SHANE ON THE JUMBOTRON???? HELLO???????

↳ **@letsgocens:** how did Hayden and Shane not date at some point like be serious

↳ **@HaydenHive:** best friends to lover, 20 years arc

↳ **@puckbunnyOG:** bestie I GOT YOU Hayden saying "I love you man" in his sad wet puppy voice??? I'm dead I'm deceased someone bury me

@Rozander81: okay but if hollanov didn't exist the chemistry between Hayden and Shane is CRAZY??? like be for real

↳ **@QueerHockey:** Shayden truthers rise up, the narrative potential is INSANE 😭

↳ **@ottawa4hollanov:** ABSOLUTELY NOT. go home. Shane and Ilya are literally married.

↳ **@HaydenHive:** i just know Rozanov is jealous of Hayden lmao

@FootyFanUK: What the hell is happening in Canada?? Is it common to make emotional af tribute videos like that in hockey???

↳ **@EuroSportsFan458:** I don't watch hockey but this tribute had more plot than half the shows on Netflix

↳ **@Messi4life:** I initially thought the player passed away but then they showed him?? also why are these two holding hands?? And why are people saying sorry????

↳ **@hollanov4life:** What happened is the two holding hands were public rivals for years and last year they got outed and revealed they've been in a years-long relationship and are getting married. Their two teams (Ottawa and Montreal) played during the playoffs and Hollander (the player in the tribute) tripped allowing Rozanov to score. The public AND his teammates publicly blamed him and accused him of tripping on purpose.

↳ **@hollanov4life:** And what's important to know is that Shane Hollander was captain of Montreal, had a ten-year career there AND won THREE Cups with them.

↳ **@hollanov4life:** also it was recently revealed, the two players were involved with each since the VERY START of their careers, like ten years ago

↳ **@FootyFanUK:** I don't know what I was expecting but it was NOT this. WHAT 😭😭

↳ **@EuroSportsFan458:** If I understand correctly it's like FC Barcelona Messi and Real Madrid Ronaldo coming out as a couple and telling us they're getting married... and then Messi trips during UCL semi-final allowing Ronaldo to score the winning goal???

↳ **@Messi4life:** oh man, that shit is juicy AND wrong !!!! 😭😭😭

↳ **@Voyageur24:** THANK YOU!! Now you get how Montreal fans felt!!!!

↳ **@ilyaslawyer:** shut up. your reaction and behavior were WRONG and DISRESPECTFUL. Period.

@newtocanadahockey: hi I have never watched hockey in my life but that tribute was beautiful?? I am now a Montreal Voyageurs supporter I guess

↳ **@ottawa4hollanov:** NOOO SWEETIEEEE 😭 you need to catch up on season 1 and 2, this is just the redemption arc

↳ **@VoyageursUltra:** WELCOME ❤️

@traditionalhockey123: Men shouldn't hold hands on the bench. Sorry.

↳ **@MrsRozanov:** i dare you to say it to his FACE you absolute clown

The Ottawa Centaurs Group Chat :

Bood: LMAO Roz is becoming a meme 😂

Wyatt: I saw, my fav tweet was "Look at Roz fueled by pure rage while gently holding Hollander's hand" 😭

Dykstra: ngl, it felt like Montreal was announcing a national day of mourning

Nick: yo the Europeans in the comments like "what is happening in Canada" is sending me 🧠

Dykstra: also Pike is trending again 😭 why does this man keep stealing the spotlight ??

Troy: "I love you man" had the timeline FOAMING. Did you know Shayden was a thing ?

Shane: please do not show Ilya those tweets

Ilya: too late. this is unacceptable

Dykstra: "Roz jealous of Pike without Pike even being present challenge (IMPOSSIBLE)"
😭😭

Ilya: I am not jealous. I just do not like how people talk about him and Shane and how he says he loves my husband on big screen

Nick: that's literally jealousy 😂

Wyatt: it's really wild tho, some people are becoming Voyageurs fans out of nowhere and mostly for Hayden Pike 😭

Bood: anyway just wanted to say again, we are proud of you Holzy ❤️

Boyle: yeah man. that was heavy as hell but you handled it

Wyatt: we got your back, always

Dykstra: and Hayden got your back all the way from Montreal

Ilya: yeah but i have his back the most

Wyatt: yeah yeah go cuddle or whatever 😂

Chapter 9: Interlude #4: Luca and Isaak

Chapter Notes

Hello ! How are we feeling after the premiere ? The past two weeks have been exhausting for me but I still woke up at 5am to watch the two episodes before work lol. Here is a little Luca and Isaak interlude that already hints at what's next for Ilya and Shane 😊. I have been real bad at replying at comments but I am reading them all, and it feels me with such joy and gratitude to know you've been enjoying my work ❤️🥹. (And let's just say that I heard the people demands about songs and karaoke 🙄). See the end notes for my twitter account that I dusted off !

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

Isaak arrived at the cafeteria ten minutes later than he meant to. Luca had texted that he was done with his workout fifteen minutes ago, and sudden panic at the thought of interacting - really interacting - with him again after five years gripped Isaak so fast that he had to stand in the hallway for a moment, breathing until his heart calmed.

He spotted him immediately. Luca was at a small corner table, hair still damp from a shower, hoodie sleeves shoved up to his elbows, staring down at his phone. He looked up when Isaak reached the table, smiling a little, shy around the edges.

“Hey,” Luca said, soft and warm in a way Isaak had no defenses for.

“Hey. Sorry if I made you wait.”

Luca shook his head. “Nah, it’s okay. I was texting Emma.” He got up, nudging Isaak lightly with his shoulder. “Come on, let’s grab food.”

“Oh, how is she? What’s she doing now?”

“She’s in med school. In Switzerland.” He paused. “She says hi, by the way.”

Isaak raised an eyebrow. “You told your sister about me?”

Luca gave a short laugh, cheeks turning slightly pink. “Well. Yeah.” His eyes flicked to Isaak, a little hesitant. “She called this morning and I... kind of told her everything. She was actually very surprised and happy to hear about you!”

Isaak had never been really close to Luca’s older sister, but she had always been very sweet to him. She also used to make fun of them relentlessly for being attached at the hip whenever the Haas family visited. Isaak always thought she knew he had an embarrassing crush on her little brother.

Isaak snorted. “Of course she did. She always liked having gossip before anyone else.”

“Yeah.” Luca smiled. “She really does.”

They loaded their trays - pasta for Isaak, chicken and rice for Luca, a jar of water to share - and returned to the table. The quiet that settled was strangely comfortable.

Luca cleared his throat. “How’s work?”

Isaak poked at his pasta. “Fine. Me and Kayla were mostly engaging with fans today. A lot of thirsty people under my drawing of you from yesterday.”

He laughed when Luca turned red faster than he previously thought humanly possible. Luca really had no idea how hot he was, which was unfair and also very, very Luca.

“Just wait till you draw Hollander,” Luca muttered. “Rozanov will comment and put all those thirsty people to shame.”

“Oh my god.” Isaak groaned, remembering his first week when Rozanov commented on his first Centaurs edit that his husband was single-handedly raising fertility rates. “I still have PTSD from that first PR training. And looking back, okay, maybe I edited it like a thirst trap, but - ”

Luca laughed, interrupting him. “Don’t worry. Roz is... a bit unhinged when it comes to Shane. Seriously, I wonder how no one clocked their shit before.”

“It’s still surreal,” Isaak said. “Two married NHL players on the same team? It’s revolutionary.”

Luca nodded, expression softening. “They... helped me a lot. With identity stuff.” He hesitated, as if he hadn’t meant to say that out loud. “I’m really grateful I ended up here.”

Isaak felt a thousand questions form in his head. What kind of identity stuff? Was he just referring to his artistic side? Was Luca gay, or bi? Did he have a girlfriend? A boyfriend? He wanted to know. He wanted to know everything about this new version of Luca sitting in front of him, but he was scared the answers could potentially break his heart.

Before he could organize a single coherent thought, Luca said quietly, “Mostly I’m just grateful this team brought you back to me.”

Isaak froze. Last night hit him all at once — the apology, the hug, Luca shaking against him, the way it felt like a wound that was healing and splitting open at the same time.

Luca’s gaze flicked up, searching his face. Isaak looked away.

“Are you regretting this?” Luca asked, small and careful.

Isaak’s head snapped up. “What? No. Do you?”

Luca shook his head immediately. “No. God, no. I just... don’t want to mess things up again.”

Isaak’s chest tightened. “You won’t. Not unless you decide to randomly vanish for five years again.”

Luca flinched.

“Sorry,” Isaak muttered. “That was... shitty.”

“No,” Luca said quickly. “It’s fair.”

He looked down, fidgeting with his sleeves. Isaak hated the sight of him looking sad, guilty, and unsure. Before he thought, he reached out and put his hand over Luca’s.

“Luc.”

Luca looked up, startled.

Isaak swallowed. “We’re starting over, right? We were just kids. People lose touch all the time. Life gets complicated and in the way. And I... I should’ve also reached out when you got drafted by Ottawa.”

Luca shifted his hand, turning his palm so he was the one holding Isaak’s hand now. “You had every reason not to.”

Isaak squeezed once, then gently pulled back. He cleared his throat. “So. Ottawa. How was it for you?”

Luca exhaled, accepting the change of subject. “Good, actually. Better than expected. I like the nature, kind of reminds me of Switzerland. I still get lost downtown, which is embarrassing.”

He smiled a little wryly. “Last season was harder. Losing a lot didn’t help.” He paused, looking at Isaak with a cheeky grin. “But then...”

He spread his hands dramatically, fingers ticking off as he counted each item. “The plane incident happened. And Barrett came out. And my captain, who is Ilya Rozanov, was outed and told us he’s marrying Shane freaking Hollander. Then we made the playoffs. Then Shane freaking Hollander joined the team. And finally, I found out my childhood best friend works here.” He exhaled, throwing his hands up. “So yeah.”

Isaak and Luca looked at each other in silence for a beat before bursting out laughing.

“Oh my god. This is actually crazy,” Isaak said, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. “But I see you are still fanboying over Hollander and Rozanov. I bet you lost your mind when you found out about them.”

Luca laughed, loud and bright. “I had a meltdown, okay? And yeah, I also definitely crashed when they told us they’d been involved since they were like eighteen.”

Isaak stared. “WHAT?”

Luca’s eyes widened. “Oh - maybe I wasn’t supposed to say that.”

Isaak snorted. “Relax. Knowing them, they’ll announce it during a livestream by accident and the internet will combust.”

Luca shook his head, amused. “They really are giving you so much work.”

“Honestly,” Isaak said, leaning back, “someone needs to make a rom-com about them.”

Luca grinned. “You would like that.”

“You know what, forget it. From what I’ve seen so far, a limited erotic series would be a better fit.”

Luca laughed again, loudly enough that Isaak noticed other people in the cafeteria giving them sly looks. Boyle watched, grinning, while Dykstra furiously typed on his phone.

For a moment, Isaak forgot his complicated feelings. For a moment, having Luca back felt completely natural, and he kind of wanted to cry.

Suddenly, Luca’s phone buzzed on the table. He checked it automatically. A notification popped up on his lockscreen, bold and unmistakable:

Dykstra : Haas and Isaak are sitting together in the cafeteria. They’re laughing.

Luca nearly dropped his phone. His ears turned red instantly as he glared at Dykstra. Isaak tried to hold in his laughter. He failed.

Luca groaned, burying his face in his hands. “Why are they like this?”

“It’s cute, like watching their kid on their first date,” Isaak teased without thinking.

“Is this a date?”

“Um... no, no, of course not,” Isaak spluttered. “Well... they might think it is. We’ve been acting kinda weird around each other, Luc.”

Luca sighed, then offered a sheepish smile. “Yeah, I know. I got a whole intervention from Hollander because of that.”

“That’s kinda cute. You really are like their kid.”

Luca groaned. “Oh my god, do not encourage them, please.”

“I’m glad they seem to really care about you, Luca.”

The sudden tender honesty seemed to stun Luca a bit. Then his smile crept back, soft, fond, helpless, the kind that made Isaak want to reach across the table, tuck a damp curl behind Luca’s ear, swipe his thumb at the little bit of sauce at the corner of his mouth.

He cleared his throat. “Anyway. You also have a deeply embarrassing team. No boundaries. And you all like each other way too much.”

Luca gave a small laugh. “Can’t argue with that.”

Isaak pushed his chair back lightly. “I should get back.”

Luca blinked. “Right. Yeah. Of course.”

There was an awkward beat. Luca rubbed the back of his neck. “Can we... do this again sometime? Maybe you could give me your number. I don’t really have any social media.”

Isaak pretended he wasn’t blushing. “Sure. I’ll text you, actually. Pretty sure the media team has all your numbers anyway.”

Luca smiled softly, hopeful. “See you around, Izy.”

“See you, Luca.”

Isaak rolled his eyes dramatically. “Anyway, I asked them if they had a lighter and they could have just answered ‘no.’ But instead they looked me up and down, looked at each other, and laughed before going, ‘We don’t smoke,’” he mimicked in an over-the-top bitchy voice. “So rude.”

Luca laughed, bright and delighted. “Well, maybe you should follow their lead, Izy. Smoking is bad for you.”

He was sitting in the chair across from Isaak’s desk, long legs stretched out. He had started showing up at the media office regularly after their first lunch together. Sometimes just to chat. Sometimes to rest after training or a workout. Other times he would scroll his phone or sketch while waiting for Isaak to finish editing. Today was the latter, sketching, head tilted slightly, he would bite his lips in concentration and Isaak would try and fail to not get distracted by it.

And every single time, Luca offered to make him tea. Every time, it was perfect - exactly how Isaak took it.

This new development in their relationship did not go unnoticed. Kayla and Harris had once laughed, and demanded to know why they weren’t being offered tea. Luca had gone pink and, out of sheer politeness or sheer mortification, began preparing drinks for the entire media team whenever he visited like some sort of high school intern. The rest of the Centaurs were also aware and openly delighted, there were some jokes and some light teasing, mostly from Wyatt Hayes and Rozanov, but nothing too serious. No one seemed to know Isaak and Luca used to know each other, and maybe Luca just wanted privacy so Isaak did not say anything to anyone either.

The most mortifying moment so far had been when Shane Hollander walked into Isaak and Kayla’s shared office, looked around, and said, “Have you seen Luca? He’s probably with

you, right?” Isaak had blushed and said no and that he did not know where Luca was. Hollander had blushed harder. Then, as if that weren’t enough, he’d said Luca seemed “really happy these days” before awkwardly escaping. It had been a disaster for everyone involved.

Outside the office, things had slipped into a strange new normal. Luca and Isaak had gone on walks together, visited bookstores (mostly for Isaak’s sake) and they’d even gone to a late-night screening of *10 Things I Hate About You*, one of their shared favorites from childhood, Isaak had found himself laughing next to Luca like it had been no time at all.

“Yeah, I know it’s bad for me,” Isaak said now. “I started during first year of uni. Stress smoking.”

Luca hummed sympathetically, still focused on the sketchpad in his lap.

“What are you drawing?” Isaak asked before he could stop himself. He had never asked before, on purpose. It seemed too intimate and he wanted to keep a bit of distance between them.

Luca looked up, surprised, then went pink immediately. “You, actually.” He lifted the pad hesitantly.

Oh. Isaak thought, heart beating wildly.

It was him, not from today. He wore his glasses in the drawing, hair slightly messy like he’d run frustrated hands through it, a concentration crease cutting between his brows. The attention to detail was so precise. Luca had drawn him from memory.

He turned back to his monitor, trying to stay upright in his chair when he very much wanted to melt through the floor.

“What do you think?” Luca asked, tentative, almost shy.

“It’s incredible, Luca,” Isaak said honestly. “You’ve really improved.”

Luca smiled, soft and proud. “Well, I had a lot of practice with this one. You’re my favorite thing to draw.”

“Oh.” Aloud, this time.

There it was again, Luca saying these impossibly soft, devastating things like it was nothing. Like he didn’t understand he was walking around with Isaak’s heart in his hands.

He cleared his throat. “I told my mom you were here.”

Luca frowned, confused but gentle. “Yeah?”

“She didn’t know you were with the Centaurs,” Isaak explained. “She... doesn’t follow hockey anymore.” He took a breath. “She stopped after my dad died. She stopped doing a lot of things.”

His fingers hovered over the keyboard. He wondered if he had said too much. Anything that touched the five missing years felt heavier, more fragile and they usually steered clear of that.

But Luca set his sketchpad down, voice quiet. "That must have been so hard, Izy. Losing your dad and... losing a part of your mom too."

"Yeah," he said, voice a bit tight. "She was actually annoyed when I took this job. But she got over it. And she was happy to hear about you. She, um... suggested we have lunch or dinner sometime."

"Of course," Luca said immediately with a kind of warmth and earnestness that made Isaak's throat ache. "Anytime."

Then he shifted forward, "You know you can talk to me, right? Anytime you miss him - call me, or come get me. We can talk about him or I can distract you, as you wish."

Isaak felt his eyes sting before he could stop them. He nodded, staring down.

Luca's expression broke. "Oh, Izy. Come here."

Isaak shook his head quickly. "No, it's okay," he whispered, wiping under his eyes.

Luca didn't listen. "Please," he murmured, opening his arms, "come here."

And Isaak was just human, so he went.

He expected Luca to stand, but Luca instead tugged him gently sideways, pulling him half onto his lap, guiding him with warm hands until Isaak's head was tucked beneath his jaw, face pressed into the soft fabric of Luca's hoodie.

One hand slid into Isaak's hair, the other wrapped around his waist, holding him close. He let out a shaky breath and curled his arms around Luca's neck, giving in fully. Luca was warm and smelled faintly of mint shampoo.

"I hate thinking of you alone and sad," Luca whispered against his temple. "I'm never leaving you alone again, Izy. Please believe me."

Isaak shut his eyes, nodding once against Luca's shoulder. He wanted to believe him.

God, he wanted to.

The canal was crowded in that lively winter-weekend way, families shuffling along, little kids gripping their parents' sleeves, groups of students skating while drinking hot chocolate out of paper cups. The Centaurs, predictably, were being ridiculous show-offs, weaving effortlessly through everyone. Harris actually had to intervene when Rozanov and Hollander tried to race each other backwards.

Isaak skated beside Harris, the camera strapped across his shoulder and already fogging slightly with the cold.

“Okay,” Harris said, clapping his hands together like a coach about to send them into battle. “Simple. We go from player to player, talk a bit, ask what song they’re listening to most right now, get a decent clip, move on. Natural.”

They started with Dykstra, who announced with no shame, that he’d been listening to some aggressively terrible EDM track. Bood followed, saying that with a two-year-old at home, the only songs in his life were “Baby Shark” and the Sofia the First theme song because Miles loved it.

Wyatt, unsurprisingly, offered, “Well, it’s December, baby! Obviously I’m listening to All I Want for Christmas Is You on repeat.” Troy gave a dramatic sigh and said, while looking pointedly at Harris, “My boyfriend has been playing Love Story on repeat for a reason, so that’s the song stuck in my head.” Isaak laughed, Harris groaned, and then he leaned in to give Troy a playful kiss on the cheek.

Eventually, they spotted Luca skating along the edge of the path, hands tucked into his coat pockets, hair a little messy from his beanie.

Harris glided toward him. “Haas! Your turn.”

Luca slowed and drifted their way. “What are we talking about?”

“What song you’re listening to the most these days,” Harris said.

Luca hesitated for a second, “Uhh... Fairytale of New York. The Pogues.”

“Classic,” Harris said. “Kinda depressing but in a festive way.”

“It’s nostalgic,” Luca said lightly, and then he turned his head, looking at Isaak through the camera with that signature helpless smile, “My best friend’s parents used to play it every Christmas.”

Isaak felt that land squarely in his ribs. He didn’t say anything, just gave a loaded look and small smile, before he and Harris pushed onward.

A few meters down the canal, they found Shane and Ilya trying to skate while Ilya’s arms were around his husband’s waist.

“Shane! We need your answer. What song have you been listening to the most this month?”

Shane separated himself from Ilya’s hold and lit up. “Oh! Okay, so - there’s this song I’ve been listening to a ton lately. It’s not a Christmas song but it feels kind of festive, I think, but... I actually don’t know the name.”

Harris blinked. “How do you not know the title of the song you listen to on repeat?”

Shane opened his mouth, shut it, opened it again, cheeks turning pink. Rozanov coasted smoothly behind him, placing a hand on the small of his back.

"It is because," Ilya said, deadpan, "my husband does not actually listen to music."

"I do!" Shane protested.

"He only listens to the songs I put in playlist for him," Ilya continued, glancing at him adoringly. "Songs that remind me of him. Yes?"

Shane's blush deepened to a dangerous shade of red. "Well... it's a good playlist."

"What's it called?" Harris asked, absolutely delighted.

"'Shane' with a red heart emoji," Ilya said easily, smirking while Shane looked like he wanted to dig a hole in the ice and drown. A chorus of groans, whistles, and gagging noises erupted from nearby.

"Okay, you're absolutely sending me that playlist," Harris said.

"Only a screenshot," Shane said firmly.

"I'll take that. But you two still haven't answered my question."

Ilya shrugged. "Shane is listening to Tiny Moves by the Bleachers. And I have been blasting All I Want for Christmas Is You, of course."

"Yeah, Roz!" Wyatt shouted, skating by to fist-bump him.

Once Harris declared they had enough footage, the players finally scattered. Isaak drifted toward the food stall, Luca matching his pace instinctively. They grabbed hot chocolates and moved away from the crowd, skating slowly beneath a row of lights strung across the canal.

Luca's breath fogged white in front of him. "You're faster now. On the ice," he said.

Isaak nudged him lightly with an elbow. "Well, I'm proud of myself for not falling once"

Luca smiled at him, soft, warm, too fond. "You want to race?"

Isaak barked a laugh, arching an eyebrow. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

They skated in comfortable silence for a moment, sipping their hot chocolates, the air humming with laughter and chatter around them. The sun dipped lower, casting everything in that December glow. Without really meaning to, Isaak drifted a little closer, their gloved hands brushing every few strides.

Luca glanced at him, eyes warm. He nudged his shoulder gently. "We should do this again. Just us."

Isaak tried to keep his voice steady. "Yeah. I'd like that."

They kept skating, slow, easy, side by side, letting the winter night open up in front of them. And for a moment, Isaak didn't feel afraid of wanting things again.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will probably be out before next week-end !

Chapter 10: Playlist

Chapter Notes

Let's just pretend all these songs already existed in 2022. Also, don't be shy, listen to the songs as you read ❤️

21/12/25 : I see you've been asking for a link for the playlist and a lovely reader (@GrumpyPunk) created it, so enjoy :
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7LW82Nu11A4gB18Kn7wym4?si=m2XnUunBQQ2SJOhrJfPNjg&pi=-aVd7T4uT_md_

What Love Asks of Us : A Breakdown of the Rozanov-Hollander Playlist

N.Raham, Senior Writer, Rolling Stone

Two days ago, the Ottawa Centaurs' official account dropped a screenshot of a playlist their captain, Ilya Rozanov, had apparently curated for his husband and teammate, Shane Hollander.

To be honest, I was fully expecting fast, groovy music you can work out to - because, in the end, these two men are professional athletes. What I did not expect was for the first song to be the Tiffany version of the rock-and-bubblegum-pop ballad, "I Think We're Alone Now." As Tiffany sings, "*We gotta hide what we're doing / 'Cause what would they say / If they ever knew?*", I sat down and fetched my notebook because instinct told me this was going to be an *experience*.

First, let's establish some context in case you don't know who Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander are. Rozanov was first overall in the 2009 draft (Hollander was second) and went on to become captain of the Boston Bears for several years. He won a Cup with them in 2014 and left Boston for the Ottawa Centaurs in 2018, a move that shocked and confused the hockey world. Then, confusion multiplied when he announced the launch of a charity with his lifelong "rival," Shane Hollander - yes, readers, they are rivals to lovers. Earlier this year, all of this made sense when Hollander and Rozanov were outed publicly and revealed that they had been in a relationship for several years and were getting married. Hollander, at the time, was still captain of the Montreal Voyageurs and had led them to three Stanley Cups. After the 2021–2022 season, he left Montreal following backlash from teammates and fans who accused him of "tripping" during a decisive playoff match against Ottawa.

Now the two men are teammates and happily married. They break the internet at least twice a month, and I am certain the PR team in Ottawa must be exhausted. Each time it happens, the public learns more about their already highly scrutinized relationship. They have been

involved since 2009, though they became exclusive much later and Rozanov moved to Ottawa to be closer to his then-boyfriend. Fairytale stuff you only see in movies - which explains why the public seems so obsessed with them.

When I approached my editor with the idea for this article, he was skeptical. I wrote it anyway. I then watched him tear up reading it, because a simple playlist had prompted in me a reflection on love, identity, and courage - one that reached into a part of my life I have spent years avoiding. I think my boss didn't expect this, was maybe confused, and you may also be confused or think I'm overinterpreting (or, I'll admit, being a tiny bit parasocial). But stick with me until the end, because I genuinely believe we can all learn something from these two men and their love story.

I was twenty-three when I met the man who would come to define much of my adulthood. He was older by seven years, steady in a way that invited trust, and capable of seeing me with a gentleness that was almost unbearable. From the beginning, there was something between us that felt both immediate and inevitable, though we were too timid, or too damaged, or too unsure of ourselves to acknowledge it aloud. We spoke easily. We made each other laugh without effort. There were moments when the air between us shifted, when a quiet anticipation took hold - but neither of us moved toward it.

I told myself I was still learning how to be a person (23 is very young, after all), still mending the parts of me that trauma had hollowed out, still unsure of who I was or what I was worthy of. He was inconsistent at times, warm one day, distant the next, enough to keep me cautious, enough to keep me asking whether the tenderness I sensed in him had a counterpart in me, or whether I had simply imagined our kinship because I was lonely.

Everything changed the night he told me that his life would likely be shorter than most. He didn't say it dramatically. He never used a phrase like "dying." Instead, he said that old age was something he would probably never meet. I remember the almost apologetic softness of his voice, as if he were sorry to give me this knowledge. I folded that knowledge into myself and told my heart to be cautious. It felt irresponsible and selfish to want something that carried an expiration date. I told myself I wasn't ready, that I was young and had time to find love, that life had handed us a fragile connection and it was wisest not to strain its limits.

He lived until 38. There were stretches when we drifted apart and stretches when we drew close again, years when we learned to confide in each other without naming the feeling underneath. And then, as he had warned me long ago, he began to fade. During the last months, when his body grew tired and our time with him narrowed into small, precious moments, friends took turns keeping him company at night. On one of those evenings, I asked him to tell me anything he had never said. He looked at me with a clarity that felt like grief and said he wished he had told me he was in love with me. That he wished he had been brave. That he wished we had tried.

There are moments that carve themselves so deeply into the body that they echo long after the world has moved on. I still do not fully understand why we protected ourselves from one kind of pain only to condemn ourselves to another. I waited for safety, for certainty, for a version of myself that felt more whole and deserving. And time, indifferent as ever, ran out.

Perhaps this is why Rozanov's playlist struck me so deeply. Because as I listened to the songs he chose, I recognized a familiar fear at their center. The fear of not being enough. The fear of breaking someone you love. The fear of letting yourself be seen. The fear of love. The difference, of course, is that Rozanov eventually found the courage to step toward the life he wanted, even when it frightened him.

The playlist he assembled reads not simply as a recounting of a relationship, but as a record of that bravery. The tracks move from secrecy to recognition, from fracture to healing, and ultimately toward a kind of domestic tenderness everyone yearns for. And perhaps that is why I felt compelled to write this piece not as a detached critic, but as a woman who knows firsthand that love withheld becomes its own form of grief. To encounter a playlist so steeped in vulnerability, curated by a man who spent so many years resisting the softness he now embraces, is to be reminded that love is not merely an emotion but an act. It requires movement. It requires risk. It requires, above all else, courage.

If you'll permit me, I'll now turn to the songs themselves, not solely as artifacts of Rozanov and Hollander's shared past, but as invitations to consider what love asks from all of us, and what it offers in return.

The Early Years: "Children behave"

There is a particular loneliness in wanting someone you believe you cannot have, a loneliness that expands in the silence between two people who feel something neither is prepared to name. I recognized that quality in the first set of songs on Rozanov's playlist, which linger unmistakably in the earliest years of his connection with Hollander.

"I Think We're Alone Now" - **Tiffany** captures the innocence and urgency of those first encounters. When Rozanov includes a track that remembers, almost with a quiet, private smile, the way two young people "*had to hide what [they were] doin'*," he is not invoking secrecy for the thrill of it. He is acknowledging the claustrophobia of existing in a world that demanded excellence from teenagers who barely understood themselves, let alone the feelings that flickered between them. What struck me most was the innocence and playfulness embedded in the melody - the suggestion that two people could be alone together, suspended in a space untouched by rivalry, expectation, or the crushing weight of public scrutiny, "*where the beating of [their] hearts is the only sound.*" I recognize that illusion intimately: the belief that if you stood close enough to the person you loved, the world might soften around you, even if only for a brief, impossible moment.

"Perfect" - **One Direction** carries the quiet grief of someone convinced they are only worthy of temporary affection, insisting they will never be the one "*you take home to mother.*" The lyrics about liking "*secret little rendezvous,*" about first seeing someone across a room and knowing they were curious, reveal much about the nature of their relationship in those early years. But what moved me was not the implicit sensuality - it was the ache of someone who yearns privately and refuses to admit it even to themselves. I remember that feeling: the way I convinced myself I was not ready to be cherished and so settled for fragments instead of the whole. It did not spare me from longing, it only taught me a more complicated form of it.

“double take” - Dhruv is a confession wrapped inside a sensual melody - the sound of a young man seeing no one else in a crowded room and pretending not to feel the sting of jealousy. Yes, the song highlights the physicality of their affair, but it also offers unabashed admissions: *“spend the summer or a lifetime with me,” “let me bring you to a place of your dreams,” “tell me, do you feel the love?”*. And still, threaded through the melody, is the awareness of the “scandal” of it all: *“who could say they saw us coming?”* It is a line that feels almost amused now, knowing what these two would become, but in the beginning it must have tasted like fear - the same fear that keeps young love unspoken, unnamed, and yet utterly undeniable

The Realization: “I have loved you since we were 18”

There is a point in every love story - even the ones that never fully unfold - when the feeling can no longer be explained away as coincidence or proximity. Some connections simply persist. It is the moment when one recognizes that the heart has already chosen long before the mind feels prepared to follow. The second group of songs in Rozanov’s playlist carries precisely this recognition. Listening to them, I felt again that strange mix of longing and restraint that defined my early years of loving a man who was already marked by time. Back then, I kept telling myself that clarity would arrive if I only waited long enough. But clarity is rarely a gift, more often, it is a reckoning. And these songs trace Rozanov and Hollander’s reckoning with a tenderness that surprised me.

“Making Love (Out of Nothing at All)” - Bonnie Tyler is a cathedral of contradictions. Its sweeping theatrics and immense, haunted crescendos might seem melodramatic to an untrained ear, yet there is something deeply sincere in the way its exaggeration mirrors the emotional immensity of its subject. When Rozanov includes this track, he is not simply selecting a classic power ballad, he is choosing a song that dramatizes the paradox he probably lived for so long: that he knew how to survive, compete, manipulate, retreat, even charm, but not how to love. The lyric *“I know just how to lie... I know just how to fake it... but I don’t know how to leave you”* becomes sharper when you realize that Rozanov and Hollander probably fought their connection for years because the impossibility of it was not imagined, it was structural. Being gay or bi in the NHL simply was not done until Scott Hunter changed the game.

The song tells the story of someone who knows the mechanics of distance, the choreography of avoidance, who knows how to make bodies *“do magical things,”* but has no idea how to step away from the one person who has become a quiet constant in the background of his life. Through this song, Rozanov could be admitting he *“always know[s] the name of the game,”* but confesses he does not understand how Hollander keeps creating love *“out of nothing at all.”* That *“nothing at all”* might refer to the scarcity of what they shared - a handful of secret rendezvous stretched across years - or to Rozanov’s own belief that he had nothing meaningful to offer. Sung in Tyler’s breathless, awe-stricken delivery, the lyric becomes the confession of someone who assumed he was unlovable encountering someone who chose him anyway.

I recognize the impulse to underestimate oneself and overestimate one's damage. For years, I believed I was too fractured to be loved without consequence. I held that belief so tightly that I treated affection like a dangerous thing, something to observe from a safe distance. And yet, when he confessed his feelings in those last months, I realized he had been building something out of the smallest gestures, the smallest conversations. Love had existed, quietly, stubbornly despite my refusal to acknowledge it.

"18" - One Direction is a confession disguised as nostalgia. The line "*I have loved you since we were eighteen / Long before we both thought the same thing / To be loved and be in love*" is not metaphor, and not, I think, hyperbole. It lands with the weight of a truth humming beneath the rivalry, beneath the thrill of their earliest encounters, beneath the long era when they kept returning to each other even though doing so risked everything they had built.

There is something deeply human in looking back at the fragments of one's youth and realizing they contained more meaning than you ever dared to admit. I have often wondered what my own life might have looked like if I had allowed myself to believe that the tenderness I felt at twenty-three was not a mistake or a symptom of instability, but the beginning of something real. This song reminds me that beginnings carry their own logic, indifferent to our preparedness. As the lyric says, "*we made a start, be it a false one, I know,*" but recognition will always begin to push through the cracks of denial.

Making it work : "I have been wrong, I have been right"

The third section of the playlist turns unflinchingly toward struggle. There are seasons in every relationship when love cannot be taken for granted. These are the years when tenderness must coexist with exhaustion, when the familiar weight of another person's presence becomes both comfort and responsibility. This is true for everyone, I believe. But for Rozanov and Hollander, the complexities must have multiplied: professional athletes, public rivals, long distance, closeted queerness, Hollander's mixed background and Rozanov being bisexual and Russian. And now, being out in the open, I imagine, brought an entirely new layer of difficulty.

"All We Ever Do Is Talk" - Del Water Gap is a catchy yet devastating portrait of the post-honeymoon phase. I am not privy to more details than anyone else about the specific contours of their relationship, but this song seems to recall a secret, clandestine, semi-casual era with a kind of aching fondness. It speaks plainly of hotel rooms at three in the morning, of taking off suits, of laughter pressed against a wall, of hunger too immediate to be named. And the singer wonders "*Will we ever get that feeling again ?*"

But then the tone shifts. The singer asks his lover to "*fall asleep on [his] shoulder, breathe out while [he] holds them,*" and suddenly the song is no longer about heat - it is about the longing for steadiness. It captures a time when the intensity of physical connection obscured the more unsettling question beneath it: What does this mean, and what will it become? The nostalgia isn't for chaos; it's for the version of oneself who hadn't yet realized how much there was to lose. As I listened, I found myself grieving not only the years Rozanov and Hollander spent circling one another, but also the years I spent doing the same - waiting for a courage that never arrived.

“If I Be Wrong” - Wolf Larsen is a trembling confession, a song spoken by someone afraid that the darkness they carry will swallow the person they love. When the singer asks, *“What if I’m wrong, what if I’ve lied, what if I’ve dragged you here to my own dark night?”* it becomes impossible not to think of Rozanov’s frank discussions of his mental health. There is a tremor running through the song - a warning, almost - offered by someone who fears that the path ahead will not be gentle, that there is a crack *“right down the front”* of them that may never fully mend. I recognized that tremor instantly. I, too, feared burdening the man I loved, feared that my grief would overshadow the comfort I longed to give, feared that being loved by me might make the end heavier for him. These fears are not born of selfishness but of the profound responsibility intimacy demands.

What makes the track fitting is its plea: *“If I be wrong, if I be right, let me be here with you tonight.”* It is not a request for certainty; it is a request for permission - to stay, to try, to love even if one cannot promise more than the present moment. The line about having been wrong and right *“all in the same night”* captures perfectly the uneven process of learning how to love someone while still learning how to love oneself.

“Live for Me” - Omar Apollo is the first moment on the playlist that feels like we are looking through Hollander’s eyes instead of Rozanov’s. If “If I Be Wrong” is a confession, this song is the answer. Apollo’s voice wavers with sincerity, and the central question, *“Won’t you live for me?”* lands with a quiet gravity. Sometimes love is not a luxury but a method of survival. The lyric *“There’s nothing I won’t carry so you don’t have to”* is not romantic in the conventional sense, nor heroic. It is the vow made between people who have seen each other’s depths and decided to remain. Supporting someone through darkness requires not only patience but resilience, and Rozanov including this track acknowledges both the weight of what he perhaps asked and the grace with which Hollander offered it.

Listening to “Live for Me,” I thought of the night my friend finally allowed himself to say what he felt - not to secure a future, but to settle a debt to his own heart. His admission was its own plea to be remembered when there was nothing left to fight for.

“Coming of Age” - Cassandra Coleman opens a window into the slow, disorienting process of self-repair. The line *“I am not a perfect lover ’cause I’m learning to love me”* names a truth many reach reluctantly: one cannot offer steadiness to another while withholding compassion from oneself. Imagining this as something Rozanov might be acknowledging - a man whose public persona had long been built on bravado and cockiness - was like a stab to the heart.

More generally, the song articulates the exhaustion of confronting one’s own past: *“It’s a little funny, a little bit sad / When your heart gets broken, so you build it back / It’s the end of a chapter so turn the page / Felt it might be a coming of age.”* This made me think of Hollander’s painful, public separation from the Voyageurs. How exquisite, then, that this song could be Rozanov’s way of telling his husband: you will get through this, and I will be here while you do.

What I love about this section of the playlist is that it does not romanticize suffering or frame it as inherently transformative. Instead, it dignifies the work of staying connected while navigating forces that could easily have undone them. These songs recognize that love is not

the absence of darkness - it is the willingness to move through darkness with another person, even when each step feels unsteady.

Forever: “People fall in love in mysterious ways.”

“**Tiny Moves**” - **Bleachers** reminds us that love is not always the thunderclap we expect. Often, it is the accumulation of small, nearly invisible gestures that eventually reshape the heart. Calling his lover a “*tiny twist of fate [that made his] whole world shake [and] change*” reveals a domestic tenderness, a festive softness. Hearing it, I felt an almost physical relief: Rozanov and Hollander have reached the quiet, luminous place so many yearn for - a place of peace, trust and intimacy.

“**Thinking Out Loud**” - **Ed Sheeran** reads less like cliché and more like affirmation. Yes, it is unabashedly romantic, but it is also unexpectedly apt. The opening line - “*When your legs don’t work like they used to before*” - becomes almost startling when you remember they are professional athletes whose chemistry once expressed itself in rivalry. And the song’s insistence on growing old together, that a soul can remain “evergreen”, reframes everything that came before.

“*People fall in love in mysterious ways*” and “*Maybe we found love right where we are*” transforms their history into something almost inevitable. The secrecy, the rivalry, the painful years, none of it disappears, but all of it becomes part of the path they had to walk. They didn’t need perfect timing or perfect circumstances. They found love in hotel rooms, in chaos, in silence, in glances, in “*maybe just the touch of a hand.*” And is it not both heartbreaking and miraculous to imagine that first handshake at seventeen, after their first match against each other, and entertain the possibility that, somehow, they already knew?

When I hear this song, I cannot help thinking of the life I nearly had, the one that flickered at the edges of possibility but never stepped fully into the light. I think about the nights at my friend’s bedside, when he told me, too late, that he had loved me. I think about the gentleness in his voice, the acceptance that made the loss feel both unbearable and strangely peaceful. We never reached the place described in this song, the place where love becomes a home. Yet there is comfort in knowing others do - even after years of fear, confusion, and missteps.

Perhaps that is the quiet power of this playlist. It tells a story not only about two men who found their way to each other despite the odds, but also about the resilience of the human heart - the way we continue to choose connection even after we have been hurt, and the possibility of arriving, finally, at a life built not upon secrecy or fear, but upon trust and love.

I have always believed in fate, but relying too heavily on fate does a disservice to true, earned love. Because real love requires work. It is not a matter of certainty but of courage. And while one could argue that Rozanov and Hollander *were* destined to collide, their story is a reminder that love does not require us to be whole before we begin. It does not wait for the perfect moment or the perfect version of ourselves. It asks only that we show up - with our fears, our bruises, our histories - and allow another person to meet us where we truly are.

A note to Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander :

Before anything else, I owe you both an apology. This article contains moments of interpretation that may overstep into speculation, but every line was written with sincerity, with admiration for the beauty and ache I recognized in music carefully chosen.

The world is watching you with an intensity that can blur into entitlement. People will form opinions about your choices without understanding the cost of vulnerability. I hope you don't listen too closely. It is also easy for the public to forget that beneath the myth, there are two human beings who have paid real costs. What you have done, choosing each other through rivalry, uncertainty, distance, collapse, and repair, is an act of courage that few ever manage. Human connection is always a risk, but the two of you have chosen it with a bravery that deserves respect. You took a chance on yourselves, and on each other. That is the bravest thing anyone can do. And I hope, reader, that this will inspire you to be brave too.

@RollingStone: “What Love Asks of Us: A Breakdown of the Rozanov–Hollander Playlist” Dive into the carefully curated playlist of Ottawa Centaurs captain, Ilya Rozanov, for his husband and teammate, Shane Hollander. Analyzed by our senior writer, N.Raham, this playlist “reads not simply as a recounting of a relationship, but as a record of [bravery]. The tracks move from secrecy to recognition, from fracture to healing, and ultimately toward a kind of domestic tenderness everyone yearns for. [...] [It is a reminder that] love is not merely an emotion but an act. It requires movement. It requires risk. It requires, above all else, courage.”

↳ **@ottawa4hollanov:** drop the author full contact, I want to give them money so they can go to therapy

↳ **@letsgoCentaurs:** somewhere in ottawa: Harris reading this and updating the internal crisis scenarios doc like “new risk: deep literary analysis of playlists”

↳ **@QueerHockey:** I was honestly expecting this playlist to be a bunch of rap songs, Bad Bunny and Charlie XCX. My bad, **@IlyaRozanov81** I did not know your game

↳ **@QueerHockey:** also this whole essay is basically “I watched two hockey players be brave and realized I never was and I don't want you to make the same mistake” and honestly? that's the kind of parasocial I will accept

↳ **@hollanov4life:** “love withheld becomes its own form of grief” HELLO??? I JUST WANTED TO SEE THE REACTION TO THE ONE DIRECTION SONGS

↳ **@ottawa4hollanov:** I do not what is funnier, Rozanov seeing this while he just made a playlist without thinking too much about it or Rozanov seeing this and realizing this women clocked all of his shit

↳ **@puckbunnyOG:** I opened it thinking “haha fun playlist breakdown” and instead I got a full meditation on grief, mortality and love. ma'am I am at WORK 😭😭

↳ **@MrsRozanov**: to be fair, some songs are way too specific for it to just be random, but the the idea of Rozanov sitting there carefully selecting songs to express things too hard to say is devastating

↳ **@Gays4Hockey**: my favorite thing is that Rozanov probably just wanted a little playlist to say “I’m in love with you and vaguely unhinged” and instead he accidentally triggered a collective spiritual awakening

↳ **@puckbunnyOG**: she really said “what if we looked at your favorite hockey couple and made it about INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA AND MENTAL ILLNESS” like okay

↳ **@traditionalhockey123**: sorry but this is too much. it’s just a playlist. not everything has to be about pain and trauma

↳ **@MrsRozanov**: imagine reading “hey maybe we deserve love even if we’re messed up” and going “ugh”

↳ **@Hollander81**: hearing straight dudes complain about depth like “please go back to hitting each other”

↳ **@SportsGuy89**: Real talk this might be the first time I’ve cried reading Rolling Stone and it’s about two hockey dudes, a playlist and a dead non-lover, what is happening

↳ **@Hockey4life**: same. At the beginning I was like oh this is going to be good, but then “Everything changed the night he told me that his life would likely be shorter than most” ??? The trauma dump had me staring at the wall

↳ **@HotTake25**: lowkey weird that a journalist put that much of her personal trauma into an article about two players she doesn’t know personally 🧠

↳ **@QueerMediaNerd**: this is the first time I’ve seen a mainstream piece treat queer athletes as complex humans and not just “representation yay” so idk I’ll take it

↳ **@puckbunnyOG**: well I think it was very self-aware of her to include the apology at the end, and the article never outright say “this is what happened” but more about what the lyrics could implies

@ilyaslawyer: “What Love Asks of Us: A Breakdown of the Rozanov–Hollander Playlist”, this article should just have been titled, “let’s dive in into Ilya Rozanov’s brain”

↳ **@Rozander81**: “he assumed he was unlovable encountering someone who chose him anyway” is an insane thing to say about someone you don’t know but why is it lowkey true 😭

↳ **@ilyaslawyer**: maybe she is Eastern European trauma recognizing Eastern European trauma

↳ **@letsGoCentaurs**: this part “*The line “I am not a perfect lover ’cause I’m learning to love me” names a truth many reach reluctantly: one cannot offer steadiness to another while withholding compassion from oneself. Imagining this as something Rozanov might be acknowledging - man whose public persona had long been built on bravado and cockiness - was like a stab to the heart.”* ??? I am going to jump off a bridge

↳ **@hollanov4life**: the way she just decided to put the idea that they fell in love at first sight out there and then called it a day is crazy work but I respect that

↳ **@ilyaslawyer**: “*They found love in hotel rooms, in chaos, in silence, in glances, in “maybe just the touch of a hand.” And is it not both heartbreaking and miraculous to imagine that first handshake at seventeen, after their first match against each other, and entertain the possibility that, somehow, they already knew?*” 😊😭👉

↳ **@Centaurs4hollanov**: ottawa pr absolutely reading this like “ok yes this is stunning but also please for the love of god stop giving the internet more content”

KpopStan223: so let me get this straight. a russian bisexual hockey captain made a playlist for his canadian husband and teammate and they were once rival and now rolling stone is out here writing about mortality, courage and bedside confessions???

↳ **@EuroSportsFan458**: yes. this is apparently normal behavior in the North American hockey cinematic universe

↳ **@newtocanadahockey**: I read one essay about a playlist and now I know their draft years, their trauma, their heated rivalry AND I’m emotionally invested in some journalist’s dead almost-lover. this is too much lore

@VoyageursUltra: “*And while one could argue that Rozanov and Hollander were destined to collide, their story is a reminder that love does not require us to be whole before we begin. It does not wait for the perfect moment or the perfect version of ourselves. It asks only that we show up - with our fears, our bruises, our histories - and allow another person to meet us where we truly are.*” - yeah okay maybe I WILL stop being a hater about hollander leaving 😭

↳ **@Voyageur24**: yeah not her calling us out 🙄 “It’s a little funny, a little bit sad / When your heart gets broken, so you build it back / It’s the end of a chapter so turn the page / Felt it might be a coming of age.” This made me think of Hollander’s painful, public separation from the Voyageurs”

@BradThomson: “What Love Asks of Us: A Breakdown of the Rozanov–Hollander Playlist” This just confirmed that Rozanov loves Hollander more like what do u mean, you move country for him, you post thirsty comments under his post, you publicly claim

him , you make him a careful romantic playlist, you loved him since you were 18 ???
And we never see any gesture from Hollander ?

↳ @Rozander81: so you read *"It tells a story not only about two men who found their way to each other despite the odds, but also about the resilience of the human heart - the way we continue to choose connection even after we have been hurt, and the possibility of arriving, finally, at a life built not upon secrecy or fear, but upon trust and love."* And your take was "love is a competition" ???

↳ @letsGoCentaurs: that's certainly an original thought Brad

↳ @ilyaslawyer: not your name being Brad and proudly disclosing wrong opinions about hollanov 

↳ @BradThompson: I am not THAT Brad, excuse you. This is THE Brad @BradHeneaux

↳ @BradHeneaux: hate all you want, from what I can see I did them a service, they look happy now and it was mostly Hayden Pike fault anyways

↳ @HaydenHive: oh you better sleep with one eye open brad

↳ @HaydenPike: fuck off @BradHeneaux and also fuck off @BradThompson

↳ @HaydenHive: 

↳ @puckbunnyOG: yeah clock him stud

@Ottawa4hollanov: "What Love Asks of Us: A Breakdown of the Rozanov–Hollander Playlist" now I understand why Hollander looked possessive of a playlist in that video

↳ @QueerMediaNerd: "spend the summer or a lifetime with me" 

↳ @Ottawa81: he also said "you know I'm your guy / Your best friend and your lover too"

↳ @HaydenHive: not the Hayden Pike earasure

↳ @puckbunnyOG: dedicating "Making love (out of nothing at all)" to your SO is insane.

↳ @puckbunnyOG: "And I'm never gotta tell you everything I've got to tell you / But I know I've got to give it a try"  

↳ @Ottawa4hollanov: "And every star in the sky is taking aim at your eyes" i do not want love if it is not like this

↳ @QueerMediaNerd: this is making me feel single, I should listen to the writer and go be brave

@onedirection4ever: “What Love Asks of Us: A Breakdown of the Rozanov–Hollander Playlist” not one but two 1D songs ? The crossover I did not know I needed

↳ @justagirl12: and looking at the release date of some the songs, it makes you think how long has Rozanov been pining

↳ @Hollander81: do you think Rozanov would hook up with someone and then lay down in bed, listening to sad music and pining over freckles and doe eyes

↳ @thirsty4holzy: I’m dying they were just two pookies being in love 🥺

“Shane is being a bit...Shane about this. Me I do not know how I feel about it, I think.”

Ilya was currently at the Hollander’s house for Christmas Eve dinner. The kitchen smelled like ginger and roasted chicken and Ilya was following Yuna’s directions dutifully, doing whatever she asked of him without protest.

“This morning must have been... a lot,” Yuna said lightly.

Ilya let out a quiet breath through his nose. “Mmn. Yes. We woke up and both our phones were... exploding.”

“I can imagine.”

“Shane read maybe three sentences before panicking,” he said, the corner of his mouth twitching with fondness.

Yuna smiled softly. “He does not like people looking at him too closely.”

“Yes.” Ilya nudged a bowl into place. “He got overwhelmed. I think... seeing someone understand our relationship like that made him feel very exposed.” He paused. “Made me feel exposed too.”

Yuna’s eyes flicked up to him, gentle, “That makes sense.”

He nodded. “But he calmed down. We talked. Was okay. Was a very good article. Strange, but... good.”

“Well, I think what you should take from that is you inspire people and this is a good thing. Greatness comes with great responsibility, Ilya.”

Ilya blinked, then gave a slow smile, “Wyatt says that all the time. Is from Spider-Man.”

Yuna laughed. “Sounds like Wyatt Hayes.”

She came closer then, unexpectedly, and pulled Ilya into a tight hug. He stiffened for half a second then exhaled and let himself melt into it. Her hands were warm on his back, the kind of motherly warmth he hadn't felt in years.

“These songs,” she said as she stepped back, her palms lingering on his shoulders, “were very tender and personal. I could tell how much of yourself you put into it. Thank you for loving my son the way you do.”

Ilya felt his throat tighten, eyes prickling. He swallowed hard. “Shane is... very easy to love.”

Yuna smiled at that, touched his cheek gently and turned back toward the cabinets.

“Also I can’t believe you succeeded in making him listen to music.”

Ilya laughed warmly, “Maybe biggest accomplishment is making him listen to music. He thought Cardi B was a man.”

Yuna nearly dropped the glasses she was fetching as she burst into laughter. “Oh God, yes. That tracks. Well... that’s the funny part. He’s got a beautiful singing voice.”

Ilya froze, “...What?”

She nodded as if this were common knowledge. “He gets it from David. Shane used to get the solos at the school Christmas choirs all the time. Never made a big deal out of it.”

Ilya slowly placed his palms on the kitchen counter, “He never told me this.”

“Probably didn’t think it was important.”

Ilya straightened, eyes narrowing, *how dares his husband have hidden sides he does not know about ?*

Yuna snorted at whatever expression was on Ilya’s face right now. “Oh, sweetie. I’m sure he just didn’t think it was something important about him.”

David and Shane were sitting on the sofa discussing which wine to open when Ilya walked in with purpose, expression deeply wounded. Shane immediately reached for him.

“Hey. Everything okay?”

“No,” Ilya said calmly. “Sing.”

Shane blinked. “What?”

“Sing. Your mother said you have beautiful voice. I would like to hear it. Right now.”

Shane’s entire face flushed a violent red. “Oh my god.”

His dad, being absolutely no help, nodded proudly. “He really does. Very clear tone. Good control.”

“Dad,” Shane groaned into his hands.

Ilya crossed his arms, unimpressed. “I am waiting.”

Before Shane could protest, his phone buzzed loudly with a video call from Hayden.

“Hayden is calling,” Shane announced, grateful for the distraction.

Hayden appeared onscreen, hair messy, wearing a Voyageurs hoodie, looking appropriately exhausted for someone with four kids during the winter holidays.

“DUDE. Are you alive? That article wrecked me. I had a whole emotional journey before eating. What the hell.”

Then he added, with an offended tone, “Also some dude named Brad was shitting on you saying you’re not ‘romantic’ compared to Ilya or some shit and THE Brad from the fan mail chimed in, but don’t worry, I told them both to fuck off.”

“You told them WHAT?” Shane yelped at the same time a tiny voice said in the background, “Mom, daddy said bad words!”

Hayden glared off-screen. “Ruby, you’re supposed to be cleaning your room! Go!”

Then, back to Shane, totally unfazed, “Yeah, so don’t worry. I got your back.”

“Yeah, but I’m the only one who gets him *on* his back, Pike,” Ilya drawled as he leaned into frame beside Shane.

Shane covered his face. *How was this his life.*

Hayden groaned. “Fuck off, Rozanov. Anyway everyone knows you’re obsessed with Shane now with your stupid love playlist.”

“I am surprised you read the article,” Ilya shot back. “Did not know you can read.”

Hayden deadpanned. “I’m going to let that go because I actually have something important to ask.”

Shane frowned. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, wait.” Hayden stood up, moving through his kitchen until he reached a table with his laptop. He opened YouTube, to Shane’s confusion, and pulled up the latest Centaurs video from the Rideau Canal.

He fast-forwarded, froze on Luca Haas smiling at the camera.

“Here,” Hayden said, zooming in dramatically. “Is Haas looking at Isaak after taking about his “best friend” ? Look at his little fond smile. I need answers.”

Shane dropped his head against the back of the couch. “Are you serious right now?”

“What? We banned TV for the holidays. The kids were watching too much. I need entertainment from somewhere.”

Ilya snatched the phone from Shane. “Let me see.”

He studied the frame for a moment. “Hmm. Yes. He is looking at behind the camera, and Isaak was filming. You have good eye, Pike.”

“Yes! Jackie always said I am perceptive for a guy.”

“You are not perceptive,” Ilya scoffed.

Hayden’s mouth opened in outrage. “Hey! I figured out you two were together before anyone else. Who else can say that?”

Ilya paused. “...Yes. True.”

“See?” Shane said. “You have more in common than you think. I - ”. He stopped himself when both Ilya and Hayden directed identical looks of disgust at him.

“Do you know Shane can sing?” Ilya asked suddenly.

Hayden frowned. “Um, yes? Why? First time we made playoffs, JJ and I dragged him to karaoke. It was embarrassing. We sounded like dying raccoons and he sounded like an angel.”

Ilya gasped audibly and then turned a betrayed look toward his husband. “You sing for Pike?”

“It was karaoke, Ilya.”

“But you never sing for me.”

Hayden laughed. “Okay, I see where this is going. I’ll leave you two,” he said, disconnecting the call.

Shane turned to his husband, who was still looking at him with what could only be described as wounded puppy eyes. He sighed softly, then leaned in, touching their foreheads together and cupping Ilya’s cheek.

“I’m sorry I never told you I had a singing voice,” he murmured. “It just never came up. It’s not something I think about a lot.”

Ilya’s eyes softened, “You will sing for me now?” he asked, voice smaller and hopeful.

Shane groaned quietly into his shoulder.

“I’ll sing for you,” he whispered. “Just... not in front of my parents.”

Ilya smiled, “Good,” he murmured in Shane’s hair, “Is private moment. For me only.”

Ilya woke to pale winter light. He reached across the mattress automatically, expecting warmth, expecting Shane’s slow morning breathing against his shoulder but the sheets beside him were already cool.

He frowned. It was seven on Christmas morning. *Where the hell was his husband ?*

He found Shane in the kitchen, sitting at the table in a sweatshirt, mug forgotten, glasses sliding down his nose, brow furrowed in that way it got when he was learning Russian. The Rolling Stone article glowed harshly on his tablet in the otherwise soft kitchen light.

“Moya lyubov,” Ilya said, voice still gravelly with sleep. “Is Christmas morning. You are reading this again?”

Shane startled, looking up and smiling sheepishly, “Couldn’t sleep,” he admitted. “It... got in my head.”

Ilya padded closer, dropped his hands onto Shane’s shoulders, and leaned down to nuzzle their cheeks together, warm skin against warm skin. “Why?”

Shane swallowed, eyes flicking down to the tablet again. “It’s just ...it’s like she knew everything.” His voice cracked, surprising even himself. “From a playlist, Ilya. She knew you felt unlovable. She knew you were scared you’d break me. She knew you thought you had nothing to offer.” His breath shook. “How does a stranger get to know that? Those are our feelings. They’re not for her or anyone else.”

Ilya pulled out the chair beside him and sat close so their knees brushed. He rested a steadying hand on Shane’s thigh. “I know,” he said softly. “It felt... strange. Like she reads my mind.”

“Exactly.” Shane’s fist clenched on the table. “And it’s not fair. It’s ours.”

“Yes.” Ilya exhaled slowly, “But, Shane... your mom told me yesterday that with greatness comes great responsibilities.”

Shane frowned, bemused. “My mom quoted Spider-Man to you?”

Ilya nodded solemnly. “Yes. Do not think she knew it was Spider-Man.” He reached over, pried open Shane’s fist gently, and laced their fingers together. “But she is right. We are... a story people watch. And this woman, she did not write to steal from us. She related to us maybe.” His voice softened. “She saw what we almost were. What she was. She tries to tell people not to be as scared as she was. To not waste time.”

Shane went quiet, thumb brushing Ilya’s knuckles. “She said we were brave,” he whispered. “I didn’t feel brave. I felt scared almost every day.”

Ilya shifted closer until their shoulders were pressed tight. “Maybe being brave is being scared but doing it anyway.”

That finally drew a genuine smile out of Shane, tired and fond. He leaned his forehead against Ilya’s temple. “You’re like a poet this morning. Maybe you should also write for Rolling Stone.”

Ilya kissed his forehead. “Yes. Maybe I write poem next and make Harris post it.”

Shane laughed, turning fully to kiss him. When he pulled back, he cupped Ilya’s face gently. “It’s true you’re very romantic.” He hesitated. “Do you think I’m... not romantic?”

Ilya stared at him, openly baffled. “Is this about that stupid comment? Shane, you are the sweetest person I know.” He lifted Shane’s hand and pressed a kiss to the inside of his wrist. “You donated to Alzheimer’s foundation when my father died. You name our foundation after my mother. You learned Russian for me.” His voice dropped to something tender and raw. “I don’t need big gestures. I know how much you care every day, yes?”

Shane’s eyes shone a little. He nodded. “Okay.”

“I do have one complaint,” Ilya added.

Shane raised a brow. “What is it?”

“You sing for Hayden Pike in disgusting karaoke bar, but not for your husband.”

Shane huffed a laugh, tension finally breaking. He stood, tugging Ilya’s hand. “Come on.”

He led him to the living room and Ilya stopped dead in the doorway. The room was dim, washed in soft morning light but dozens of little electric candles flickered everywhere: the floor, the table, the windowsill. Just like the night Shane proposed.

“What’s this?” Ilya murmured, his voice suddenly small.

“You wanted me to sing,” Shane said, cheeks pink. “So shut up and come here.”

He stepped close, hands settling at Ilya’s waist. “Slow dance with me.”

Ilya obeyed immediately, arms sliding around Shane’s back, bodies fitting together with the ease of years. Shane leaned his forehead against Ilya’s collarbone. For a moment, they just swayed lightly and just breathed, holding each other.

And then Shane began to sing, no music on, just his voice, low, sweet and only meant for Ilya.

“You told me you won’t live too long...”

Ilya’s eyes stung. He tightened his grip. “Shane,” he whispered.

Shane continued, lips almost brushing Ilya’s skin.

“And I wish I could say something to change. How you feel about the way your life is going...”

His hands slid up to cradle Ilya’s face, wiping tears with gentle thumbs.

“And tell me why you’d wanna go through it alone...”

He rested their foreheads together, breathing the next line against Ilya’s lips:

“Won’t you live for me... or could I live for you?”

A broken noise escaped Ilya as he buried his face in Shane’s neck.

Shane held him through it, whisper-singing the following lines: *“There’s nothing I won’t carry. So you don’t have to...”*

He kissed Ilya’s temple, soft and steady.

“That,” Ilya managed, voice completely wrecked, “is dirty trick, Hollander.”

Shane smiled into his hair. “You asked.”

“I did,” Ilya said, pulling back just enough to cup Shane’s cheeks. His eyes were glassy but glowing. “I love you. People will talk, say they know us, but they will never have this. Us. Yes?”

“Yes,” Shane whispered, and Ilya kissed him, slow, deep, grateful.

@RollingStone: “What Love Asks of Us: A Breakdown of the Rozanov–Hollander Playlist” Dive into the carefully curated playlist of Ottawa Centaurs captain, Ilya Rozanov, for his husband and teammate, Shane Hollander. Analyzed by our senior writer, N.Raham, this playlist “reads not simply as a recounting of a relationship, but as a record of [bravery]. The tracks move from secrecy to recognition, from fracture to healing, and ultimately toward a kind of domestic tenderness everyone yearns for. [...] [It is a reminder that] love is not merely an emotion but an act. It requires movement. It requires risk. It requires, above all else, courage.”

↳ **@shanehollanderhockeyplayer** : My husband, **@IlyaRozanov81**, and I are deeply touched by this thoughtful article. Our relationship generates a lot of discourse, but if people take anything from it, I hope it’s that. That love, real love, is a risk worth taking, over and over again. ❤️🌈 Merry Christmas to everyone !

Chapter 11: Interlude #5 : Luca and Isaak

Chapter Notes

Guys, I have more than 800 comments in my inbox, 😞 I am reading all of them and will try to answer during the Christmas break as I will finally have more free time ! It has been a hard month for me (explaining why I wanted my last chapter to be devastating lol) but your comments really motivated me ❤️ ! Also, I see you've been asking for a link for the playlist and a lovely reader (@GrumpyPunk) created it, so enjoy : https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7LW82Nu11A4gB18Kn7wym4?si=m2XnUunBQQ2SJOhrJfPNjg&pi=-aVd7T4uT_md_

Music is essential for me when I write, for each Luca and Isaak chapters, I actually needed to find songs that fit their storyline for this chapter before writing anything so if any of you are interested, here is my playlist so far for them ! : https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0VyQQSp00lJcN2AA2b9m5K?si=OxeRasssQfSfdsDo_3CtFw&pi=2Zh7iYvpTeeVE Again, thanks for all the love ! I can't wait to take some time to reply to all of you this coming week ❤️❤️❤️❤️ !

PS - I know that the opening scene of this chapter is not really realistic but idc haha

The Centaurs were playing at home, and the Voyageurs were up 2–1.

Luca was doing his best not to side-eye Ilya on the bench beside him, even though the tension radiating off him made it difficult to focus on anything else. Ilya always played Montreal like it was a personal affair, which, Luca guessed, it very much was. Shane, on the other hand, seemed unbothered, which was suspicious in its own way. Luca sighed. He hoped those two wouldn't do anything to break the internet tonight, it always meant more post-game work for the media team, and Isaak was staying over at Luca's later. Luca's idea. The plan was to spend the whole next day together, and he felt giddy about it, for lack of a better word.

When the whistle blew for a stoppage in play, Luca hopped over the boards and skated a few lazy circles, mostly to get away from Ilya's brooding aura. As he drifted toward center ice, his gaze flicked up toward the media booth out of habit, trying to see if he could spot Isaak through the glass. He wondered what the #CentaursInLines sketch would be tonight. Probably Roz, since he was the only one who'd scored so far.

He was startled out of his thoughts when someone slid up beside him.

"So," Hayden Pike said easily, skating alongside him like they'd done this a hundred times before, "how's life, kid?"

Luca frowned and looked around, half-expecting someone else to be there - someone Pike actually knew well enough to ask that question. As far as Luca could remember, their interactions had been limited to polite nods exchanged at Shane and Ilya's wedding.

"Uh," Luca said, thrown. "Good?" He hesitated, then added, because his mother had raised him right, "You?"

"Same old," Pike replied, nodding thoughtfully. "So, you seeing anyone?"

Luca frowned harder. For a brief, uncharitable second, his brain wondered if Pike was hitting on him, before immediately discarding the idea. Pike was married. Pike had kids. Pike had *many* kids. Ilya joked about this a lot.

"No," Luca said simply.

Pike hummed, then leaned in a bit closer, lowering his voice like he was about to share a trade secret.

"That guy who does the sketches after your home games," he said. "He's cool, right?"

This time, Luca actually jerked back in confusion. "Isaak?" he said slowly, incredulity clear in his tone.

"Yeah," Pike said, smiling. "Him."

Luca stared at him for a beat, then sighed internally as the realization finally clicked into place. Of course this was happening. Shane and Ilya couldn't mind their own business for more than five minutes. None of the Centaurs could, in fact. This was Luca's life now. NHL veterans were gossiping about him. Maybe married life was boring - but Luca was pretty sure that if he ever married Isaak, life would be anything but.

Before he could respond or ask Pike exactly how much he thought he knew, Shane appeared out of nowhere and grabbed Pike by the front of his jersey with practiced ease.

"Alright," Shane said pleasantly, already tugging him away. "That's enough of that. Sorry about him."

"What?" Pike protested, as Shane dragged him sideways. "I'm just making conversation."

"Somewhere else," Shane said, not slowing down.

Pike twisted slightly in Shane's grip and gave Luca a thumbs-up over his shoulder. "Good chat, kid!"

Luca finished the rest of the game replaying the interaction in his head, debating whether he should warn Isaak about the possibility of being accosted by Hayden Pike and his intrusive questions.

They lost the game, and the atmosphere afterward was tense but not bleak. It wasn't a terrible loss, and Montreal was still a strong team. Everyone knew to steer clear of Ilya though.

Shane found him while Luca was untying his skates.

"Hey," Shane said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Sorry about that."

Luca glanced up. "You told him, didn't you?"

Shane winced. "I may have... mentioned a few things to Ilya. And Hayden was there, and he got invested." Then, after a beat, "They're on a TV ban at home."

"He asked if I was seeing anyone," Luca said.

Shane flushed instantly. "Oh my god."

"And then he asked about Isaak."

Shane closed his eyes. "I'm really sorry."

Before Luca could tell him it was fine, funny even, Ilya appeared behind Shane, having clearly caught the tail end of the conversation.

"Well?" Ilya asked, eyebrows waggling. "Are you? Seeing anyone?"

Shane groaned audibly.

Luca didn't even get the chance to answer before a ripple of laughter moved through the room.

"Guys," Wyatt called, holding up his phone. "You need to see this. Oh my god."

They crowded around just as today's #CentaursInLines sketch loaded on screen. It wasn't Ilya scoring. It was Ilya sitting in the penalty box, arms crossed, expression deeply offended, lips pulled into a pout Isaak had definitely exaggerated. For half a second, the room was silent.

Then Ilya scoffed loudly. "At least I still look good," he said, but he couldn't stop himself from smiling down at his husband, who was laughing so hard he had to sit.

Luca smiled to himself, warmth settling in his chest. He couldn't wait to tell Isaak that he'd somehow managed to make the entire team laugh after a loss.

"Well, you can't blame me," Isaak laughed, buckling his seatbelt. "He was looking so emo the whole game."

Luca snorted as he pulled out of the arena parking lot. "Ilya always looks like that when we play them. You should've seen the way he glared at anyone who dared say the Voyageurs

tribute video was kind of nice after the match in Montreal.”

Isaak leaned back against the seat, grinning. “I can imagine. I saw the viral clip of his pissed-off face while still holding Shane’s hand.”

Luca laughed, remembering all the memes Wyatt had sent in the group chat.

“So,” Isaak said, turning slightly so he could look at Luca’s profile, “I’m excited to see an NHL-salary flat in Ottawa.”

Luca shot him a look. “You’re going to be disappointed. My flat is not fancy.”

“Luc,” Isaak said, unimpressed, “you’re twenty-two years old and you have a fifty-meter square, two-bedroom flat with a view. This is NHL money.”

Luca laughed, a little sheepish. “I mean. I still don’t have a TV.”

“You don’t have a TV?”

“Nope.”

“Luca.”

“I just... never got around to it,” he explained, shrugging. “I’m usually either at the rink, training, or asleep. And when I want to watch something, I just use my laptop.”

“What about hockey games?”

“I watch them at Bood’s place usually.”

Isaak shook his head fondly. “Incredible. Truly.”

Luca’s place was, as expected- spacious, modern, clean in that slightly impersonal way that suggested he didn’t spend much time there. Comic books were scattered across the coffee table, along with pencils and a sketchpad. On the wooden console where a TV should have been, sat a few framed pictures. Isaak recognized Luca’s family immediately.

He stopped short when he noticed one of himself.

It was a photo of the two of them at the rink in Isaak’s hometown, both grinning with flushed cheeks. Luca had his arms wrapped around Isaak, mostly to keep him upright. They couldn’t have been more than twelve.

“Hey,” Luca said softly, coming up behind him and wrapping his arms around his shoulders. “I said your name like twice.”

Isaak tried not to melt into Luca’s warmth, but it was impossible. Ever since the hug in Isaak’s office, after they’d talked about his father, Luca had become more and more affectionate. It felt easy to him. Natural. And he couldn’t tell if it meant anything at all or if Luca simply wasn’t affected by proximity the way Isaak was. Like this was just friendliness,

uncomplicated and uncharged, while Isaak stood there trying not to read into every touch. He wished, not for the first time, that Luca would stop being so casually touchy. Or worse, that he wouldn't.

"Sorry," Isaak said, stepping forward and gently putting some distance between them, ignoring the brief flicker of confusion on Luca's face. "I was just surprised by this picture. We look so young."

"Yeah," Luca said easily. "But of course I have a picture of you in my place, Izy. You were such a big part of my life."

Well, you had no problem turning me into a memory, Isaak thought unfairly.

"And I love that one," Luca went on, smiling, "because I remember I had to hold you up. For once, it was me helping you and not the other way around."

Isaak frowned slightly, something tightening in his chest. He didn't answer right away, and Luca's smile wavered.

"Hey," he said carefully. "Did I say something wrong?"

Isaak shook his head. "No. I'm just... tired." He hesitated, then added, "Would you mind if I took a shower before bed?"

"Oh. yeah, of course," Luca said quickly. He pointed down the hall. "Bathroom's there. Do you want me to put the kettle on or...?"

He sounded unsure again. Fuck, he really needed to stop putting that expression on Luca's face.

He tried to smile, "Actually. Do you want to drink warm milk and chocolate chip cookies ? Like the kids we are?"

Luca's face lit up immediately. "Hell yes."

They ended up on the couch with two mugs and cookies, knees angled toward each other, steam curling into the air. Isaak cradled his mug between his palms, shoulders slightly hunched. He was only wearing a thin long-sleeve T-shirt and joggers, clearly not dressed for how cold Luca kept his place.

"You're cold," Luca said.

"I'm fine," Isaak replied, predictably.

Luca stood without arguing. He went to his bedroom and came back with a thick blanket and one of his bigger sweaters, a soft dark blue one - his favorite.

"Here."

Isaak hesitated, just for a second, then took both. "Thanks."

He laughed as he unfolded the sweater before pulling it on.
"Snoopy in a penalty box. Seriously?"

Luca smiled sheepishly. "It's from Emma. She thought it was funny. She says I always looked like that on the rare occasions I got penalty time."

Isaak gave him a small smile and adjusted the sweater on himself.

Watching him in his clothes did something deeply unfair to Luca's nervous system. The sweater hung off Isaak's shoulders, sleeves too long, collar slipping just enough to expose a strip of smooth skin at his throat. Luca had to look away under the pretence of sitting back down.

Get a grip, he told himself.

They settled again, closer now, the blanket draped over their legs. Luca could feel Isaak's warmth where their knees brushed, and restraining himself from pulling him closer - from drawing Isaak fully into him, making him lie down against his chest so Luca could hold him and breathe him in - felt almost physically painful. He tried to slow his breathing to cool down the heat building up and stirring south - god, he could not believe he was getting worked up just from seeing Isaak wearing his freaking sweater.

Ever since that night, the way Isaak had cried against him, Luca had been aware of this constant, low-level need to touch him. A hand on his arm. His back. His waist. It had felt like that when they were sixteen and it was even more maddening now. He wanted to touch Isaak all the time, and most of the time it was not even sexual, touching him just felt grounding and peaceful. Right now, though, he wanted to crawl over him, grab his face and kiss him hard, again and again, until all he could think about was Luca's name, scent and touch.

But he didn't because Isaak still had his guard up, and Luca was terrified of pushing too hard and scaring him away.

Luca was scared himself. This was new to him. All of it. He didn't look at strangers and feel sparks. He made out with girls during high school, mostly to fit in, but he never really felt anything. Attraction has never been easy. Even connection came slowly to him, if it came at all.

And then there was Isaak. He had always been different.

They talked quietly, about nothing important. Christmas. Luca told him about spending it at the Boodrams', and showed him sweet pictures of Milo. Isaak talked about Christmas Eve with his mum's side of the family, then watching *Serendipity* on Christmas morning alone with his mum. Luca wanted to ask more - what else he'd done, who else he'd seen during those days they hadn't been together - but Isaak kept things light, always steering away from anything too vulnerable and retreating into banter.

After a while, Luca shifted. “Do you want to watch something? My place is warmer in the bedroom.”

Isaak smiled faintly. “Sure.”

Luca grabbed his laptop and led the way. The bedroom was small but comfortable, the bed only half-made. He set the laptop at the foot of the bed.

“New Girl?” Luca asked.

Isaak chuckled, “Obviously.”

They leaned back against the headboard, shoulders brushing. Luca was hyperaware of every point of contact, every small adjustment Isaak made. As the second episode played, Isaak slowly sank into the mattress, curling slightly onto his side, his head tipping toward Luca’s shoulder.

Luca stayed very, very still.

When Isaak’s head finally came to rest against him, he felt it everywhere.

“You want to go to sleep?” Luca asked quietly.

“Mhm,” Isaak murmured. “I should probably go to the guest room.”

Luca swallowed and tried to keep his voice light.

“Or you could stay,” he said. “We’ve slept in the same bed before.”

Isaak turned his head up, studying him, “We’re not kids anymore.”

Luca met his gaze. “Yeah. But we’re still us, right?”

For a charged, suspended second, he wondered if he’d overstepped. His eyes flickered down to Isaak’s soft, pink lips and he was almost certain Isaak looked down at his too. The thought of closing that distance, of finally kissing him, flashed through Luca’s mind so vividly it stole his breath.

Then Isaak pulled back, exhaling sharply.

“Right,” he said. “Okay.”

He took off his glasses and set them on the nightstand.

They lay back down, a careful distance between them. Luca stared at the ceiling, heart hammering, then forced himself to move. He slid closer and wrapped an arm around Isaak’s waist, gentle enough that he could pull away if he wanted to.

“I’m really happy you’re here,” Luca said quietly, the words slipping out before he could stop himself. “In my life again.”

Isaak tensed for a brief moment, then relaxed into the hold, his back pressing into Luca's chest.

"Me too."

They laid there, breathing in sync, Luca's hand resting at Isaak's side, careful not to move.

For now, that was enough.

The Centaurs were flying back from Toronto after the last game of the year. The plane was quiet, most of the team already asleep with hoods pulled over their heads or watching movies. Luca could hear Shane and Ilya somewhere behind him, talking softly in Russian, which still surprised him sometimes.

Luca sat alone by the window, phone in his hand, thumb hovering over the screen. He'd sent a text to Isaak about an hour ago and still hadn't gotten a reply.

*Hey, when do you think we could do lunch with your mum? I'd really love to see her.
Also, what are you doing for New Year's?*

He knew it was dumb to feel ignored. Isaak was probably working, and an hour wasn't that long. Still, the familiar unease crept in anyway. It felt like there would always be some kind of barrier between them now, something Luca didn't quite know how to push past. He wanted Isaak to trust him again fully, and he had no idea how to show him he wasn't going to disappear. Technically, it was not even possible - they worked at the same place.

Bood dropped into the seat beside him, shoulder bumping his lightly.

"You're texting Izy, kid?"

Luca shot him a look. "Don't call him that."

Bood raised an eyebrow, clearly entertained. "Why not?"

Before Luca could answer, Wyatt leaned back over the seat in front of them, forearms braced on the headrest. "You literally call him that."

"That's different," Luca said, already annoyed.

Wyatt grinned. "How?"

Luca opened his mouth, then closed it again. He didn't have a good answer that wouldn't make this worse, so he glared at them instead. "Just... stop."

Bood chuckled. "Okay, okay."

Luca looked back down at his phone, hoping Isaak would reply already so he could stop thinking about it. The screen lit up.

Relief spiked then fizzled when he saw it was just Harris.

Harris: Hey, quick thing. I asked families for childhood photos for the end-of-year montage and your sister sent this. You cool with us using it?

Harris: Also... why does this kid look exactly like Isaak?? 🧐🧐🧐🧐🧐🧐🧐

There was a photo attached. Luca barely had time to register it before Bood leaned over, curiosity pulling him in.

“What’s that?” Bood squinted, then laughed. “Is that you as a kid?”

Wyatt twisted fully around in his seat, again. “No way.”

The photo showed Luca and Isaak, both around six, sitting at a kitchen table in pyjamas, enormous sundaes in front of them, ice cream all over their faces. Their heads were leaning against each other, both grinning like idiots.

Heat rushed up Luca’s neck.

Wyatt frowned. “Wait. This kid kinda looks like Isaak.”

“Yes,” Luca said, sharper than he meant to.

There was a split second of stunned silence.

“What?” Bood burst out - then immediately dropped his voice when he realized how quiet the plane was. “What do you mean *yes*? You knew Isaak as a kid?,” he whispered furiously.

Wyatt was already out of his seat, crouching next to them. “Let me see that.”

“I want to see too,” Troy whispered, appearing at Wyatt’s shoulder.

Luca groaned quietly and handed the phone over. There was no stopping this now.

“You two look like a cute teepee,” Wyatt said.

Luca rolled his eyes. “Please stop talking.”

Bood was still staring at the photo. “You grew up together?”

“Kinda.”

“How long?” Troy asked.

“Since we were five.”

“How did we not know this?” Wyatt demanded.

“Because it wasn’t your business,” Luca said flatly.

“I feed you at Christmas,” Bood said, affronted, “and this is how you repay me?”

Luca side-eyed him. "I'm telling Cassie you said that."

Bood waved him off. "Fine. But I still can't believe you didn't tell us."

"I told Shane."

Wyatt gasped dramatically. "Wow."

"Why the secrecy, though?" Troy asked, quieter now.

Luca hesitated, then sighed. "It's complicated. He used to live next door to my aunt in the UK. I spent every Christmas break there. Then my aunt moved back to Switzerland, and I was an asshole who stopped replying to his texts."

There was a pause. Then Wyatt's face fell into exaggerated disbelief.

"No way," he said. "Our little Lulu. Ghosting his childhood best friend."

Luca groaned. "I know."

Bood shook his head slowly. "Okay, but you're fixing it now."

Luca nodded. "Yeah. Well, I want to. We're both in Ottawa. I'm trying."

"So invite him to the BBQ tomorrow," Bood said immediately.

Luca stared at him. "I can do that?"

Bood frowned. "Why wouldn't you?"

"It's... a team thing."

"So?" Bood shrugged. "Everyone's welcome. And everyone bring their partners."

"He is not my partner."

Bood rolled his eyes, "Just invite him okay."

Before Luca could respond, Ilya and Shane suddenly appeared behind them, clearly having been eavesdropping. Luca was not even surprised anymore.

"So," Shane began, smiling gently at him, "you two are reconnecting, now."

Luca nodded. "Yeah. We've been spending time together."

"How much time?" Bood asked.

Luca felt his ears heat. "A lot."

Wyatt grinned. "Define 'a lot.'"

“We spent all day together yesterday.”

There were raised eyebrows, quiet *ohhhs* under people’s breath.

“What did you do all day ?” Ilya teased, wiggling his eyebrows.

“Uh,” Luca started, “nothing special, we went for a run, had brunch, watched a movie and just chilled at my place.”

Ilya frowned, “Are you sure you two are twenty-two ?”

Shane gave his husband a look, “Not everyone needs to be driving fast cars and going out to clubs, Ilya.”

Troy snorted, “Yeah Roz, let the kids be.”

Luca was going to say that it was still plenty of fun when his phone buzzed again. He looked down immediately.

Isaak: Maybe in January. She’s really busy with work right now.

Isaak: She’s actually working a shift on New Year’s Eve. Some friends from uni invited me to a party, so I’ll probably go there.

Luca’s stomach tightened. *Friends from uni.* He never heard about any friends from uni. He typed back before he could overthink it.

You hate parties. Come to the team BBQ with me? It ends just after midnight. We have a 2pm game on the 1st.

Three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again. Luca held his breath.

Isaak: Okay.

Luca’s head snapped up.

“He said yes.”

The reaction was immediate, the guys all grinned and Bood clapped him on the shoulders.

“Yes, answer him !”

“What do I reply?” Luca asked, suddenly unsure.

Troy shrugged. “Maybe just an emoji?”

Without thinking, Luca sent a red heart.

The guys burst out laughing.

“Our Lulu is so sweet !”

Luca groaned, "I never approved of this new nickname !"

Bood's house was already loud when they arrived - voices, laughter, and music playing low in the background. Shoes were piled haphazardly by the entrance, someone had clearly given up trying to organize them.

"Welcome, welcome!" Bood boomed from somewhere inside. "Food's out back, drinks on the counter."

Luca stepped inside with Isaak just behind him. The living room was already full with teammates sprawled on couches and the floor, partners leaning into each other. Dykstra's kids were building ... *something*, out of couch cushions, supervised loosely by Troy, who looked equal parts amused and alarmed. Milo was sitting on the rug, fully captivated by Ilya, who had taken it upon himself to demonstrate increasingly elaborate animal noises using plastic toys. Shane hovered nearby, arms crossed, smiling fondly as he watched.

Isaak paused just inside the door, taking it all in. He looked a bit overwhelmed. Luca smiled and tugged him gently by the hand.

"C'mon," Luca said quietly. "You already know all of them."

Isaak stuck his tongue out playfully but let himself be pulled further inside.

Out on the patio, the air smelled like smoke and spice. The Ottawa River stretched dark and wide beyond the yard, lights from the opposite bank blinking faintly.

Bood flipped something on the grill while Harris leaned against the railing with a drink.

"So," Harris said casually, eyes flicking between Luca and Isaak, "I feel like we're allowed to ask questions now."

Luca groaned. "No."

Isaak smiled, "Depends what the questions are."

Shane and Ilya joined them then, Shane holding a ginger ale, Ilya immediately slipping an arm around his waist.

"What was Luca like as a kid?" Shane asked, smiling sweetly at Isaak.

Ilya snorted. "What do you mean *was*? He's still a kid."

Luca rolled his eyes.

Isaak laughed. "I don't think he's changed much, honestly. He was already very intense about hockey..." He glanced at Luca, then added, fondly, "and a sweetheart."

Luca felt his cheeks heat up. It didn't help that his teammates immediately cooed at him without shame.

"And," Isaak added, eyes flicking back to Luca, "he was a huge fan of Shane and Ilya growing up."

Luca stared at him. "Traitor."

Ilya laughed loudly. "This is not news, Haas. I already knew about your little crush."

Luca scoffed. "Shut up, it was not a crush. I wasn't even a Boston fan."

Ilya mock-gasped. "You were Voyageurs fan?"

"He wasn't," Isaak said. "Luca was always an Ottawa fan, right?"

Luca smiled at him. "Right." He shrugged toward the others. "No one in my family was really into hockey, but Isaak's parents were huge Centaurs fans. So I guess that's why I was too."

"Aww," Harris said immediately. "And now you're both Ottawa Centaurs. That's actually very sweet."

Conversation drifted more easily after that, and Luca was relieved to see Isaak slowly relax and he tried not to feel too much about how he stuck close to him all night.

Eventually, as midnight approached, Luca tugged him gently toward the far edge of the yard.

"So," Isaak said, leaning against the fence as fireworks began to go off in the distance. "A little crush on Rozanov, huh? I guess all those posters in your childhood bedroom make more sense now."

Luca huffed a soft laugh, shaking his head. "There was *one* poster. And I definitely looked up to Ilya. But no crush. It's... complicated." He hesitated, then said it anyway. "I think I have a hard time feeling attracted to people unless I have a real connection with them first. I only learned the word recently, but - demisexual. That's me."

Isaak's teasing expression softened into something thoughtful. "Oh." He nodded. "That makes sense."

He looked down at his hands, then back up, quieter. "I'm gay. I think I always knew. I was much more interested in Hugh Grant than any of the women in those rom-coms."

Luca smiled, hopeful but careful. "Are you... seeing anyone?"

"No. You?"

"No," Luca said. Then, after a beat, "I did feel very connected to someone once. Deeply. I don't think I'll ever feel that way about anyone else."

“Like what?” Isaak asked, voice barely carrying over the noise behind them.

“Seen,” Luca said. “Safe.”

Isaak’s breath caught. He knew. They both knew.

“And do you...” Isaak asked quietly. “Still feel that way?”

“Yes,” Luca replied immediately, not looking away. “But I’m still working on making that person feel safe with me. Right now.”

Fireworks bloomed above the river, bright and sudden before Isaak could react. He slid his arms around Luca’s waist and Luca’s body responded before his mind could catch up, arms coming up around Isaak’s shoulders, pulling him in just enough to feel the warmth of him, the solid reassurance of his presence.

Isaak fit there too easily. Like he always had.

Luca was suddenly, acutely aware of everything: the line of Isaak’s spine beneath his hands, the way his breath hitched when Luca tightened his hold just slightly, the faint scent of smoke clinging to his coat. Want hummed through him.

“Happy New Year,” Luca said softly, his voice close to Isaak’s ear.

Isaak tilted his head up, meeting his eyes. “Happy New Year.”

For a moment, neither of them moved. Luca felt it, the pull to lean in, to close the last inch, to do something irreversible. His hands flexed at Isaak’s shoulders, grounding himself, and he smiled softly.

Isaak’s eyes widened, just briefly, before he smiled back. Then he leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to Luca’s cheek - lingering, his lips warm even through the cold.

It wasn’t nearly enough. And somehow, it was also too much.

The tension followed them all the way back to Luca’s apartment. It sat between them in the car, heavy and unaddressed, lingering even after the door closed behind them.

Luca set his keys down more slowly than usual. Isaak stayed near the door for a moment, coat still on, like he wasn’t sure whether to take the next step inside or not. That hesitation hit Luca harder than anything else tonight. He was suddenly exhausted by it, by the careful distance, the half-steps forward and back, the pretending not to feel what was obvious every time Isaak looked at him for just a second too long.

“Can I ask you something?” Luca said.

Isaak looked up. “Yeah.”

“What would it take,” Luca asked carefully, “for you to trust me again?”

Isaak came in fully this time, removing his scarf and coat, movements deliberate. “What do you mean?” he asked, just as carefully.

Luca dragged a hand through his hair, frustration finally breaking through. “I mean - can we stop pretending everything’s fine when it’s not? Can we just... be honest? Please. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

Isaak exhaled sharply and paced once before stopping near the counter, arms crossed tight over his chest.

“I’m thinking that I’m scared.”

Luca swallowed, his chest tightening.

“Because clearly,” Isaak continued, voice gaining an edge, “whatever this is - whatever we’ve always had - it mattered more to me than it did to you. And that sucks.”

“That’s not - ” Luca started.

“And it hurt,” Isaak said, cutting him off, louder now. “It hurt when you just ghosted me. It hurt so much. It made me feel like I was never as important to you as you were to me.”

The words landed hard. Luca felt heat rush to his face, his chest tightening until it almost hurt to breathe. How could Isaak say that? How could he not see how much space he has always occupied in Luca’s life ?

“I was going through a lot too,” Luca said, his voice breaking despite himself. “We were so young. We still are. People make mistakes, Isaak. Even when they care. Especially when they care.”

Isaak shook his head, incredulous. “Did you even think of me?”

“I thought about you constantly,” Luca shot back. “Every single day. You know that.”

“Then why didn’t you reach out?” Isaak demanded. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I don’t know!” Luca shouted. “Because I didn’t think you needed me.” The words tumbled out now, messy and raw. “You were always so strong. You kept telling me to be myself, to embrace the parts of me I hated. You believed I could be this great man, and I felt - ” He let out a harsh laugh. “I felt undeserving of you.”

Isaak’s jaw clenched, his hands curling into fists at his sides.

“I hated myself,” Luca continued, his voice cracking as tears finally spilled over. “And with you it was worse, because the worst thing I could imagine was letting you down. Ruining everything. And the most unfair part is -” His breath hitched. “Even when you were not here, you never left me. You were always there. In my head. In everything.”

Isaak snapped. "It was not up to you to decide if you deserved me!" he shouted. "I deserved you. I needed you."

"And now you have me!" Luca cried. "I'm right here!"

He stepped closer without thinking, the need to close the space between them overwhelming. He wanted to touch Isaak, to grab onto him, to make him feel how real this was, how present he was. Instead, he stopped himself just short.

"Every year of my life, since I can remember, ties back to you," Luca went on, voice shaking. "Every memory. Every place. For the years we didn't talk, you were still there. You gave me so many good things, and they followed me everywhere. Every new person, every experience, I measured them against you."

Isaak scoffed, a bitter laugh tearing out of him. "Fuck you."

Luca flinched, the words cutting him deep.

"I didn't ask to be some ghost in your life," Isaak snapped. "I didn't ask to be a god you worshipped from a distance. If I hadn't joined the Centaurs, we wouldn't even be here. Did you ever think of just reaching out?"

"I tried," Luca said, tears streaming freely now. "You were impossible to track down."

Isaak's eyes were sharp and glassy, the hurt in them raw and unfamiliar. "Maybe you didn't try hard enough. Or maybe you just didn't care enough. Or maybe you were too scared to let anyone see how much you cared. You were always like that."

"Stop," Luca whispered. "You're being mean."

He swallowed, forcing himself to keep going. "You can't live in the past, Izy. I love you. I always have. I am in love with you, I think. I just need you to let me show you. I can spend the rest of my life apologizing, but I can't force you to believe me."

Isaak froze. He actually looked shocked.

"You love me?" he asked quietly.

Luca laughed through tears, wiping at his face with the heel of his hand. "Of course I love you. It's fucking obvious."

Isaak turned away, breathing hard, running a hand through his hair. "I need time," he said after a moment. "I need to think. I think I'll go home tonight."

Luca nodded, his voice small and wrecked. "Okay."

Isaak turned back at the sound of it. The devastation on Luca's face hit him instantly. He crossed the space between them and cupped Luca's face in both hands, thumbs brushing gently under his eyes as their foreheads touched.

“I’m being mean, yeah ?” Isaak murmured. “I know. I just need a breather. To think clearly.”

Luca let out a weak, watery laugh. “I’d rather you stay and be mean.”

Isaak smiled despite himself. His eyes flicked down to Luca’s lips, then back up. He swallowed and leaned in just slightly, close enough that Luca could feel his breath. Luca’s body answered without hesitation, his head tilting forward.

But then Isaak pulled back, only an inch. He brushed their noses together, and Luca followed when he retreated, reluctant to let the space grow. Isaak smiled sadly.

“I should go,” he said softly. “We’ll talk. Tomorrow. Okay?”

Luca nodded, heart hammering, tears drying on his cheeks. “Okay.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Isaak said.

And then he left.

Chapter 12: Interlude #6 : Luca and Isaak

Chapter Notes

Hello!

First, I want to say how sorry I am for making you wait so long for an update. I was busy writing academic papers instead of my silly little fanfic and, well, life also got in the way.

Writing has always been how I process my feelings, almost like a diary, so it's hard for me to write about love, reconciliation, and intimacy when I'm not in a great place mentally myself. I have two more chapters planned for Ilya and Shane, and maybe one more for Isaak and Luca, but I want to be very honest with you: I don't know when I'll have the time or the mental space to finish them. It could be next week, or it could be next month.

That said, I sincerely appreciate every single comment I've received, especially on the playlist chapter. It's such an honor to know that something I wrote resonates so deeply with you. This story comes from a very raw and honest place in me, so knowing it has touched others means more than I can properly put into words. Thank you. ❤️

I'll leave you here with Isaak and Luca, because it felt like what people wanted most (and who am I to argue with that, haha). I hope you enjoy it.

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

Isaak had always been good at being on his own.

When he was five, he spent recess lining up rocks along the edge of the playground. Not because he was sad or didn't want friends, he just liked the way the rocks felt in his palm, the quiet satisfaction of sorting them by color and shape. Smooth ones in one line, jagged ones in another. Sometimes he imagined them as warrior tribes, allies and enemies facing off, elaborate stories unfolding in his head. He could lose an entire break to it.

Once, a teacher crouched beside him and said gently, "Why don't you go play with the others?"

Isaak had tried. He hovered near a group of kids kicking a ball back and forth, stood there long enough for someone to glance at him, frown, and kick the ball away again. No one told him to leave. No one invited him in, either. Sometimes, years later, he thought back to that moment and wondered if maybe he'd been the one expected to say something, to ask. After a while, he went back to the rocks, feeling vaguely relieved.

He didn't think of it as loneliness then. It was just... quieter. Easier. For a long time, that was Isaak's default state: existing in his own contained world, not really aware that people expected something else from him.

Meeting Luca that winter changed that.

Isaak didn't remember everything about those early years, of course. But there were pictures and old videotapes, and more than that, there was the memory of companionship for the first time. Luca hadn't asked him why he was alone. He'd just plopped down beside him in the snow, in Isaak's backyard, cheeks flushed red, all loud energy and restless motion, and started talking as if Isaak had already agreed to be part of the conversation. It was startling. And wonderful. Someone reaching for him without hesitation, without asking him to be anything first.

As Isaak got older, he made friends at school. Mostly people he liked sitting next to in class, people he talked to at lunch. But more often than not, he still ended up in the library during breaks, reading or sketching.

He was thirteen when a classmate first asked for his number to invite him to a party. Isaak had been genuinely surprised. It hadn't occurred to him that school friends were meant to exist outside of school. He'd been perfectly content with compartments: school people, home people, holiday people. It sounded depressing when put like that. People were often concerned when Isaak explained it. But he hadn't felt like a sad child. It wasn't that he didn't like people. It was just that being around them took an effort he didn't always know how to give.

The bullying came later.

It wasn't one big thing. It started with small comments about how shy he was, how weird, how he was always alone in the library, how seriously he took everything. Once, someone trashed his sketchpad during recess, laughing and calling him a freak for drawing people.

The worst part was how quickly he had learned to adjust.

He paid attention. Watched how other people talked, how they laughed, and learned to copy it. He stopped talking about the things he loved unless someone asked directly. He learned how to be agreeable, helpful, inoffensive. Teachers praised him for being mature. Other kids tolerated him better.

Sarcasm and self-deprecating jokes became his shield. By the time he got to high school, he wasn't mocked anymore, he was almost admired. Being a little odd had become interesting. Isaak leaned into it, made jokes to make people like him, but always kept them at arm's length.

He remembered being absolutely certain that if someone really got to know him, they wouldn't like him. Or they'd realize how strange he was and leave. He didn't fully understand why he felt that way. He had loving, supportive parents. He had Luca, who knew him like no one else did and loved him in that uncomplicated, steady way - like family.

Maybe it was exhaustion. Maybe it was because pretending had become second nature. Because that was what he'd been doing for years. He felt different, not because he was gay, or because of his skin color, but because of the way his mind worked. And as far back as he could remember, he'd known how to hide it.

He never pretended with Luca.

Being with him had always felt free. Even when Isaak felt like he was playing a version of himself everywhere else, with Luca he could exist without explanation. Luca was reliable. Peaceful.

He remembered vividly the winter they were sixteen, the last one they spent together. They were sprawled in Isaak's living room when Isaak forgot he wasn't alone and started singing, loudly and terribly off-key, *I'll Make a Man Out of You* from *Mulan*. He stopped abruptly when he noticed Luca watching him, cheeks burning.

"You're so weird," Luca said, smiling.

The way he said it, fond, amused, made it feel like a compliment. In that moment, Luca felt like the most solid thing in Isaak's life. Isaak remembered thinking, *this must be what love feels like*.

But Luca had only ever known him in small doses. A few weeks a year. Maybe that was why Luca hadn't seen the whole picture. Maybe that was why Isaak had been easier to love back then.

So when, after a year of consistent texting, of trying to keep their long-distance friendship alive, Luca stopped replying, it didn't just hurt. It confirmed something Isaak had always feared.

He told himself it was normal. People drifted apart. Long-distance friendships faded. Luca was busy. He was trying to get drafted. But late at night, when Isaak was honest with himself, the thought was simpler and much worse: maybe he had never been someone worth the effort.

So Isaak went back to practicing not needing anyone. Then his dad got sick.

At first, Isaak was grateful for the distractions. Appointments. Schedules. Things to manage. He learned to watch his mother closely, to sense when she was about to fall apart and step in just in time. He cooked. He cleaned. He kept everything moving.

When they told him how bad it was, he had never felt more alone. He wanted to reach out to Luca then. More than ever. He knew Luca would have offered comfort, would have been there without question. But Isaak didn't know how to ask for what he needed.

When his father died, his mother's grief filled the house so completely that Isaak didn't know where his own was supposed to go. He learned how love could hollow people out. After that, opening himself up felt even more dangerous.

Moving to Ottawa helped. Being closer to his mother's family meant he wasn't her only emotional anchor anymore and it gave him space to breathe. University was supposed to be a fresh start. In some ways, it was. He hooked up here and there, but nothing serious. As a kid, he'd marvelled at the idea of romance, of finding your person. The older he got, the more it felt like love was something that happened to other people.

When Luca was drafted to Ottawa, Isaak let himself believe, briefly, stupidly, that fate might finally take over. That maybe he'd run into Luca on the street, or in a café, somewhere ordinary enough that reconnecting wouldn't feel terrifying. Like the universe had decided something for them.

Nothing happened. Eventually, Isaak stopped waiting.

Taking the job with the Centaurs hadn't been some grand romantic gesture. It was practical. A good opportunity. And if it also offered the chance to see Luca again on his own terms, to get closure, maybe, then so be it.

But the past few weeks had undone him in small, relentless ways. The way Luca looked at him, for one. Like Isaak still mattered. Like he had always mattered. Like if he could, he'd spend all day close to Isaak.

Being wanted like that felt foreign. Overwhelming. Especially by Luca. Isaak's instinct was still to pull back, to create distance before something could be taken away again. Because once, Luca had made all of his worst fears come true. And now he was back, insisting that wasn't what had happened at all. That he hadn't disappeared because Isaak wasn't enough, but because Isaak had been too much. Too good. Too kind. Too real. That Luca had convinced himself Isaak deserved better than him.

He couldn't make that logic land. The reality was still that Luca hadn't fought. He hadn't tried hard enough. But Isaak was starting to realize, uncomfortably, that maybe he hadn't either.

Why hadn't he reached out? Why hadn't he demanded answers? Why hadn't he called Luca out when the messages stopped? Was it because, somewhere deep down, he'd believed the same thing, that he wasn't someone worth fighting for?

Last night, though, the want had been there. The pull. The way Luca had looked at him, voice breaking, hands shaking, saying that loving Isaak was the most obvious thing in the world.

And God, Isaak wanted him back. He wanted the weight of Luca beside him. The heat of his body when he stood too close. The way Luca's hands were warm and careful, like he was always asking permission without saying it. Isaak caught himself thinking about him at the worst times, while editing, while brushing his teeth, while lying awake at night replaying conversations. It was maddening, wanting someone this much while still being afraid of them.

He was afraid of giving it a chance because he knew what love could do. It could take everything and leave you standing in the aftermath, trying to remember how to exist without it. And yet, all those years ago, Luca had felt reliable and peaceful, and everything in Isaak was begging him to see that he still was.

He hadn't slept much. Pale winter light crept through the windows when he finally gave up and shuffled into the kitchen. He was halfway through scrambling eggs when he heard soft footsteps behind him.

“Happy New Year, darling,” his mother said, her voice warm and still a little sleepy from her night shift.

Isaak turned, surprised. “You’re up early. I thought you’d sleep in.”

She smiled faintly, tying the belt of her robe. “I heard you moving around. Wanted to see you before you left for work.” She leaned against the counter, studying him. “I thought you stayed over at Luca’s last night. Weren’t you at the team’s party?”

“I was. I just... came home after.” He focused on the eggs, pushing them around the pan.

“What’s going on?” she asked gently. “How are things? How is Luca?”

Isaak turned off the burner and faced her. He knew he looked wrecked, dark circles under his eyes, shoulders tight.

“Isaak,” she said quietly.

A lump formed in his throat. He looked down at the floor.

“Did something happen?” she asked.

He tried to shrug it off, but the movement was stiff. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s clearly something, darling.” She stepped closer, resting a hand on his arm. “Talk to me.”

His vision blurred. “He told me he loves me,” Isaak whispered. “Last night. And I left.”

Her eyes widened, not at the confession, but at the way he said it. Isaak wasn’t a crier. He was her steady, contained boy. Seeing him tremble like this was unsettling.

“Oh, sweetheart.” She pulled him into a hug, and he folded into her, burying his face in her shoulder.

“I’m so scared, Mum,” he mumbled. “I’m scared of getting it wrong. Of letting him in and then... it happens again. Or it’s worse. Or I’m not enough. Or I’m too much.”

She held him tightly, rubbing his back. “It’s okay to be scared,” she murmured.

He pulled back, swiping at his eyes. “He said he stopped talking to me because he didn’t feel... deserving.” A shaky laugh escaped him. “After all that silence.”

She guided him to the small kitchen table and sat across from him, folding her hands around his. “We can’t erase the past,” she said. “But his reason, however flawed, it comes from affection. He idolized you. That’s a heavy thing for a young boy to carry. Especially one who was struggling with himself.”

“He should have talked to me,” Isaak said. The anger was there, but dulled now, worn thin by exhaustion.

“He should have,” she agreed. “And you could have chased him. But you were both children, in your own ways.” She squeezed his hands. “The question isn’t really about the past. It’s about now. Do you believe the man he is now is sincere?”

Isaak thought of Luca’s tear-streaked face. The raw honesty in his voice. The way his hands trembled when he cupped Isaak’s face. The patient, relentless way he’d been trying for weeks.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “I do.”

“And do you love him?”

The question settled into the quiet kitchen. Isaak closed his eyes. He saw Luca at six, grinning with an ice cream mustache. At sixteen, calling him weird like it was something precious. At twenty-two, looking at him like he was the only thing in the room worth seeing.

“It’s always been him,” Isaak breathed.

His mother smiled, sad and understanding. “Then you have a choice, my brave boy.”

“What if I ruin it?” he asked.

“What if you don’t?” she said.

He sat with that. Finally, he nodded, something fragile but steady settling in his chest. He stood and kissed his mother’s forehead.

“Thank you.”

“Go,” she said, eyes shining. “And for God’s sake, talk to him. Really talk. No running away this time.”

Isaak’s hands were still unsteady as he pulled into the nearly empty staff lot at the arena. He killed the engine and sat for a moment, the silence of the car amplifying the noise in his head.

With a sigh, he fished the half-crushed packet of cigarettes from his glove compartment. He slipped out of the car, leaning against the cold door, and lit one.

“Those things will kill you, you know.”

The voice, laced with a familiar Russian-accented amusement, came from his left. Ilya Rozanov was leaning against a sleek black SUV a few spaces over, raising a brow at Isaak.

Isaak took another deliberate drag, exhaling slowly. “Coming from you, that’s rich.”

Ilya’s lips twitched into a smirk. He pushed off the SUV and ambled closer. His gaze, sharp and assessing, swept over Isaak. “You look like shit.”

“Thanks,” Isaak said flatly, tapping ash onto the asphalt.

Ilya took a sip of his coffee. “You and our Luca looked... cosy last night. Very sweet.”

Isaak felt a flush creep up his neck. “Is there a point to this conversation ?”

“The point is,” Ilya continued, his tone shifting to something deceptively casual, “today, he looks like a sad puppy again. Very tragic.”

Irritation flared in Isaak’s chest. “I don’t think our personal life is team business.”

“This is not team business, I care about Luca, we all do,” Ilya said a bit harshly, but his expression wasn’t unkind. “You had a fight after the party ?”

Isaak looked away, “Something like that.”

“He loves you,” Ilya stated.

Isaak’s head snapped back toward him. “Did he - ”

“No. He did not tell me.” Ilya’s gaze was unnervingly direct. “The way he looks at you. Is not a secret. The only one who seems not to know is you.”

The blunt observation hit its mark. Isaak dropped the cigarette, grinding it out with his heel. “It’s complicated.”

Ilya made a dismissive sound. “Is always complicated. And then you choose to make it simple, or you choose to stay complicated and be miserable.”

He studied Isaak for a long time. When it became clear the younger man was not going to offer any response, Ilya sighed and went on.

“I know a little about... complicated. About hurting the one you love and being hurt by them too.” He paused, and for a second, the ghost of a much younger, more haunted Ilya flickered in his eyes. “But I think communication is solution, yes ? Shane says forgiving is not just giving your partner a chance, it is also about giving yourself one. A chance to have the love and life you want, to work for it.” Ilya’s voice was quiet now, stripped of all performance.

“He was a kid,” Ilya said, pushing off the car. “You both were. And you still are.” Ilya clapped him once, lightly, on the shoulder. “Think about it. And,” he added, “Stop smoking. Makes you look like terrible cliché”

He winked then, strode off toward the players’ entrance, leaving Isaak alone in the cold parking lot.

The game was a blur.

Luca played okay - not great, not terrible but his mind was elsewhere. Every time he glided to a stop at the bench, his eyes would instinctively scan the press box, searching for a familiar dark head.

He showered in record time, barely feeling the hot water. The usual post-win locker room chatter washed over him like static - all he could think about was the devastated look on Isaak's face when he'd left his apartment.

I need time.

Luca had given him a night. It had felt like a century.

Towel around his waist, he dressed hastily, shoving his gear into his bag with uncharacteristic roughness. Wyatt gave him a long, searching look but didn't say anything. He shouldered his bag and practically fled the locker room, taking the back corridors toward the media offices, his heart hammering a frantic rhythm against his sternum. He had to see him. He had to know if *time* was just a kinder way of saying *never again*.

The office door was ajar. Luca's hope surged, then immediately crashed. Isaak's desk was neat, computer dark, chair pushed in. The only person there was Kayla from social media, packing her own bag.

"Hey, Luca," she said brightly. "Nice win."

"Thanks," he said, forcing it. "Is ... uh. Is Isaak still around?"

"Oh, no," she said. "He left already. Kind of rushed out, actually. Looked distracted."

"Right." Luca nodded, even though his chest was starting to ache. "Okay. Thanks."

He turned away before she could say anything else.

The walk back through the arena felt longer than it should have. By the time he reached the parking garage, the hollow in his chest had spread, heavy and cold. Maybe he'd imagined it. The almost-kisses. The touches.

The drive home was blank. He navigated on muscle memory, the city lights smearing into streaks of meaningless color. He unlocked his apartment door, hands clumsy with exhaustion. He stepped inside, let his bag fall to the floor, and stood there in the dark, staring at nothing.

"What the fuck, Luca!"

He spun around. Isaak stood at the end of the hallway, bent slightly forward, hands on his knees, breathing hard. His cheeks were flushed, hair wind-tousled, eyes bright and furious.

"I was waiting for you," Isaak said, straightening and stalking toward him. "By the locker room tunnel. For like forty minutes. Then I go to check your stall and Bood tells me you left half an hour ago."

Luca stared at him, his brain failing to catch up. "You - you were waiting?"

“Yes,” Isaak said sharply. “I told you we were going to talk today.”

Something in Luca’s chest cracked open.

“You were there,” he said, barely audible. His vision blurred, traitorously.

Isaak’s angry expression softened, melting into something exasperated and unbearably tender.

“Yeah,” Isaak said, his own voice dropping to a murmur. “I was there.” He reached out, his hand hovering for a second before he gently cupped Luca’s jaw, his thumb brushing away a tear that escaped.

Luca leaned into it, breath catching, the question sitting unspoken between them.

Isaak answered.

He closed the distance and kissed him.

It wasn’t slow or tentative. It was certain. Warm. A kiss that said *yes, finally*, like something clicking into place after years of misalignment. Luca grabbed the front of Isaak’s coat, pulling him closer, pouring everything he hadn’t known where to put into the kiss. Isaak kissed him back just as hard, just as sure.

When they broke apart, they stayed close, foreheads pressed together, breathing unevenly in the quiet hallway.

“I love you too,” Isaak whispered, lips brushing Luca’s. “You must know that. It’s always been you.”

Luca laughed softly, the sound caught somewhere between relief and joy. He kissed Isaak again, sweet and slow this time. “Come inside,” he murmured, not letting go.

Isaak smiled, open, unguarded and it made Luca’s chest ache.

“Yeah,” he said. “Okay.”

They barely made it past the threshold.

Luca nudged the door closed with his foot, hands still on Isaak’s waist, like he was afraid that if he let go even for a second, Isaak might disappear again. Isaak laughed softly into his mouth at the clumsiness of it, the sound breathless and warm, and kissed him again.

Coats were shrugged off haphazardly. Luca’s landed somewhere near the wall, Isaak’s slipped from his shoulders and pooled at his feet. Luca kicked it aside without looking. His hands were everywhere but gentle, one at Isaak’s lower back, the other sliding up to his shoulder, thumb brushing along his collarbone. Isaak’s fingers curled into the front of Luca’s sweater, tugging him closer. He could feel Luca’s heart racing through the fabric.

They bumped into the edge of the couch, and Luca let himself fall back onto it, pulling Isaak down with him. Isaak followed easily, knees bracketing Luca's thighs, hands braced on either side of his shoulders. For a second, they just looked at each other, faces flushed, lips swollen, breathing uneven.

"You okay?" Luca asked quietly.

Isaak nodded, then leaned down and kissed him again. Deeper. Luca's hands slid up Isaak's back, slow and reverent, fingers splaying under the hem of his shirt, skin warm beneath his palms, making Isaak shiver. The kiss started to tip, less careful, more urgent. Luca tilted his head, mouth opening, a whimper slipping out of him before he could stop it. Isaak's hands started to roam all over Luca's body. He was muscled and lean, hard everywhere. God, he wanted this. Wanted Luca under him, wanted the closeness, the familiarity. He dropped his hands to the curve of his ass and squeezed, coaxing a rough surprised sound from Luca, who exhaled Isaak's name and pulled him down impossibly closer.

Isaak broke the kiss with effort, forehead dropping to Luca's shoulder as he breathed out shakily.

"Wait," he murmured, not pulling away completely.

"I'm not good at this," Isaak said quietly, after a short moment.

Luca shifted just enough to give him space without breaking contact. His hand came up to Isaak's cheek, cupping it fully now, grounding. "At what?"

"At... people," Isaak said. "At relationships. The talking part."

He pulled back just enough to look at Luca. Luca didn't interrupt but his thumb kept tracing slow, steady lines along Isaak's cheekbone.

"My brain doesn't work right for this stuff," Isaak went on, words careful but urgent. "I miss cues. I take things literally. I get stuck on details. I need things to be clear. Even if they're bad." His jaw tightened. "Ambiguity kills me."

Luca nodded slowly, his hand sliding from Isaak's cheek to the back of his neck, fingers spreading there. "You want me to be clear."

"I need you to be clear, specific" Isaak corrected, voice strained. He leaned into the touch without thinking. "If you're pissed off, you have to say 'I'm pissed off.' If you need space, you have to say 'I need space.' You can't just go quiet and expect me to understand. I won't."

His breathing had picked up again. Luca could feel it through the thin space between them.

"I'll think it's my fault," Isaak said, quieter now, "and I'll shut down. Or I'll try to fix it, and I'll probably make it worse."

Luca absorbed that in silence. His hand slid down to Isaak's wrist, thumb pressing gently over his pulse, like he was anchoring both of them.

“Okay,” Luca said. “I can do that. I won’t always get it right, but I can do that.”

Isaak nodded once. His shoulders eased a fraction.

“I’m not great with words either,” Luca added. “Not when it’s... like this.”

“I know,” Isaak said immediately. “But you have to try. Because I can’t guess.” A small, shaky breath. “I’m a terrible guesser.”

That pulled a faint smile out of Luca. He shifted slightly, letting Isaak settle more fully against him, one arm snug around his waist now.

“Specific,” Luca said, testing the word. “So... a specific thing right now is that I’m exhausted. My head’s been a mess all day.”

Isaak nodded.

“Okay.”

“And another specific thing,” Luca said, quieter, “is that I’m scared if I say the wrong thing, you’ll leave again.”

Isaak’s chest tightened. He lifted his head, hands coming up to cradle Luca’s face this time, thumbs brushing gently along his jaw.

“I won’t.”

Luca searched his face. “You can’t promise that.”

“I can,” Isaak said, firm despite the tremor underneath. “Because the rule is: if I need to leave, I have to say ‘I need to leave.’ Not just... go.” He swallowed. “For both of us.”

“That’s a good rule.”

“Yeah.”

They laid there for a moment, quiet but close. Luca’s hands stayed at Isaak’s waist, thumbs moving slowly, almost absentmindedly. Isaak traced the curve of Luca’s shoulder, his head resting on Luca’s chest, grounding himself in the feel of him.

“So,” Luca said finally, tentative but hopeful. “Are we... doing this? Even though we’re apparently both bad at it?”

A weak laugh slipped out of Isaak before he could stop it. He leaned forward, resting his forehead against Luca’s.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “I think we have to.” A pause. “I think we’re stuck.”

Luca smiled then, small, earnest and relieved all at once. “Okay.”

He leaned in and Isaak met him in the middle, kissing his sweetly.

“Another specific thing...” Luca said against his mouth. “I would really, *really* love it if you stayed here tonight. We don’t have to do anything!” he rushed to add.

Isaak laughed, nudging their noses together, which made Luca smile even wider. “I’ll stay.”

“Great,” Luca said, grinning. “This specifically makes me very, very happy.”

Isaak rolled his eyes. “Okay, Luc. Let’s not overdo it.”

They were both laughing into the next kiss.

Chapter End Notes

I hope that those of you who have always felt different know that it will be okay. Live sincerely. Treat others with kindness and empathy. Take care of yourselves. And above all, remember that when you need it, art will always be here for you, stories, songs, poems, drawings. It’s us talking to one another, expressing ourselves, yours to interpret and make it your own, and you will always find refuge and understanding there. Please also read the beginning note if you did not ! 

Chapter 13: Fighter

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone, it's been a while haha. As usual, I was busy submitting abstracts for conferences and writing scientific papers. I swear I do not know how I got there. I also got my little heart broken so yeah ... rough couple of months.

This chapter is for people whose main language is achievement. Who shape themselves into something clear, measurable, and difficult to argue with just to protect themselves. The thing is the more you build your identity on what you can achieve, the more it becomes difficult to think you might be worthy in moments of failure, uncertainty, or simple ordinariness. And I just wanted to say that you are worthy. I know it is one thing to want unconditional love, and another entirely to trust that it exists. Even the love we have for ourselves feels conditional at times, after all. But really to dream and to hope is what makes life worth living 

The loss wasn't anything dramatic, but it was the third one this month.

The locker room is quiet when they come in. Not unusually so, yet there's something tighter underneath it. Like everyone is busy replaying their personal mistakes, blaming themselves. At least that's what Shane is doing, and he only assumes others are doing it too.

He wants to go in the shower and scrub the frustration clean off him. If he's totally honest with himself, no single mistake stands out, nothing obvious to point at, just a series of small decisions that don't quite work until that final buzzer sound, and everyone already knows they should have won, could have won.

You're lying to yourself, a tiny voice inside his head says. *You know the mistake that stood out*. The penalty in the second period. Ilya, jaw set, gloves off, screaming at the ref while the other team celebrated a power play. A goal that never should have happened. A game that slipped through their fingers because Ilya couldn't let some third-liner's comment go.

Shane sits at his stall and starts unwrapping the tape from his stick, slow and careful, keeping the motion even because it gives his hands something to do and his mind something to focus on instead of Ilya, whose presence he can feel beside him. His husband is still in half his gear, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, staring at the floor like he's replaying something over and over again.

They don't speak. They usually don't after losses like this. But today the silence felt heavier.

Ilya exhales sharply, then throws his glove onto the bench hard enough that a few heads lift without anyone fully turning.

"You heard him," Ilya says.

Shane sighs inwardly. He finishes peeling off the last strip of tape before answering, folding it neatly between his fingers, buying himself a second to breathe. "I heard him."

"And you said nothing."

Shane looks up at that. The room feels smaller suddenly. "I'm not doing this here."

"Of course not," Ilya replies, too quickly, something already building in his voice. "Not here. Not on the ice. Nowhere it matters."

"It matters when we win." Shane says it because it's the simplest way to explain it, the only way that makes sense in his head.

Ilya lets out a short, sharp laugh that doesn't sound like anything close to amusement. "You really believe that."

"I believe we don't take penalties because someone wants a reaction."

He knows as soon as he says it that it lands wrong. He can see it in the way Ilya's jaw tightens, in the way his eyes go sharp and hot.

"Say that again."

"You take it every time," Shane replies, keeping his voice level even as it carries in the quiet room. "You let them pull you into it, and then we're killing penalties instead of playing hockey."

A few people are listening now. Wyatt and Bood exchange a glance across the room, Dykstra and Haas have their backs turned but are standing way too still, their conversation having died mid-sentence. Even the guys in the showers seem to have turned the water off.

"You think I am the one losing us games," Ilya asks, voice defiant.

"That's not what I said."

"It's what you meant."

Shane's grip tightens on his stick. "I meant we need you on the ice. Not in the box."

"And I am not there?" Ilya takes a step closer. "I am not playing? Captain for this team every night?"

"That's not..." Shane exhales, forcing himself to stay on track, to not get pulled into the undertow of Ilya's anger. "I think you care more about what they say than the team."

The silence that follows is immediate. Someone drops a water bottle somewhere in the back of the room and it sounds like a gunshot.

Ilya watches him for a long moment, and when he speaks again his voice is lower, tighter, the accent heavier in a way it only gets when he's genuinely upset. "You don't hear it same way I do."

"I hear enough," Shane says, because he does. He hears every word. Every whisper. Every slur. He just chooses not to respond to it, because responding doesn't help.

"No," Ilya says, shaking his head. "You don't. Because you ignore it. You pretend it doesn't exist and for you, this is control, yes ? But it is not Shane, this is you hiding."

"And you think losing your head helps?" Shane shoots back before he can stop himself, his voice rising now despite his best efforts. "We lost because you couldn't let it go! Because you had to prove something to a guy who doesn't matter, and now we're down two points and everyone's looking at us like..." He stops. Breathes.

"Okay," Ilya says after a second, flat in a way that makes Shane's stomach drop. "Then we are not the same."

"That's not what I ..."

"It is." Ilya cuts him off, not loudly but firmly enough that it lands harder than shouting would. "You get to make everything simple. Numbers, stats, wins. If it doesn't show up there, it doesn't matter. But for me, Shane," His voice cracks, just slightly. "We are married off and on the ice. I am bisexual man on and off the ice."

Shane closes his eyes. The words hit somewhere soft, somewhere he's been trying to protect. "That's not fair," he whispers.

"No?" Ilya's mouth tightens, and now there's something else under the anger, something rawer. "You want to talk about fair? I fight for us out there. Every shift. Every game. I deal with what they say, what they call us, what they think of us. And you stand there and decide it is not important because it does not affect your precious game."

"I never said it didn't matter !"

"You act like it doesn't!" Ilya's voice rises, finally breaking out of that controlled quiet. "You act like I am being dramatic. Like I am looking for a fight. Like I want to be angry. But I am not angry for myself, Shane. I am angry for us ! And you just... you just stand there."

Shane feels his grip tighten on the stick in his hand, and tries to hold back the tears he feels coming. *How can he make Ilya understand?* "I'm trying to win, Ilya. Can we not do this now? Please?"

Ilya steps closer again, close enough now that Shane can feel the heat coming off him, can see the way his chest is heaving. "Maybe is easy for you."

Shane frowns, not following.

"You don't feel things the same way," Ilya continues, and now the words are coming too quickly, like he's not choosing them anymore, like they're being ripped out of him. "You don't

even know how. Everything is numbers for you, control, and you think that makes you a better player than me."

Shane doesn't move. He doesn't argue. He just goes very still in a way Ilya recognizes immediately. And regrets immediately.

The anger drains out of Ilya's face, replaced by something closer to horror. "Shane," he says, his voice dropping, rougher now. "I didn't..."

Shane sets his stick down with deliberate care, "I'm done with this."

He turns away, but Ilya reaches for him without thinking, catching his wrist before he can step back, his grip not tight but insistent. "Shane, wait."

Shane doesn't pull away, but he doesn't turn back either, and that is somehow worse. The whole room is watching now. No one is pretending otherwise.

"I said it wrong," Ilya says quickly, dropping his voice to barely a whisper, already stepping closer again. "I didn't mean that. You know I didn't mean that."

There's still no response. Ilya's chest tightens with something close to panic, because Shane not reacting is always worse than Shane getting angry. Always.

"Hey." Softer now. He tugs gently on Shane's hand until he can turn it, pressing Shane's palm flat against his chest, right over his heart. "Listen to me."

Shane stills at that, his hand remaining where Ilya put it even if the rest of him stays tense. He can feel it, the rapid, uneven beat under his palm. Ilya's heart is racing. Shane's probably is too.

"I didn't mean it," Ilya repeats, his voice lower now. "I was angry. I said something stupid. But I didn't mean that."

For a moment, Shane just stands there, his palm against Ilya's chest, feeling the proof that Ilya is as wrecked by this as he is.

"You don't get to say things like that," he says finally, his voice quiet but steady.

"I know." Ilya's voice breaks on the words, his eyes wet. "I know. I'm sorry, sweetheart. I love you."

In the dead silent room, someone, Luca, probably, lets out a breath he's been holding for the past three minutes.

"Later," Shane says. "We'll talk later."

Ilya nods. His hand is still wrapped around Shane's wrist.

"Later," he agrees.

The Ottawa Centaurs Side Group Chat : Luca's Uncles – 40 minutes later on the team bus

Wyatt: okay so

Wyatt: WHAT the fuck was that

Bood: i thought holzy was gonna cry fr

Troy: bro ROZ looked like he was gonna cry

Dykstra: they BOTH looked like they were gonna cry

Luca: ARE THEY OKAY???

Wyatt: Lulu your dads just had their first public fight

Luca: THEY'RE NOT MY DADS

Bood: you had the saddest face i ever seen 😭

Troy: i almost covered your ears like u were 5

Troy: also felt deeply uncomfortable to witness that

Dykstra: yeah

Bood: I'll have a talk with them

Luca: CAN WE FOCUS ??? ARE THEY OKAY

Wyatt: they'll be fine

Bood: they been doing this longer than we've known them

Troy: yeah they got like... veteran relationship experience

Luca: but they are sitting together and NOT TALKING

Luca: LIKE COMMUNICATE ???

Wyatt: look at you suddenly therapist

Bood: didnt u ghost someone for FIVE YEARS

Dykstra: growth 🌱

Luca: you guys are so fucking annoying

Holmber: update: they are speaking

Luca: WHAT ARE THEY SAYING

LaPointe: they are weird

Luca: ????

Holmber: ...i think they flirting

LaPointe: nah cause what is that voice Roz is using

LaPointe: i feel like i just heard something private

Dillon: captain just unlocked new personality

Harris: not sure what is happening but this sounds cute 😭

Harris : also stay strong guys, you'll get out of this bad stretch 💪

Luca: BUT DID THEY RESOLVE THE CONFLICT

Dykstra: are u child of divorce

Luca: I just don't like conflicts

Troy: avoidant attachment style confirmed

Harris : ugh Troy, no

Luca: what does that mean

Bood: means u run away from feelings

Dykstra : yeah, maybe you do it for FIVE YEARS

Luca: drop it srsly

Wyatt: we just hurt u lied to us Lulu

Holmber: update again

Holmber: Roz said he will kiss every freckle on Holzy face and apologize each time

Holmber: i wish i was joking

Harris: that is adorable stop

LaPointe: Holzy laughed

Wyatt : see Luca they'll be okay

...

Wyatt: okay but why is Luca not answering anymore

Bood: yeah he was spiraling two seconds ago 😭

Troy: Lulu??? you alive??? @Dillon what he's doing ?

Dillon: he's texting someone

Dillon: 🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄

Dillon: I tried to look, he literally GLARED at me

Dillon: like full murder eyes

Wyatt: LMAOOOOOOO

Dykstra: Isaak. it's Isaak. obviously

Troy: 100% Isaak

Wyatt: Luca blink twice if you are texting your situationship

Dillon: he's blushing btw

Bood: AWWWWWW

Troy: look at our boy growing up 😭

Harris: love wins ❤️

Luca and Isaak chat :

Isaak: you okay? I miss you ❤️ I hate road trips

Luca: Am okay, locker room was rough though. I miss you too ❤️

Isaak: how rough

Luca: Shane and Roz fought. properly. It was ugly

Luca: they'll be fine

Luca: it just

Luca: i don't know. it got to me more than it should have

Isaak: of course it did

Isaak: you love them

Luca: felt like watching my parents fight haha

Isaak: I wish I was by your side ❤️ but is okay Luc, they've been together a long time, they are bound to have some fights

Luca : yeah

Luca: only one more match and we are coming back

Luca : I hope ur not in charge of cleaning up Ilya's PR image, he keeps getting into those fights

Isaak: is okay, general public is on his side, we all know what some of these players are saying

Luca: yeah, it's sad and unfair

Isaak : okay try to think about happy things now ok, you can call me when ur at the hotel

Luca: i will thanks, at least Ilya and Shane seem to be flirting with each other now lol

Isaak: make up sex between them must be so hot

Luca: eww don't put these images in my mind

Isaak: they are not your dads for real luc

Luca: shut up

Luca: do you want me to fight with you when i come back

Luca: so we can have make up sex

Isaak : you ? Luca Haas ? Is going to pick a fight ?

Luca : shut up

Isaak : i'm teasing ya. I have other ways to make you passionate, no need for fights

Luca : what ways

Isaak : deeply wholesome embarrassing ways that will totally work for you

Luca : like what ?

Isaak: like i can't wait for you to be inside me because I want to be as close as possible to you

...

Isaak : Luc ?

Luca : yeah, that worked

Isaak: 😂

Luca: i hate you, i can literally see the team texting about my blushing

Luca : and I'm hard

Isaak: are u now

Isaak : how much time until you reach the hotel ?

Luca : like ten minutes, I'll call asap

Isaak : can't wait, love you

Luca : I love you too

Shane is lying on top of the covers, one arm behind his head, staring absently at the ceiling when Ilya comes out of the bathroom.

Ilya looks at him for a second. Then he crosses the room, pulls back the covers on his side, and gets in, settling against the headboard. He reaches over and tugs Shane in without asking, arm coming around his shoulders, pulling him into his side until Shane's head is against his chest. For a moment neither of them says anything.

"You are thinking again," Ilya says.

"Yeah."

"You want to say it, or I guess?"

Shane huffs quietly. "You'll guess wrong on purpose."

"Sometimes," Ilya admits. "Is more fun."

That gets a small smile out of Shane.

"It's not just the losses," he says.

"I know."

Shane tilts his head up slightly to look at him.

Ilya shrugs one shoulder. "You play like someone waiting for something bad to happen."

Shane looks back down. His hand has found the hem of Ilya's shirt, fingers working the fabric absently. "Montreal messed with my head more than I thought."

"I keep feeling like I have to prove I belong here," Shane continues, quieter. "Like if I don't, if we keep losing, or I have a bad game, or people start talking, it's going to happen again. And I'll be the problem again."

Ilya's arms tighten around him.

"You already belong," he says. "You don't have to earn it every game."

"That's not how it feels."

"I know." A pause. "But feeling is not always truth, moya lyubov."

Shane is quiet for a second.

"That's actually quite profound Ilya," he says, very quietly.

Ilya scoffs. "I can be profound. You should know how deep I can go."

Shane lets out a breath that's almost a laugh, slapping Ilya's chest playfully.

"When you said I care more about what they say than the team," Ilya says, carefully, like he's been waiting for the right moment, "it hurt me."

Shane closes his eyes. "Yeah. I figured."

"I don't," Ilya says. "I just... cannot put it away the way you do."

"I know." Shane exhales. "I'm not ignoring it either. I just..." He stops and exhales. "You know, growing up, people used to say I was a bit weird, too intense, too serious." He pauses. "And I just, I thought, it doesn't matter. Because I was good at hockey. That was enough. That was my proof." He's quiet for a second. "I think I'm still doing that. Like if I play well enough, nobody can say anything."

"Shane," Ilya says, after a moment. His voice has changed, gone softer and a little rougher at the same time. "How long have you been doing this?"

Shane shrugs against his chest.

Ilya absorbs this. His hand moves to caress Shane's hair and he kisses the top of his head.

"I love you," he starts. "Not because of the goals. Not because of the cups. I love how you laugh, your jokes, your face when you are angry, how you read boring books. I love how you take everything so seriously -"

"I don't - "

"I love that you are the most," Ilya continues, over him, "the most pure person. And how good and kind you are." His voice catches slightly. "You don't have to prove anything to me. You never did. I loved you when you said hello for the first time I think. I love you now. There are no conditions."

Shane doesn't say anything.

His face has dropped against Ilya's chest. His breathing is uneven.

"Sweetheart," Ilya says, softer.

"I don't know why I'm like this," Shane says, muffled.

"Hey." Ilya's arms come around him properly now, fully, both of them. "No. Stop. There is nothing wrong with you."

Shane exhales, shaky. One tear goes, then another, and Ilya holds him and doesn't say anything. They stay like that for a while.

Eventually Shane's breathing evens out.

"I shouldn't have said you care more about it than the team," he says, into Ilya's chest. "That wasn't fair."

"I shouldn't have said you don't feel things like normal," Ilya replies immediately. "That was worse."

"Yeah. That one sucked."

Ilya winces. "I know."

Shane shifts slightly, getting more comfortable, pulling the covers up over both of them without fully moving from where he's tucked against Ilya.

"The losses are getting to me," Shane says, after a moment.

"I can see."

"I don't like feeling like this."

"No," Ilya says. "Nobody does."

"We'll fix it."

"Yes," Ilya says simply. "We will. On the ice and," he nudges Shane lightly, "here."

Shane huffs quietly. "Very profound again."

"I told you," Ilya says. "Very deep."

"Stop."

"Like the ocean."

"Goodnight, Ilya."

"Goodnight, moya lyubov."

Shane closes his eyes.

Ilya doesn't let go.

The trigger :

Edmonton is the last stop of the trip, and the Centaurs are ready to go home.

It's 1-1 going into the third, which should feel manageable. It doesn't, quite, because Sergei Morozov, Edmonton's right wing, has been making it difficult to feel anything except irritated since the first period. Shane has played against him before. He knows the type. He's filed away comments from players like Morozov for years, the casual slurs, the murmured provocations designed to find what breaks, and kept playing, because responding is exactly what they want.

Tonight, though, Morozov is worse.

It starts small. A sneer after a whistle. A stick where it shouldn't be, low and mean, that the ref misses. By the second period it's been rattling everyone, Shane can feel it in the bench, in the way Troy's jaw is set, in the way Luca has been playing with slightly more edge than usual. Then, ten minutes into the third, Morozov gets Ilya along the boards after a stoppage.

Shane watches from across the ice. He can't hear what's said, Morozov has his back to him but he sees what happens to Ilya. The way his shoulders lock. The way his jaw tightens. The way something behind his eyes goes somewhere else for just a second before he pulls it back.

It's not anger that grips Shane. It's something colder. Because Ilya didn't look angry. He looked hurt. And Ilya doesn't hurt easily, not like that, not visibly.

Shane is already moving. He tells himself it's just to be close enough that Ilya can see him, he gets close enough to hear instead.

Morozov leans around the ref, still trying to separate them, and says it louder.

"Твои родители." Your parents. "Они были бы так стыдились тебя." They would be so ashamed of you.

"Может быть, хорошо, что они мертвы. Не должны смотреть на то, кем ты стал." Maybe it's good they're dead. They don't have to see what you've become.

Shane doesn't remember dropping his gloves. He doesn't even remember crossing the ice.

He just remembers his fist connecting with Morozov's jaw. Then his nose.. Going down with him because he wasn't done.

The officials drag him back. Two of them. Morozov is on the ice, lip split, nose bleeding, not trying to get up. A trainer is coming over the boards. The ref crouching beside him is saying something Shane can't hear over the noise of the arena.

He shakes the officials off long enough to get close again. His voice, when it comes out, doesn't sound like his own, lower, the Russian coming out with a fluency he's spent years carefully concealing.

"Слушай меня, тварь." Listen to me, you piece of shit. "Ты никогда больше не произнесёшь его имя. Никогда. Ты понял меня?" You will never speak his name again. Never. Do you understand me?

Morozov doesn't answer but his eyes are wide.

"Если ты снова скажешь хоть слово о нём," Shane says, quieter, "я вернусь. И в следующий раз я не остановлюсь." If you say another word about him, I will come back. And next time I will not stop.

"Shane." Ilya's voice.

"Шейн. Хватит. Омнусту." Shane. Enough. Let go.

Shane exhales. He steps back and lets the refs take him.

Then he is walking and the arena is still so loud, and his hand is throbbing, and it's going to be a long call with Player Safety tomorrow morning and none of that has fully landed yet because his body is still running on something that hasn't switched off.

The locker room is quiet when he gets there. Shane sits at his stall and doesn't bother changing. He just sits, elbows on his knees, and looks at his hands. His knuckles are split, he notices this with a kind of detached curiosity, turning his hand over slowly. He's not sure exactly when that happened.

The trainer comes in two minutes later, takes one look, and starts working without saying much. Shane appreciates that. He sits there and lets him work and tries to regain control of himself.

He thinks about Ilya's face. The way his shoulders had locked. He thinks about the Russian coming out of his own mouth and how it hadn't felt like a decision. He waits for the regret to arrive.

It doesn't.

The trainer finishes, tells him nothing's broken, wraps his knuckles with brisk efficiency and no commentary, and leaves him alone again.

He leans his head back against his stall and stares at the ceiling and listens to the muffled sounds of the third period through the walls and waits. Then the arena erupts.

Shane opens his eyes and looks at the ceiling and thinks: *of course he did*.

He reaches for his phone. Pulls up the game feed. Watches the replay of Ilya's goal, off a perfect setup from Luca, and watches Ilya point at the camera afterward.

Shane allows himself a smile and sets his phone face down on the bench. He sits with that for a while.

The team comes in loud with the win, then immediately quieter when they see him. Ilya is the last to come in. He crosses the room directly, still in full gear except for his helmet, sits down next to Shane, and reaches for his hand, the wrapped one. His thumb moves once across Shane's knuckles.

Around them the room resettles into its post-win rhythm. A little muted, a little careful - everyone finding their stalls, giving them space without making it obvious.

"You scored," Shane says.

"Yes," Ilya says. "Was a very good goal."

"I know. I watched."

"How is the hand?" Ilya asks.

"Fine. Nothing broken."

Ilya makes a sound that isn't quite agreement. His grip tightens slightly. "We talk later."

Shane nods. "Later."

Across the room, Bood catches Shane's eye and gives him one quiet nod. No fanfare.

Then Dillon, leaning back, "Holzy. You speak Russian now?"

"He started learning properly about four years ago," Ilya offers helpfully from beside Shane. "He is very quick."

Wyatt lets out a low whistle. "So you just ... pick up a second language. With a whole other alphabet. On the side."

"His pronunciation was very bad at first," Ilya continues, unbothered. "Now it is only a little bad."

"My pronunciation is fine," Shane says.

"Morozov understood you," Ilya concedes. "So. Fine enough."

"Exactly."

"You're welcome, my love."

A brief pause while the room processes that.

"Holzy's actually kind of scary when he wants to be," Boyle says.

"...yeah," Dykstra says slowly.

"Yeah," Troy agrees.

"A little bit," Luca says carefully.

"I always knew there was something under the surface," Wyatt says. "He's too calm all the time. It's always the quiet ones."

"It was always going to come out eventually," Bood agrees.

"I just didn't think it would come out in Russian," Dykstra says.

A weighted silence settles. The kind where everyone is deciding if laughing is allowed yet.

Then Holmber, completely serious: "I'd like to apologize to Rozanov for finishing his yogurt last month and putting the empty container back in the fridge."

Everyone turns to look at him.

"What," Dykstra says.

Holmber gestures at Shane. "Preemptive. I'm covering my bases."

Wyatt catches the spirit of it immediately. "Okay. I'd like to apologize for the time I told Roz he shows me too many pictures of Anya."

"I remember this," Ilya says, visibly offended.

"I'd like to apologize," Dykstra jumps in, "for using Roz's hair product that one time and then blaming Luca when he noticed."

Luca whips around. "That was YOU?"

Dykstra grins and ruffles his hair, entirely unrepentant.

"I'd like to apologize," Boyle says, "for being visibly surprised when Roz used the word 'perceptive' in a sentence."

Ilya sniffs. "I know English very well. I even read the New Yorker."

"I'd like to apologize," Holmber continues, apparently working from a prepared list, "for googling 'famous Russian people' before Roz's first team dinner and then just listing them at

him one by one."

"I'd like to apologize," Troy says, raising his hand, looking weirdly solemn, "for considering asking Roz for Shane's number last year."

That one lands differently. A beat of stunned silence, then several people making sounds at once.

"You wanted to WHAT," Ilya says, very loudly.

Troy winces. " Harris knows and I joked about it with Shane ! "

"So everyone knows but not me !"

"Because I knew you'd react like this !"

"This is BETRAYAL -"

"He's objectively very - " Troy starts.

"Do not finish that sentence," Ilya warns.

".. talented," Troy finishes, with exaggerated innocence.

Shane has gone pink. Ilya looks between them with a deeply wounded expression.

"I'd like to apologize," Young adds quickly, "for the time I asked if you wrestled bears as a kid."

"That was a fair question," LaPointe says.

"How was that a fair question," Luca asks.

"Russia," LaPointe says, as if this explains it.

"I'd like to apologize," Dillon cuts in, "for ogling Shane doing pull-ups shirtless in the gym that one time."

A pause.

Shane goes a shade redder. Ilya turns to look at Dillon with an expression that cycles through several things before settling somewhere between deeply unimpressed and reluctantly understanding.

"I'd like to apologize," LaPointe says from the back, very quietly, "for the time I asked Roz, completely seriously, if he'd ever met Putin."

"And what did I say," Ilya says.

"You said yes."

"And?"

LaPointe shifts. "And I said 'what's he like' and you stared at me for so long I left the room."

"I was deciding," Ilya says.

"I'd like to apologize," Chouinard says, "for nothing specific. Just generally. As a precaution."

"Wise," Wyatt says.

"Very smart," Bood agrees.

Ilya nods magnanimously. "Accepted. All of you. Accepted."

"And," Bood adds, very quickly, like ripping off a bandaid, "we collectively apologize for the side group chat that you two are not in."

Ilya goes very still. Shane frowns. "The what."

"It started with good intentions," Bood says immediately. "It was created to make sure everyone behaved at your wedding."

"Aww," Shane says, genuinely touched.

"Now it's mostly just us talking about you two," Bood finishes.

"BETRAYAL," Ilya says, with real feeling. "I am captain—"

"Sometimes Luca does something embarrassing and he only wants to tell the uncles, not the dads," Wyatt says.

Both Shane and Ilya gasp audibly and turn their hurt expressions toward Luca, who has gone red.

Luca stammers, "This is not true. Shane knows more than all of you combined." He glares around the room. "And Roz too, because they don't keep secrets. And Hayden Pike as well now, apparently."

Wyatt pouts. "Wow. Now I'm the one who's hurt."

Ilya is still shaking his head. "Still betrayal."

A beat of noise, overlapping protests, Dykstra trying to explain the group chat's origin story, Bood insisting it was wholesome originally.

"Okay," Luca says.

Something in his voice makes the room settle. He's still pink, but his chin is up. He looks around the room once and then says, "Isaak and I are together," he says. "Officially. I mean. Just so you know"

"FINALLY," Wyatt shouts, coming to clap Luca on the back.

"That's great Luca," Shane says sincerely.

"I knew before anyone else," Ilya announces, over all of them. "From the first day. The PR meeting. I said to Shane - "

"Yeah, yeah, we all clocked it Roz," Troy says.

"Yeah, they were not very discreet," Dykstra agrees.

""Okay," Luca says, ears fully red. "Can we - "

"When do we meet him properly," Ilya asks. "Not work. Properly."

"You literally know him !"

"Not as your boyfriend !"

"Okay let's leave the kid alone guys, we need to get out of here," Bood laughs. He turns to go to the shower, but glances at Shane one more time.

"We played for you tonight," he says quietly.

Wyatt nods once. "Yeah," he says. "We did."

Shane looks around at all of them.

"Thank you," he says.

Ilya's thumb moves across his knuckles one more time. Shane turns his hand over and holds on.

Back at the hotel, Ilya drops his bag by the door. Shane sits on the edge of his bed, elbows on his knees, looking at his wrapped hand like it belongs to someone else.

The adrenaline has been wearing off for a while now, leaving something slower and heavier in its place. Not regret exactly. Something adjacent to it that he hasn't fully named yet.

Ilya doesn't say anything immediately.

He gets a glass of water from the bathroom, sets it on the nightstand beside Shane without comment, then pulls the desk chair out and sits across from him. Close. Elbows on his knees, mirroring him without thinking.

Shane picks up the water and takes a sip. "Say it," he says.

Ilya's jaw works for a second. "I hate that you did that."

Shane looks up.

"I know what he said," Ilya continues, before Shane can speak. "I was there. I heard every word. And I - " He stops. Exhales through his nose. "I know I said I want you to fight for us. But not like that. I hated it, Shane."

"I've stood there for a lot," Shane says, keeping his voice even. "Things said to me, things said about us, things said about you. I've filed them away and kept playing because that's what works. That's what I do." He pauses. "But he talked about your parents. He said it was good they were dead."

The silence that follows is a different kind.

Ilya looks away. "I know what he said," he repeats, quieter.

"Then you know I didn't decide," Shane says. "I was just there. And then I was doing it. There was no moment in between."

"That's what scares me." Ilya's voice is rougher now, the control fraying at the edges. "You getting suspended. Your record. Everything you have worked for - "

"Two games," Shane says.

"That is not the point - "

"It kind of is," Shane says. "Two games. That's the cost. And I would pay it again."

Ilya's mouth tightens. He stands up, takes three steps toward the window, stops, turns back.

"I don't want you fighting like this for me," he says. "I never wanted that. You think I don't know what it costs you? What people will say? Shane Hollander loses control, Shane Hollander gets suspended, Shane Hollander - "

"Ilya."

" - can't handle it, his husband is a bad influence, they shouldn't be on the same - "

"Ilya." Shane's voice is firm but not hard. "Stop."

Ilya stops.

"I know what people will say," Shane says. "I've known what people will say about us since before we went public. Since before we were anything." He holds Ilya's gaze. "I stopped making decisions based on that a long time ago. You know that."

Ilya looks at him for a long moment.

"You scared me," he says finally. "The way you looked. I have never seen you look like that."

Shane holds that. "I scared myself a little," he admits.

"And you're still not sorry."

"No," Shane says. "I'm not."

Ilya makes a sound that isn't quite a laugh. He drags a hand through his hair and turns back to the window. Outside, the city is doing whatever cities do at midnight, entirely indifferent.

"I spent years trying to protect you from myself," Ilya says, to the window. "You know that. And then I gave up, because I wanted you too much. And now - " He stops. "Now that you are with me, I feel like I need to protect you from the whole world. Which is - " He exhales. "A lot."

"You can't," Shane says simply. "Any more than I could stand there tonight." He pauses. "You've been carrying things alone for a long time. So have I. That's what we did before. But we're not doing that anymore. That's what we decided."

Ilya turns back from the window. He looks at Shane for a moment.

"I still hate it," he says.

"I know."

"I don't want it to happen again."

"I know." Shane meets his eyes. "I can't promise it won't."

Ilya smiles faintly, reluctantly amused. "It won't," he echoes. "Now people will think, must not provoke Hollander. Very dangerous. Speaks Russian."

Shane huffs quietly. "Good."

Ilya crosses back to the bed and sits beside him, close, reaching for his hand the same way he did in the locker room. He turns it over once. His thumb moves across Shane's knuckles, slow and careful.

Shane lets himself lean forward until his forehead comes to rest against Ilya's temple.

"Your Russian was good," Ilya says, after a moment.

Shane closes his eyes. "Yeah?"

"Accent still needs work."

"You always say that."

"Because it is always true." A pause, quieter now. "He apologized after the game. On camera."

"I know."

Neither of them says anything for a moment.

"I love you," Shane says.

Ilya turns and kisses his temple, brief and warm. "I love you too, moya lyubov." He pulls back just enough to look at him. "Sleep. You have Player Safety call in the morning."

"I know."

"You will be very polite and reasonable."

"I know."

"You probably have a call with Yuna Hollander too."

Shane scoffs, "I know."

"You will not tell any of them you would do it again."

Shane says nothing.

"Shane."

"I'll be polite," Shane says.

Ilya looks at him for a long moment. Then he sighs, "Okay," he says. "Let's go to sleep."

Twitter :

@hollanov4life: WAIT. WAIT WAIT WAIT. SHANE HOLLANDER JUST PUNCHED A MAN AND THEN THREATENED HIM IN RUSSIAN AND I NEED EVERYONE TO STOP WHAT THEY ARE DOING RIGHT NOW

↳ **@MrsRozanov:** I have watched this clip fourteen times. The way he just drops everything and goes. Zero hesitation. Zero calculation. Just goes.

↳ **@puckbunnyOG:** "good boy Shane Hollander" nation we are going through something tonight

↳ **@thirsty4holzy:** are we still calling him good boy or has he graduated

↳ **@puckbunnyOG:** he's a good boy who will DESTROY YOU if you touch his husband and I think that's actually the ideal version

↳ **@MrsRozanov:** was he ever a good boy tho ??? do we call having a ten year secret relationship with your rival good boy behavior ?

↳ **@hollanov4life:** hmm do you think Rozanov saw Shane and was immediately like, "he is good boy but freaky too, must have" ?

↳ **@ilyaslawyer:** Rozanov did not fall in love with a man who yells and fights. he fell in love with a nice polite Canadian who says please and thank you and then threatens people in Russian specifically for him. those are different things.

↳ **@puckbunnyOG:** the good boy was always going to go feral for the right reason we just didn't know what the reason was yet

↳ **@thirsty4holzy:** we know now

@hollanov4life: OKAY but can someone who speaks Russian PLEASE tell us what he said because I have seen three different translations

↳ **@RussianHockeyFan:** okay I'll do it. rough translation of what's audible: Shane says "listen to me you piece of shit. you will never speak his name again. never. do you understand me?" and "if you say another word about him I will come back. and next time I will not stop."

↳ **@hollanov4life:** I AM NOT OKAY

↳ **@MrsRozanov:** "you will never speak his name." Shane Hollander defending his husband's honour in his husband's first language. I need a moment.

↳ **@puckbunnyOG:** what exactly did Shane's face look like up close because whatever it was it WORKED

↳ **@RussianHockeyFan:** I have watched the clip frame by frame. whatever Shane's face looked like up close Morozov did not enjoy it.

@ilyaslawyer: the way Ilya didn't even try to pull him off at first. he waited. he let Shane have it. he KNEW.

↳ **@RozanovStan:** Ilya standing there watching Shane lose his mind for him like 🙄

↳ **@MrsRozanov:** he didn't even blink. he just stood there and WATCHED.

↳ **@hollanov4life:** and then when he did step in his voice was so soft.

↳ **@QueerHockey:** what gets me is that Shane has been absorbing slurs aimed at HIMSELF for years. standing there. not reacting. because he decided it wasn't worth it. but went feral on behalf of his husband. May this kind of love find me.

@Ottawon24: Rozanov scoring after his husband got ejected for defending him is the most them thing that has ever happened. absolute cinema.

↳ **@RozanovStan:** the way Roz pointed at the camera after. just once. quietly. that was for Shane watching from the locker room alone and we all know it.

↳ **@hollanov4life:** Shane sitting alone in that locker room watching Ilya score on the penalty kill. I cannot. I will not.

@Gays4Hockey: Shane "I handle everything with grace and dignity" Hollander committing assault in two languages. character development.

↳ **@hollanov4life:** TWO LANGUAGES

↳ **@MrsRozanov:** he was bilingual about it. that's actually worse. that's so much worse.

↳ **@puckbunnyOG:** most people can barely function in one language when they're angry. Shane Hollander switched to his second language MID ASSAULT. the dedication.

↳ **@RozanovStan:** that is genuinely the most romantic thing I have ever heard

@ilyaslawyer: the word people keep reaching for is romantic but I think the word is actually devoted. devoted is quieter. devoted is learning someone's language for years and never telling anyone.

↳ **@hollanov4life:** I need to lie down

↳ **@MrsRozanov:** same

↳ **@puckbunnyOG:** SAME

@Hollander81: Yuna and David Hollander really had one kid and said that's it. can't do better. why try. and they were RIGHT.

↳ **@hollanov4life:** YUNA AND DAVID SAID ONE AND DONE AND THEY WERE CORRECT

↳ **@MrsRozanov:** they looked at that freckled baby and said we have peaked as parents. we are done here.

↳ **@puckbunnyOG:** Yuna Hollander watching her son threaten a man in Russian on live television 🙄🙄

↳ **@thirsty4holzy:** do you think she's proud or horrified

↳ **@hollanov4life:** both. she is both. she raised him to be kind and polite and then he married Ilya Rozanov and now look.

↳ **@ilyaslawyer:** Ilya Rozanov really said let me take this nice Canadian boy and radicalize him slightly. mission accomplished.

↳ **@RozanovStan:** "radicalize him slightly" 😭😭

↳ **@Hollander81:** Shane Hollander led Montreal to three cups, got outed without his consent, got publicly betrayed by his own city, moved to Ottawa, still shows up every night and plays the best hockey of his career. and now this. built different. Yuna and David did THAT.

↳ **@VoyageursUltra:** and we treated him like garbage. I think about that every single day.

↳ **@Voyageur24:** every day. we're sorry King.

@FootyFanUK: once again checking in on hockey world. WHAT IS HAPPENING NOW

↳ **@EuroSportsFan458:** okay so the polite nice one beat someone up and threatened him in Russian

↳ **@FootyFanUK:** WHY RUSSIAN

↳ **@hollanov4life:** his husband is Russian

↳ **@EuroSportsFan458:** this is better than any show on television. where do I watch from the beginning

↳ **@ottawa4hollanov:** START FROM THE BEGINNING. the rivalry. the plane incident. the outing. the wedding.

↳ **@EuroSportsFan458:** THERE'S A PLANE INCIDENT???

↳ **@hollanov4life:** welcome to Canadian hockey. please take a seat. it only gets worse and also better. mostly both at the same time.

↳ **@Messi4life:** I don't watch hockey but I've been following this account for three months and I feel like I've lived several lifetimes

↳ **@FootyFanUK:** same honestly

↳ **@EuroSportsFan458:** okay I've been reading for two hours and I need to start watching hockey immediately

@HotTake25: Morozov getting one game is fine I guess but the NHL needs to do better than this systematically. one suspension doesn't fix years of looking the other way.

↳ **@QueerHockey:** for once @HotTake25 is right and I hate that. the league needs to make it mean something structurally.

↳ **@VoyageursUltra:** what Shane did tonight is what happens when players have to police it themselves because the institution won't. that's on the NHL. has been for years.

The Ottawa Centaurs Side Group Chat: Luca's Uncles - *later that night*

Wyatt: okay so twitter has the clip

Wyatt: with audio

Troy: yeah I saw

Dykstra: how does twitter always have everything within like four minutes

Bood: it's a gift and a curse

Wyatt: okay someone just posted a translation

Wyatt: okay

Troy: what

Wyatt: it was about Roz's parents

Wyatt: I'm not repeating the rest

Bood: good

Bood: then Shane did the right thing

Luca: absolutely he did

Wyatt: zero question

Holmber: not even close

Dillon: the twitter translation of what Shane said back though 🤔

Troy: I KNOW

Dykstra: "you will never speak his name again" in RUSSIAN

Wyatt: I keep watching the clip

Wyatt: the way he just GOES

Troy: zero hesitation

Troy: like a switch flipped

Luca: I was ten feet away and I still can't fully process it

Bood: our quiet little overachiever

Bood: the way Morozov eyes went wide 😭

Troy: he did not expect that AT ALL

Dykstra: nobody expected that

Luca: can we talk about Roz pointing at the camera after the goal

Troy: YES

Dykstra: I'm not going to lie that got me a little

Wyatt: same

Troy: same

Luca: same

Dillon : same

Wyatt: let's not tell Roz we said that

Dykstra: he'll never let us live it down

Holmber: update: twitter is fully losing its mind

Troy: okay also #HollanderSpeaksRussian is trending

Troy: and #MorozovGotWhat HeDeserved

Dykstra: good

Wyatt: very good

Bood: also just seeing the news about the suspension

Bood: two games

Wyatt: yeah Harris just texted me

Troy: two games is fair honestly

Dykstra: considering

Luca: Morozov ?

Wyatt: one

Wyatt: league reviewed the audio

Dykstra: make it count

Luca: okay that's something at least

Troy: "@puckbunnyOG: good boy Shane Hollander nation we are going through something tonight"

Wyatt: GOOD BOY SHANE HOLLANDER NATION 😭😭

Bood: 😭😭

Luca: I can't

Dykstra: don't tell Shane that tweet exists

Wyatt: okay I'm going to sleep

Wyatt: today was a lot

Troy: it really was

Dykstra: night guys

Bood: night everyone

Bood: and Luca

Luca: yeah?

Bood: you good?

Luca: yeah I'm good

Luca: night Bood

Bood: night kid ❤️

Chapter 14: Trivia

Chapter Notes

Just a fun little chapter ! Spoiler alert - NO, I am not setting up for a throuple or a threesome with the fictional Canadian Prime minister. Also, yes I totally stole the mental health initiative from the English Premiere League.

The trigger :

The conference room looks different than usual. Two tables face each other with cameras on tripods and a ring light in the corner that Isaak keeps adjusting.

"It's fine," Harris says.

"It's crooked."

"Nobody's going to notice."

"I'll notice," Isaak says, tilting it again.

Kayla tests a few angles while the team filters in, loud as always. Shane sits at the left table and watches Ilya immediately claim the seat directly across from him instead of beside him.

"Really?" Shane asks.

"We are competitors today," Ilya says seriously. "Enemies. Rivals. Takes me back."

Shane rolls his eyes.

"Okay!" Kayla claps her hands and the noise dies down. "Welcome to the first annual Ottawa Centaurs Trivia Challenge. Sponsors are paying actual money for this, so please be entertaining."

"I'm always entertaining," Ilya announces.

"More like troublesome," Shane mutters.

"Thank you, my love."

"That wasn't a compliment."

"Stop flirting," Bood says from behind them.

Harris pulls up a slide on his tablet. "Five rounds. Hockey stats, pop culture, teammates, general knowledge, and name that famous person. Different format each round. Winning team gets dinner at a nice steakhouse, partners included, plus gift cards and bragging rights."

That gets their attention. Even NHL players like a free dinner.

"Team captains are Shane and Ilya," Harris continues, "because our metrics are better when you two are competitive and I, for one, have embraced the chaos."

Ilya hums in agreement. "Makes sense."

Wyatt groans. "You know competition is basically foreplay for them, right? This isn't fair to the rest of us."

Ilya smirks. Shane goes slightly pink.

"There are children present," Dykstra says, gesturing at Isaak and Luca. Both of them give him flat looks.

"We are twenty-two," Luca says.

"Exactly," Dykstra grins.

"I am captain and I will focus only on winning," Ilya says, cutting across the noise. "No flirting. Only destroying Shane."

"There's no way you're beating me at trivia," Shane says.

"Do they realize they're competing for a dinner they're both going to anyway?" Chouinard asks.

"Nope," Bood says. "Don't tell them."

Harris sighs. "Shane, you pick first."

"Bood," Shane says immediately.

"Smart and loyal," Bood says, moving to Shane's table.

"Wyatt," Ilya counters.

It goes back and forth until Shane has Bood, Dykstra, Young, Dillon, LaPointe, and Boyle. Ilya has Wyatt, Troy, Luca, Holmber, and Chouinard.

"Round one," Harris says. "Hockey stats and history. First person to answer correctly gets the point. Ready?"

He pulls up the first question. "In what year did the Ottawa Centaurs join the NHL?"

"1992," Bood calls out immediately.

"Correct. What's the record for most goals scored in a single NHL season?"

"Ninety-two, Gretzky, '81-'82," Shane answers before anyone else can move.

"Correct. Last team to win back-to-back Stanley Cups?"

Everyone makes a face. Ilya shoots Harris a look.

"Montreal," Wyatt shouts eventually.

"Correct, point to Ilya's team."

The questions come faster. Who scored the first goal in Centaurs history. What year the NHL expanded to thirty-two teams. Longest playoff overtime game. Shane's team pulls ahead easily, Bood and Shane firing off answers, Holmber snagging one about draft history.

"How many times have Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov faced each other in playoff series?"

"Thirty-three games," Ilya says immediately.

Everyone looks at him.

"What?" Ilya says.

"Way too fast, buddy," Wyatt mutters.

By question ten, Shane's team is up by three.

"Round two," Harris announces. "Pop culture. Music, movies, internet. Same rules."

"Oh no," Shane says quietly.

"Oh yes," Luca grins, fist-bumping Wyatt.

"What artist released the album '30' in 2021?"

"Adele," Luca says immediately.

"What Canadian singer had a hit with 'Blinding Lights' in 2020?"

"The Weeknd," Dillon answers.

"Name any member of BTS."

Dead silence.

"Anyone?" Harris asks.

"There's a band called BTS?" Shane asks.

Ilya raises his hand. "I know this one. The Koreans."

Shane looks at him.

"Yes. One is named... BT?"

"That's not - " Harris starts.

"And another is... S?"

"Those are just the letters in the name," Luca says.

"I tried," Ilya shrugs.

"Next question. What does '*rizz*' mean?"

More silence.

"Is that even English?" Bood asks.

"I see people saying I have rizz sometimes," Ilya offers helpfully.

"You guys are really old," Luca says. "It means like... being charming."

"Of course it does," Ilya says, looking smug. Everyone makes a face at him.

"What song by a Canadian artist topped charts in over fifteen countries in 2012?"

"Call Me Maybe!" Wyatt shouts.

"Who's the most famous Canadian actor named Ryan?"

"Reynolds," Troy says.

"Gosling," Dillon says at the same time.

"We'll accept both. What was Drake's biggest hit in 2016?"

"One Dance," Ilya answers.

"Justin Bieber's hometown?"

"Stratford, Ontario," Chouinard says.

"What Canadian show featured a family running a motel?"

"Schitt's Creek," Young answers.

"Final question, name the Canadian who hosted Jeopardy for decades."

"Alex Trebek," half the room says at once.

"Bood was first."

By the end of round two, Ilya's team is ahead by two points and Shane looks mildly offended by modern culture.

"Round three," Harris says. "Teammates. Questions about people on this team. If a question is about you specifically, don't answer, because that's cheating."

The energy shifts. Everyone leans in.

"What year did Ilya Rozanov win his first Cup with Boston?"

"2014," Shane answers immediately.

"When did Shane and Ilya first face each other?"

"World Juniors, December 2008," Ilya answers, looking across the table at Shane with a small smile.

Dykstra leans toward Dillon and whispers in a dramatically breathy voice, "Of course I remember, moya lyubov."

Dillon matches his tone perfectly and adds an exaggerated Russian accent, "I pay attention to everything about you, my rival, my enemy, the love of my life..."

The room cracks up. Shane goes red. Ilya tries to look offended but he's already grinning.

"Which teammate played baseball in high school?"

"LaPointe," Young answers.

"Which teammate was a first overall pick?"

"Rozanov," half the room shouts.

"Too easy, Harris," Young calls out.

"And Hollander was second pick, yes?" Ilya adds, grinning.

Shane gives him a look. "You bring that up a lot."

"Because it is important."

Dykstra turns to Dillon again with wide eyes. "I saw you at the draft - "

" - I knew you were special," Dillon finishes solemnly, hand on his heart.

"Which current Centaur has a degree from McGill?"

Silence. Everyone looks around, genuinely stumped.

"Anyone?" Harris prompts.

"Who the hell went to McGill?" Wyatt asks.

"Shane's dad?" Ilya guesses.

"Time's up. It's Dillon."

Every head turns toward Dillon, who stares back with wide eyes.

"You went to McGill?" Bood asks.

Dillon sighs and nods. "Four years."

"What did you study?" Shane asks.

"Literature."

A few eyebrows go up.

"Like... books and stuff?" Troy asks.

"Yes, Barrett. Books and stuff."

"That's actually cool," Young says, sounding genuine. "Didn't know that about you."

"Wait," Luca says slowly, like something just clicked. "You do read a lot on the road. I've seen you. I just thought you were trying to look smart."

He gets a hit on the back of the head for that, "Not nice kid," Wyatt says half-serious.

"Mission not accomplished, I guess," Dillon says with an embarrassed laugh.

"Do you read boring hockey books like Shane?" Ilya calls out.

Dillon pauses. "I read everything. I like poetry."

"Poetry," Wyatt repeats, grinning but not mocking. "Alright, Dillon. That's actually pretty cool."

"Ugh. Thanks, I think."

The round continues. Bood gets the one about most NHL games in Ottawa. Answers fly back and forth, the score seesawing, until the final question puts Ilya's team ahead by one.

"Round four. General knowledge. History, geography, literature, current events."

"Which Shakespeare play features 'to be or not to be'?"

"Hamlet," Dillon answers immediately.

A few heads turn toward him.

"What year did the Berlin Wall fall?"

"1989." Dillon again.

"Who wrote 'Pride and Prejudice'?"

"Jane Austen." Before anyone else has even processed the question.

Wyatt leans back in his chair. "Okay. Who is this guy?"

"Who is the current Prime Minister?"

"Olivier Beaumont!" Ilya shouts, chest puffing, proud to display his knowledge about Canada since he started studying for the citizenship test.

By the end of round four, Shane's team has pulled ahead thanks to Dillon quietly answering half the round, and Ilya is looking at him with something close to respect.

"Final round," Harris says. "Name That Famous Person. I'll show a photo, your team answers in order, ten seconds per person. You keep going until someone misses. Total score is how many you get right. Shane's team goes first."

The first photo appears.

"Ryan Reynolds," Bood says.

"Taylor Swift," Dykstra gets the next one.

The photos keep coming. Drake. Rose Landry. They cycle through quickly, the whole room leaning in and yelling encouragement. They make it to eight before Bood misses on a pop star.

Ilya's team takes their turn. A photo of Scott Hunter that gets a scoff from Ilya. Ten photos in, Troy misses on a historical figure.

"Ilya's team wins !" Harris announces.

Ilya pumps his fist. "We won!"

"I am your husband," Shane says. "We're going to the same dinner."

"Yes, but my team won."

"That's not -"

"I am bringing Anya."

"You're not bringing the dog to a steakhouse."

"Then I bring Luca."

"Luca is on your team, he's already going."

"I will bring Arthur then."

That gets a soft smile from Shane. "You are ridiculous."

Ilya leans back, satisfied. "If we had kid, I would bring our kid."

"Look around. Your kids are all here."

"I will teach the kids to be winners, do not worry, moya lyubov."

"You're going to teach them to be competitive nightmares," Shane shoots back, then pauses. "Oh my god, we're both going to teach them that."

Ilya grins at Shane for a moment, and Shane just looks back. The room has gone slightly quieter because people are listening, but neither of them seems to notice.

Wyatt breaks it. "Did you two just casually discuss having kids on camera?"

Shane blinks. Goes pink. "Can we cut that?"

"Aww, really? I was looking forward to creating a social media meltdown out of free will this time," Harris says from behind the camera.

Kayla is grinning. "That's staying in."

"Oh my god," Shane mutters. Ilya just shrugs and looks pleased with himself.

The room dissolves into noise and teasing, people stretching, packing up, talking over each other. Isaak has drifted over to talk to Luca quietly in the corner.

Then Harris clears his throat loud enough to cut through the chaos.

"Hey, before everyone leaves." He raises his voice over the scrape of chairs. "Got an announcement. Thanks to your captain's initiative, the team has been named official ambassadors on a new campaign with Health Canada and the PM's office."

A few heads turn toward Ilya, who preens mockingly. Shane pecks him on the cheek. "I'm proud of you."

"It's a mental health awareness campaign," Harris continues. "'Support your team, support the people you watch them with.' Encouraging fans to check in on each other, normalize the conversation."

"That's actually really cool," Wyatt says.

"There'll be a kickoff event in the following weeks. With an official visit to the PM's office. It's a big deal, boys."

"We're meeting Beaumont?" Wyatt asks, looking impressed.

"You are meeting Beaumont," Harris confirms. "So please, all of you, be normal."

"Do not worry, Harris. He is gay icon like me and Shane, yes? We will get along," Ilya says.

"Like you get along with Scott Hunter?" Shane says.

"Very funny Hollander."

"Why is Canada's prime minister a gay icon, just because he's attractive?" Luca asks.

Isaak gives his boyfriend a look. "Luc, seriously? Because he's gay and got elected at thirty-two."

"Thirty-one," Dillon corrects.

"Ooooh, yeah that makes sense," Luca laughs, a bit sheepish.

The team starts filing out then, the noise settling into the usual post-filming hum. Shane lingers to talk to Kayla about the edit and Bood is telling Dykstra and Dillon they don't need a fancy steakhouse, he'll fire up the grill this weekend and they can have their own steak dinner.

Twitter :

@hollanov4life: THEY DISCUSSED HAVING KIDS. ON CAMERA. CASUALLY. LIKE IT WAS NOTHING. I AM ON THE FLOOR

↳ **@MrsRozanov:** "if we had kid I would bring our kid" ILYA ROZANOV WANTS TO BE A DAD 😭😭😭

↳ **@HaydenHive :** Arthur Pike be collecting hockey fathers

↳ **@puckbunnyOG:** Shane saying "your kids are all here" about the TEAM and Ilya not even correcting him because he already sees himself as team dad 🙄

↳ **@MrsRozanov:** the way he immediately said Luca when Shane said he can't bring the dog, that's his son 🙄

↳ **@hollanov4life:** and then Shane going "oh my god we're both going to teach them that" like he's already imagined what kind of parents they'd be??? I need to sit down

↳ **@ilyaslawyer**: the way neither of them even noticed the room went quiet. they were just looking at each other. discussing their future children. on a sponsored trivia video.

↳ **@MrsRozanov**: I admire the media team for voluntarily including that footage, they are embracing the hollanov chaos 😭

@Ottawon24: the trivia video is genuinely the funniest team content I've seen in years, the chemistry of this team man 🔥

↳ **@letsgocens**: Ilya claiming his seat ACROSS from Shane from the get go, takes me back to the rivalry 😭

↳ **@thirsty4holzy**: Dykstra and Dillon doing impressions of Shane and Ilya is the content I didn't know I needed 😭

↳ **@MrsRozanov**: "I pay attention to everything about you, my rival, my enemy, the love of my life" Dillon were you a theater kid 🤡

↳ **@letsgocens**: well we now know he got a BA from McGill !!

↳ **@thirsty4holzy**: such a random lore drop, the booktok girlies are going to lose their mind

@QueerHockey: the Health Canada mental health campaign is genuinely incredible. "Support your team, support the people you watch them with." more of this in sports please

↳ **@Gays4Hockey**: and Ilya Rozanov is behind it?? the character development from the man who used to start fights every other game

↳ **@ilyaslawyer**: Ilya "I will fight everyone on the ice and then advocate for mental health off it" Rozanov

↳ **@Ottawon24**: well he starts fight with the assholes of hockey so same battle if you think about it... genuinely proud of our captain for this one

@holzycaptain: not Shane answering the year of Ilya's first Cup before Harris even finished the question 😭

↳ **@centaurschaos**: and Ilya immediately answering when they first met like he has the date engraved into his BONES

↳ **@hollanov4life**: do you think they already KNEW back then. tiny Hollander and Rozanov at world juniors, did they KNOWWW already

↳ **@MrsRozanov**: soulmate energy

@hollanovnation: “How many playoff games have Hollander and Rozanov played against each other?” Ilya: THIRTY-THREE, WITHOUT HESITATION??? sir that's your husband not your hyperfixation

↳ **@QueerHockey**: no because the implication is he counted them. voluntarily.

↳ **@puckbunnyOG**: Shane didn't even seem that surprised, he probably knew the answer too

@puckandprose: the funniest part of the trivia video is that it confirms the Centaurs pass 50% of their time third wheeling hollanov

↳ **@letsgocens**: the team doesn't even react to the pet names anymore 😭

↳ **@centaurschaos** : Shane and Ilya competing against each other just to end up discussing hypothetical children and bringing each other to the prize dinner anyway

↳ **@ilyaslawyer**: heterosexuals could never create this level of unnecessary competition

↳ **@QueerHockey**: “We are competitors today. Enemies.” five minutes later: 🥰🥰🥰🥰

↳ **@letsgocens**: the way they started so competitive, but in the end only really answered when the question were about each other, these losers in love 😭

@hollanov4life: WAIT. so Hollanov are meeting Olivier Beaumont at the PM's office. Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov, and Olivier Beaumont in the same room.

↳ **@MrsRozanov**: Ottawa really collected all the attractive powerful men like Pokémon

↳ **@puckbunnyOG**: the ENERGY that room is going to have. someone open a window

↳ **@thirsty4holzy**: remember when Beaumont got elected in September 2021 and Shane started his first season with Ottawa ? the gay gods blessed this city and never looked back

↳ **@Ottawon24**: we really went from boring government town to main character city in one month

↳ **@ilyaslawyer**: three of the most attractive powerful men in Canada standing next to each other for mental health. I am already not mentally healthy about this

↳ **@puckbunnyOG**: Ottawa's tourism board should just use that future photo and retire

@HotTake25: am I the only one who thinks athletes should play hockey and leave politics to politicians

↳ **@hollanov4life:** yes you are literally the only one

↳ **@QueerHockey:** it's a mental health campaign not a political rally sit down. Also everything is politics dude !

@EuroSportsFan458: I have now watched every Ottawa Centaurs video. I don't understand hockey. I don't care. I am invested

↳ **@Messi4life:** same. I know all their names now. I have a favorite. it's Luca

Chapter 15: Interlude #7: Luca and Isaak

Chapter Notes

Yeah already another update, and I'll probably post another chapter tomorrow too ! You should thank the person who hurt me, creative juice is flowing in my blood it seems 😂. I do have the final chapters already planned, only 5-6 left, more if I get other ideas. I was so touched seeing some people asking if next chapter would be Luca 😊 he is really our baby ! And I genuinely lol at the two who were discussing the Mayor of Ottawa in the comments hahaha, I did include a little reference to your comments in the chapter. 😊

"I feel nervous."

Luca glances at his boyfriend, who is readjusting the collar of his shirt for the fourth time since they left the car. They're walking down the street, five minutes from the restaurant, the early March air sharp enough that their breath comes out in small white clouds.

"Why? You know all of them already."

"Not in this setting! Not as your boyfriend." Isaak tugs at his collar again. "Oh my god, this feels like meeting the parents."

"We had dinner with your mum last week. It went fine."

"You've known my mum since you were five, Luc. That doesn't count."

"It's just the guys. They're like children in large bodies, trust me. And their partners have always been really nice to me."

Something about this makes Isaak's eyes go wider rather than calmer.

"Oh my god. They all see you as their child and I am going to get grilled by every single one of them."

Luca laughs, a real one, bright in the cold air, and stops walking, catching Isaak by the shoulders. Isaak is wearing the dark green coat that makes his eyes look almost absurdly vivid, and underneath it a black shirt that accentuates his waist in a way that makes Luca go a bit crazy.

"Stop. Izy." Luca smooths down his collar for him, letting his fingers rest there. "Everything will be fine." He tilts his head, smiling. "But it is kind of cute that you care this much about their opinion of you."

Isaak sniffs, not quite willing to be charmed yet. "I'm still recovering from Rozanov cornering me in a parking lot to tell me to stop being a cliché."

Luca laughs again, softer this time, and pulls him closer. He cups Isaak's face in both hands, thumbs brushing along his jaw, and kisses him. Gentle, unhurried. It's more about reassurance than anything else, Luca's mouth warm against his in the cold, his nose bumping Isaak's cheek. He catches Isaak's bottom lip lightly between his teeth as he pulls back, and Isaak makes a quiet sound that Luca files away for later.

"Okay," Luca says, a little hoarse. "Let's go. We don't want to be the last ones to arrive."

Isaak blinks at him, slightly dazed, then straightens his coat with exaggerated dignity. "Fine. But if they ask me what you were like as a child, I'm telling all the embarrassing stories."

"You already told stories."

"I'll tell them again. With more detail."

The steakhouse is way nicer than expected for a trivia prize, but Luca supposes this is the NHL, so everything comes with an upgrade.

"Kids! Over here, I saved you seats!" Ilya calls the moment they walk in, loud enough that a couple at a nearby table turns to look. He's already installed at the head of the table, looking way too gleeful. Shane sits to his left, mid-conversation with Lisa and Wyatt. Harris and Troy are at the other end with Nick and his wife Selena.

Luca groans. There's no getting out of sitting next to Ilya without being rude. At least Shane and Lisa are on the other side to run interference.

They make their way over. Isaak pulls out the chair in front of Lisa and Luca slides in beside Ilya, who immediately claps him on the back hard enough to make him lurch forward.

"Looking sharp, Haas," Wyatt calls from across the table, leaning back in his chair with his arm along the back of Lisa's. "Both of you."

Shane leans forward to greet Isaak properly, a warm smile on his face. "Glad you're here, Isaak."

"Thanks, Shane."

"Isaak!" Harris's voice booms from the far end. He raises his glass of water like a toast. "Welcome to the chaos. Officially." Troy gives a small nod beside him, which from Troy is practically a standing ovation. Selena, who Isaak has never met, waves at him with a bright smile. She's small and blonde and has the energy of someone who has escaped three children for the evening and intends to enjoy every second of it.

They've barely settled in when they hear voices at the entrance. Holmberg appears first, shrugging off his coat, with Young trailing behind him looking entirely unapologetic about his presence.

"Young?" Wyatt frowns. "You were on the losing team."

"I'm his plus one," Young says, gesturing at Holmberg.

"He's my roommate," Holmberg explains, pulling out a chair. "Was I supposed to leave him at home?"

"This is a prize dinner," Ilya says, narrowing his eyes. "For winners. Which you are not, Young."

"And yet here I am," Young says cheerfully, sitting down.

"You two are late," Ilya continues, shifting into his captain's voice. "Like practice. Always ten minutes behind."

"Actually," Young says, reaching for a bread roll, "we got here ten minutes ago."

"Then where were you?" Shane asks.

Young glances at Luca and Isaak with barely contained amusement. "We, uh, saw these two outside. Thought we'd give them a minute."

Holmberg nods solemnly. "Seemed polite."

"A minute for what?" Harris asks, leaning forward.

"They were kissing," Holmberg says.

The table reacts immediately. Wyatt throws his head back laughing, Shane presses his lips together trying to hold it in, and everyone else gasps with delight.

"On the street!" Harris says, hand on his chest. "In public! Children walk on that street!"

"I've seen you and Troy make out in his office. A lot," Isaak shoots back, face on fire.

"Well, it's different. It's a private office, Isaak," Troy says, and Harris bumps his shoulder, grinning.

Luca wants to kill all of them. But Isaak is laughing, which he takes as a good sign. Under the table, Isaak's hand finds his knee and squeezes once. *I'm fine, this is fine.* Luca exhales.

Drinks arrive. Then bread, then steak, then more wine. The conversation moves the way team dinners usually do, despite half the team missing. Ilya orders a bottle for the table without consulting anyone and Shane quietly asks the waiter to also bring water.

"I still can't get over the trivia thing," Wyatt says, cutting into his steak. "Four years at McGill for a lit degree. How did none of us know?"

"It's public information," Harris says, shrugging. "It's on his player profile. He just never talks about it."

"But why?" Lisa asks. "It's impressive."

Harris hesitates. "I actually felt kind of bad about it, honestly. After the video. It clearly wasn't something he broadcasted, and we put him on the spot." He frowns. "He handled it well, but still. I should have flagged it beforehand."

"He seemed fine," Troy says.

"Yeah but Dillon always seems fine. He's an easygoing guy," Harris says, and there's something careful in the way he says it that makes the table go briefly quiet.

Nick breaks it gently. "He answered half the general knowledge round by himself. The man's been hiding in plain sight."

"Poetry, though," Wyatt says, shaking his head with genuine appreciation. "That's actually cool."

"I want to know what kind of poetry," Lisa says.

"Ask him," Luca says. "He's very easy to talk to."

As the mains are cleared, Wyatt tops up glasses and the talk turns to the thing that's been on everyone's mind anyway.

"So," Selena says, resting her chin on her hand, looking at Shane and Ilya. "Kids. Is that really happening?"

"Yes," Ilya says. "We talk about it. Is definitely on the table."

"It's complicated," Shane adds, in a careful tone. "We're both playing. We're on the road constantly. The logistics aren't simple."

"But we will figure it out," Ilya says. "When time is right."

"You'd be great dads," Lisa says, and she says it like a fact, not a compliment.

Shane smiles, small and real. "Thanks, Lisa. We've already got our hands full, honestly." He tilts his head toward Luca. "This one actually takes up a lot of parental energy."

Luca drops his face into his hands while the rest of the table laughs.

"I am not your child," Luca says, muffled.

"You kind of are, though," Wyatt says.

"I'm twenty-two."

"And yet," Troy says.

"Speaking of," Selena continues, turning her attention to Luca and Isaak with the focus of a woman on a mission, "when exactly did this happen? Because Nick told me you two were

being weird around each other for months."

"We were not being weird," Luca says.

"You were being extremely weird," Harris says.

"Remember the coffee?" Troy says, and his face breaks into something close to nostalgic.

"That sad puppy face, Luca. Coming out of Isaak's office holding two full cups."

"He hates coffee," Wyatt quotes, putting on a tragically wounded voice. "I still think about that."

Luca looks at the ceiling. "It was a misunderstanding."

"And now look at you two," Selena says warmly. "Together. Happy. In love."

Nick frowns at his wife, who looks almost on the verge of crying. "Oh my god, are you pregnant again?"

Selena shushes him with a side eye. "No, Nick."

"How long have you been in Ottawa?" Lisa asks Isaak, genuinely curious.

"Around four years. My mum and I moved after my dad passed." He says it evenly but Luca still reaches out to squeeze his hand under the table. "He had cancer. We came here to be closer to her family."

The atmosphere shifts. Not pity, exactly. Something more careful.

"I'm sorry," Lisa says.

"Thank you." Isaak takes a breath. "He loved hockey, actually. My parents used to live here when they were students. Centaurs fans. That's how Luca became an Ottawa fan, through my family." He glances at Luca with a soft smile. "So it feels kind of full circle. Being here."

"I lost my mother," Ilya starts, his voice serious. "When I was young. Still in Russia." He looks at Isaak directly. "It does not get smaller. But you learn to carry it better. And the people around you," he gestures at the table, "they help you carry."

Shane's hand moves to cover Ilya's. Isaak holds Ilya's gaze for a moment, before nodding gratefully.

"Woah, Roz, you should collaborate with Dillon and write poetry," Wyatt says. "That was very profound."

Ilya smiles, wiggling his eyebrows. "I can go very deep. Ask Shane."

Shane groans. "You can retire this joke now, Ilya."

"But seriously," Isaak starts, looking around the table. "Joining the organisation really helped me. My dad loved hockey, so I feel connected to him here. And I think you all helped me and Luca find our way back to each other." He pauses. Luca watches him take in the whole table. Wyatt and Lisa, Harris and Troy, Holmberg and Young, Nick and Selena, Shane and Ilya. "I know you lot give Luca a hard time. Constantly. About everything." That gets a few grins. "But it's obvious how much you care about him. How much you've looked out for him. I've seen it from the media office for months." He pauses again and clears his throat. "So. Thank you. For taking care of him when I couldn't."

The silence lasts about three seconds.

"I'm not crying," Wyatt says, clearly a bit emotional.

"I am," Selena says, not even pretending.

"Luca, I am sorry but Isaak is the new favorite child," Young says.

"Way more polite than you," Holmberg tells Luca.

"Yes, very respectful and not brat," Ilya says, clearly touched as well.

"We should add him to the group chat," Wyatt says. "The real one. Without Shane and Ilya." That earns him a glare from both Shane and Ilya while the rest of the table laughs.

Isaak catches Luca's eye across the noise and Luca stares back, fond and a little amazed, like he still can't quite believe Isaak is here, sitting next to him, part of this.

Isaak leans over and, very quietly, under the noise, says, "Your team is insane."

Luca smiles. "Yeah. But they're good."

"They're really good."

"Ilya, Wyatt told me you're the one behind the mental health campaign with the government," Lisa says.

Ilya straightens slightly, "Yes. I think it is important. Fans care about players, but they forget to care about each other. And themselves. And us too. Men, we do not really talk about mental health."

Lisa nods. "I think that's really smart. We see so much of that at the hospital. People who won't ask for help until it's a crisis. If athletes normalize it, that actually changes things."

"And we're actually going to the PM's office for it," Wyatt says, still sounding faintly awed. "Like, the actual Prime Minister."

"My mom is beside herself," Shane says, and Luca can hear the fondness underneath. Yuna Hollander's opinion clearly carries weight in the Hollander-Rozanov household. "She thinks Beaumont is a generational talent. She keeps sending me articles. She says he's the kind of

leader who could actually change things, and also, and I quote, 'make sure the trains still run when it snows.'"

"Practical woman," Lisa says, smiling.

"Very practical," Shane agrees. "She almost cried when he got elected, which she will deny."

"Why does your mother love this attractive, powerful man so much?" Ilya asks, his tone carefully neutral in a way that fools absolutely nobody. Luca senses the upcoming disaster and presses his lips together to stop himself from laughing.

"Because he's impressive," Shane answers, oblivious. "He's genuinely engaged with policy."

"Very impressive," Harris agrees from the end of the table. "And, I mean, he's also..."

"Dreamy," Isaak supplies, like he can't stop himself.

Luca turns to look at him. Isaak shrugs, unapologetic.

Harris points at him. "Thank you. Yes. The curls alone," he sighs in apparent contentment while ignoring the side eye Troy is giving him.

"And the brown eyes," Isaak continues, warming to the subject in a way Luca finds both amusing and mildly concerning.

Lisa hums, and adds, "And the... what's the word... presence."

"He is very charming," Selena confirms with authority.

"There's actually research on this," Shane says, leaning forward with the earnest intensity that Luca has come to recognize as Shane about to be very, very Shane. "Voter behavior studies show that physical attractiveness and charisma significantly influence electoral outcomes. It's not just superficial. People associate attractiveness with competence and trustworthiness..."

"Shane," Ilya says. *Here we go*, Luca thinks. "I do not want to know why the Prime Minister is handsome and competent."

"I'm just saying it's documented..."

Luca watches Ilya's face cycle through approximately seven expressions in the space of ten seconds. Beside him, Wyatt is watching too, and clearly cannot hold it in any longer.

"Oh my god," Wyatt says, putting down his fork. "Roz. Your face right now."

"What about my face."

"It's a murder face. That is a murder face."

"I don't have a murder face."

"You absolutely have a murder face on," Lisa says, calm and factual, and the table falls apart. Luca buries his laugh in his wine glass. Isaak is shaking beside him.

"Shane, I am begging you," Wyatt continues, wiping his eyes, "please stop complimenting the Prime Minister, because at this rate Ilya is going to duel him when they meet."

"I would win," Ilya says immediately.

"He's the Prime Minister," Wyatt says.

"I have a Stanley Cup."

"He is the head of the country, Roz."

"But I have a very beautiful husband who will not stop talking about another man's curls."

"I didn't say anything about his curls. That was Harris and Isaak."

Ilya turns his look of betrayal toward Harris and Isaak. Harris raises his hands in surrender. Isaak suddenly finds his napkin very interesting. Luca feels Isaak's knee press into his under the table, half *help me* and half *this is the funniest thing that's ever happened to me*.

"I think he'd actually fight the PM," Young says to Holmberg in a low voice.

"I think he'd win," Holmberg says.

"Thank you boys," Ilya sniffs.

"No one should be thanking anyone or fighting anyone," Shane says, but he's smiling now, the one Luca has seen a hundred times, the one that means Ilya is being ridiculous and Shane loves him too much to actually mind. He leans over and kisses Ilya's cheek. "You're the most impressive person I've ever met. Happy?"

Ilya considers this. "Yes." He picks up his wine glass. "But I am watching this man very carefully when we meet."

"Please don't," Harris says, horrified at this potential scenario.

"I make no promises."

Dessert arrives and the table splits the way long dinners do, conversations breaking into pairs and threes. Selena and Lisa have found each other and are deep in something about a tv show. Chouinard is showing Holmberg and Young pictures on his phone, the kids, given the exaggerated cooing. Harris has his arm along the back of Troy's chair and they're talking to each other quietly.

Wyatt has somehow drawn Shane and Ilya into a debate about superheroes. Luca catches fragments, something about which Avenger each of them is most like, and watches Shane argue with genuine conviction that he is not Captain America while Ilya and Wyatt both stare

at him in disbelief. Shane's main argument is that he's Canadian, not American. Ilya's main argument seems to be about Shane's ass.

Luca smiles and turns back to Isaak, who has been watching the same scene with a quiet, open expression that Luca doesn't see often enough.

"Hey," Luca says softly.

Isaak looks at him. "Hey."

"I'm really happy you're here tonight." He says it simply because he means it simply. "With all of them. In this part of my life."

Isaak's face does something complicated. A flicker of the old fear, gone almost before it arrives.

"Me too," Isaak says. He turns his water glass slowly on the tablecloth. "They're good people, Luc. I can see why you love them. I'm glad you found them."

"Even Ilya?"

"Especially Ilya." Isaak smiles. "He's exactly like you described. Terrifying and unbearably kind at the same time."

Luca reaches under the table and laces his fingers through Isaak's. Isaak lets him, and for a moment they just sit like that, the noise of the table around them, warm and close.

"You want to go?" Luca asks quietly.

Isaak's eyes flicker to his mouth for just a second. "Yeah."

They stand. The table notices immediately.

"Already?" Wyatt says, looking wounded.

"Let them go," Lisa says, giving Wyatt a look.

"It was really lovely meeting you properly," Selena says to Isaak, squeezing his hand across the table. "Both of you. Come for dinner sometime!"

"We will do this again," Ilya announces. "When we make the playoffs. Big dinner. Whole team."

"Don't jinx it," Shane says immediately.

"I am not jinxing -."

"Goodnight, everyone," Luca says firmly, pulling on his coat, because if he lets this go on they'll be here until midnight.

The cold hits them as they step outside. They walk close, shoulders brushing, their breath coming out in white clouds under the streetlights, neither of them saying much.

The drive to Luca's apartment is quiet. Isaak has his hand on Luca's thigh, thumb tracing absent patterns through his jeans. Luca keeps his eyes on the road and tries to concentrate on driving and not on the slow, warm drag of Isaak's thumb.

They make it to the door.

Luca fumbles with his keys. His hands are cold, or maybe just shaking slightly, which is stupid. They've done this before. They've been doing this. But something about tonight feels different. Like a line has been crossed that isn't about them at all. Isaak sat at a table with the people who matter most to Luca, in this new life of his, and he belonged there, effortlessly, and that fact is doing something to Luca's chest that he can't quite name.

He gets the door open. Steps inside. Turns.

Isaak is right there.

He kisses him before the door is fully closed, one hand finding the back of Isaak's neck, the other pulling him in by the waist. Isaak makes a small sound against his mouth and kisses him back, hands fisting in the front of Luca's coat, pulling him closer. The door clicks shut behind them. Luca presses Isaak back against it, gentle but certain, and Isaak's head tips back as Luca's mouth moves to his jaw, the soft skin below his ear.

"Luc," Isaak breathes.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Luca laughs against his neck, feels Isaak's chest shake with his own laughter underneath him, and kisses him again. Slower this time, deeper, tasting wine and sugar. Isaak's hands slide inside his coat, fingers spreading warm across his back, and Luca lets himself be pulled closer, lets himself feel all of it. The cold from outside still clings to their coats but underneath, where their bodies press together, everything is warm.

"Inside," Isaak murmurs against his mouth.

Luca nods. He takes Isaak's hand and leads him down the hallway, coats and shirts abandoned somewhere behind them. Isaak's fingers lace through his, steady and sure, and when Luca glances back, Isaak is already looking at him with an expression that makes his breath catch. The way he looked at the table tonight, but even more open, unguarded. Like every wall he's ever built has quietly come down and he's decided not to rebuild them and Luca thinks *finally*.

Luca pulls him into the bedroom and kisses him again, slower now, both hands in Isaak's hair, and Isaak's arms come around his neck like they belong there.

They have all night. They have tomorrow. They have, Luca thinks, so much more than that.

Chapter 16: Interlude #8

Chapter Notes

Please bear with me haha 🙏. This chapter happens in March 2021, almost one year before present time in this fic. Blame "Doors" by Noah Kahan for finally pushing to write this idea that has not left me alone since chapter 2.

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

March 2021

Tanner Dillon is at home, working out, when he hears the news that Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov are apparently in a romantic relationship.

It goes like this.

It is a day off. No training, no matches, no plans. He wakes up around nine, has breakfast, cries in the shower like he usually does and then goes down to his home gym to stop feeling bad about himself.

This is the routine on what he calls the "bad days". Wake up. Eat something. Fall apart in the shower where nobody can see it, not that anyone is looking. Put himself back together through controlled, repetitive physical exertion until his arms burn more than his chest does. It is not official, he does not write it down or anything, but it works. It has been working for almost two years now, which either means it is working well or that he has stopped being able to tell the difference between functioning and surviving.

Anyway, the bar is racked and hands are chalked.

He is between sets, reaching for his phone to change the track in his playlist, when he notices the notifications. A lot of notifications. The Centaurs group chat has been going off for hours while his phone was on silent.

He frowns. Opens the chat and scrolls. It takes him a few messages to understand what is happening. Rozanov. Hollander. A video. Everyone telling Roz they are here for him. A lot of very aggressive punctuation about homophobia.

Tanner closes the app and opens Twitter and is immediately subjected to the sight of his captain and Shane Hollander. Kissing. Like really kissing.

Tanner watches it once, sits down on the bench with chalk still on his hands, and then watches it again.

He is surprised at how unsurprised he is.

Not about Hollander. The rumours about Hollander being gay have circulated in the league for years, the kind of persistent, low-level speculation that most players ignore publicly and discuss privately.

Rozanov is different.

Tanner has never suspected specifically, it is not like he has been putting pieces together. He has watched Rozanov play for years, the way most people in the league have, with a mix of admiration and mild annoyance. But playing alongside him, he has noticed something else underneath the skill and the showmanship. A heaviness. The way Rozanov sometimes goes very still, a bit absent. The way his energy drops between periods in a way that has nothing to do with fatigue. The way he sometimes looks at a room full of people like he is standing on the other side of a glass.

And now, watching the video again, he sees something else entirely. The way Rozanov kisses Hollander is not casual. It is not reckless. It is the way someone kisses when the person in front of them is the only thing keeping them upright. Like Hollander is the reason he gets up, trains, plays, tolerates the noise, the cameras and the weight of being Ilya Rozanov.

Tanner knows what it feels like to build your whole life around one person who feels like the only real thing in it. To know, somewhere underneath, that this kind of devotion is not entirely healthy but also is not something you can choose to stop doing. Because without it you are just a body going through motions in a house that is too quiet. A bit like Tanner himself these days.

But, good for them. Love is love.

He opens the group chat. Types: *Good for you Roz, Hollander is a catch*. Texts Bood privately, confirming he will join the team call tonight.

Then, without thinking too much about it, he calls Olivier.

It rings once.

"Hi."

"Hey, Beau."

A beat. He can almost hear Olivier recalibrating, relieved at the familiarity but still unsure. The last time Tanner called him was when he almost died, after all.

"I texted you," Olivier says. "This morning."

Tanner pulls the phone away. There it is, from six hours ago: *Hey, are you okay?*

"I didn't see it."

"Of course you didn't."

This is the second time they have spoken since the breakup. The first was January, after the plane. Tanner called from the tarmac in Tampa, hands shaking, ears still ringing from the emergency landing, and Olivier picked up on the first ring then too. They stayed on the line for forty minutes and didn't talk about anything that mattered and it was exactly enough. Afterwards, they went back to silence, because neither of them knows how to be casual.

"You saw the video," Tanner says.

"Of course. My team flagged it this morning. They wanted to know if I should make a statement. As an openly gay elected official."

"Are you going to?"

"Thinking about it. Something supportive, not performative." A pause. "Their moment, not mine."

"That's very thoughtful."

"Hmm."

Tanner has always known Olivier was destined for great things. And he was right. The man has become the kind of politician people build narratives around. Young, handsome, absurdly articulate. Haitian Canadian, law degree by twenty-two, then a Master in public policy, and elected as a member of parliament before thirty. Tanner still mostly thinks of him as the guy who eats fries with an absurd amount of ketchup, loves funny socks and always misplaces his glasses.

"You should tweet something about how hot they probably are together."

Olivier gives a short, loud laugh. "Yes, of course. I will also say that if I am ever PM, I will personally fast-track Rozanov's citizenship."

Tanner smiles. "So the rumours are true, eh? You're running?"

"Ugh, I don't want to jump the gun."

"Youngest Prime Minister in history has a nice ring to it," Tanner teases.

The scary part is that it does not even sound impossible anymore. Olivier is polling absurdly well for someone barely past thirty. People like him on television. Older voters call him *respectful*. Younger voters call him *hopeful*. Journalists keep using words like *magnetic* and *generational*.

"Shut up Tan." A pause. "How are you?"

"I'm fine."

"Tanner."

"Beau."

He can hear Olivier exhale. Not frustrated exactly. More the specific sound of a man who has spent years walking into the same wall and still has not stopped looking for a window.

Tanner remembers the first time Olivier tried, really tried, to get him to talk about something real. They were sprawled on Olivier's couch with takeout containers between them, and Olivier had asked, very simply, about his family.

"I don't have one," Tanner had said.

Olivier had made his very adorable confused face and Tanner had pecked him on the mouth before continuing.

"I mean, maybe I had one and they just didn't want me. I'm not sure. I don't really remember."

He'd said it the way he said everything about himself, flat and factual. And Olivier had looked at him with an expression Tanner had never been on the receiving end of before. Not pity. Something fiercer. Like he was angry on Tanner's behalf and would somehow fix it.

"Their loss," Olivier had simply said. And then he'd changed the subject, because he already understood, even then, that Tanner could only handle being seen in small doses before he needed to close the door again.

He brought it up one week later. They were in Olivier's room, and he had coaxed Tanner to lie down with his head in his lap, fingers moving slowly through his hair, and then said, very gently but without hesitation: *"Tell me."*

Tanner had stiffened. Olivier's hand didn't stop.

"Tell it like a story if you want," Olivier had said. *"I know you love those."*

So Tanner had told it like a story. A boy who didn't have a lot of memories, which was common, he'd read somewhere, for people whose childhoods were mostly about surviving them. Foster care from as far back as he could piece together. Different houses, different rules, different versions of temporary. Hockey was the one constant, someone somewhere had put a stick in his hand and he'd turned out to be good at it, which meant he was useful, which meant he got to stay longer in some places than he would have otherwise. He loved reading, loved words, loved the way a sentence could hold a feeling he didn't know how to carry on his own. Nobody had ever encouraged that. The families wanted the athlete. The schools wanted the athlete. The scouts wanted the athlete. So he became the athlete, and the rest of him, the part that read poetry and wrote things down in notebooks he never showed anyone, went underground.

Olivier had listened without interrupting, hand still in his hair. When Tanner finished, he hadn't said anything wise or comforting. He'd just leaned down and pressed his lips to Tanner's forehead, and stayed there for a long time.

"It's strange," Tanner says now. "Seeing them. But funny thing, I am not that surprised, it almost makes sense."

"Yeah."

"They almost make it look easy."

"What do you mean?"

Tanner looks at his hands, chalk dust on his knuckles. "Like loving each other is the easiest thing in the world."

"It's probably the hardest thing they've ever done," Olivier says quietly. "It just looks easy from outside."

Tanner thinks about Rozanov's face on the bench, the stillness, the glass between him and the rest of the world. "Yeah," he says. "That too, probably."

"I saw you got moved to the second line," Olivier says.

"You watch my games, Beau?"

"I've always watched your games. You know that."

Tanner does know that. He remembers the first time he looked up into the stands during warm-ups at McGill. It was his first game in the starting lineup. He was so nervous his hands were shaking inside his gloves, and then he saw Olivier there, law textbook open on his lap, completely ignoring it, eyes on the ice. On him. Nobody had ever come to watch Tanner do anything before. Not the foster families. Not the group home staff. Nobody.

"It's a fair call," Tanner says. "I haven't been playing well."

"You've been playing fine."

"I've been playing like a second liner. So they put me on the second line. That's how it works."

"Are you okay with that?"

"I'm realistic about it."

"That's not the same thing."

"It rarely is."

Olivier pauses. "You're being very philosophical."

"I have a literature degree, Beau. I'm always philosophical. I just hide it well."

"Behind the jock thing?"

"Behind the jock thing."

Tanner can hear his smile. From the very first week at university, when he'd found Tanner reading Lord Byron in the back corner of the library and sat down next to him without asking - Olivier had seen through Tanner's facade. Worse, he'd done it so gently Tanner hadn't even realized his walls were coming down until they already had.

"How are you?" Tanner says, putting emphasis on the "you."

"Busy. So many meetings. A panel on Thursday."

There is a loud crunch on the other end of the line.

Tanner frowns. "Are you eating?"

"I'm having a late lunch."

Tanner glances at the clock on the wall. "It's three in the afternoon."

"I had back-to-back committee meetings since seven this morning and the only thing in my office is a bag of barbecue chips from the vending machine."

Tanner laughs despite himself. "You're a Member of Parliament eating vending machine chips alone in your office."

"Don't judge me."

"I'm absolutely judging you."

"François went over his allotted speaking time again."

"Who's François?"

"A colleague who speaks very slowly about things he does not understand."

Tanner snorts. He has missed this. Olivier's version of complaining, describing people with such careful politeness that it lands harder than any actual insult.

"And because I'm apparently becoming a real politician, I nodded respectfully for forty-five straight minutes instead of throwing a chair at him."

"Growth," Tanner says solemnly.

"Thank you."

Another crunch. Then a quieter one, like Olivier is trying to chew more discreetly and failing. Tanner almost tells him that he can hear every single chip. He does not, because that would sound too much like something he would say if they were still together, sitting in the same room, Olivier cross-legged on the couch with crumbs on his shirt and a briefing binder open on his lap.

Then Olivier exhales softly, some of the humour fading. "I'm working on a foster care file, actually."

Tanner straightens slightly without meaning to.

"Youth aging out of the system," Olivier continues. Not delicate about it. He'd learned a long time ago that Tanner preferred direct to gentle. "Housing supports. Education access. Transition programs. It's still early stages, but it could become something real."

"How are they handling intake?" Tanner asks immediately.

A pause. "What do you mean?"

"The housing support. Is it tied to enrollment?"

"Partially, yes."

"That's going to lose people."

Olivier goes quiet instantly and Tanner cannot help the fond smile from forming on his face, remembering late nights when Olivier worked through his Political Science coursework out loud and Tanner interrupted every five minutes with questions that accidentally dismantled entire arguments. Olivier used to look at him after, half annoyed and half delighted, and say, *"You could have gone to law school, you know."*

"Why?" Olivier asks now.

"Because half the kids aging out don't even have the paperwork needed to apply for those programs." Tanner shrugs even though Olivier cannot see him. "IDs get lost between placements. Nobody teaches you taxes. Or lease agreements. Or how to fill out financial aid forms without panicking you'll do it wrong."

He stares at the rubber flooring beneath his shoes.

"It's bureaucracy, making someone already exhausted prove they deserve help," he says quietly.

Tanner can practically hear Olivier thinking through it, rearranging pieces in real time, the way he used to rewrite entire essays in his head without picking up a pen.

"Okay," Olivier says slowly. "Yeah. You're right."

Tanner huffs out a laugh. "You don't have to sound so devastated about it."

"I'm not devastated. I'm rewriting three pages of notes in my head."

Tanner chuckles. "I know, baby."

The word lands before he can catch it. A reflex from another life and the silence that follows is deafening.

"Sorry," Tanner says. "That just..."

"It's fine," Olivier says quickly. Too quickly. His voice has gone slightly rough. "It's fine, Tan."

Neither of them addresses it further. But the air on the line has changed, like a door has been opened by accident and neither of them can figure out how to close it without admitting they have both looked through it.

"Ah. Sorry to your notes," Tanner manages, steering them back.

"No, this is good."

There is another rustle of the chip bag. Tanner hears him shift, maybe leaning back in his chair, and for a second he can see the whole scene so clearly it hurts. Olivier in his office, tie loosened, sleeves pushed up. His golden brown skin, soft curls constantly falling over his forehead no matter how much product people put in it for TV. That unfairly open face that makes strangers trust him immediately. The desk would be chaos. It is always chaos. Stacks of files and books and highlighters without caps and at least one mug balanced somewhere it should not be. Tanner used to move the mugs to safer spots without saying anything.

He can hear the fatigue underneath Olivier's voice now that he is listening for it. Not physical exhaustion exactly. The strain of being looked at all the time. Of needing to sound certain about things that affect millions of people. Tanner wonders, not for the first time, whether anyone in Ottawa remembers that Olivier Beaumont is still just a person underneath all the speeches and the polling numbers and the comparisons to the Kennedys.

"I saw you talking on CTV last night," Tanner says finally.

"Oh?"

"You were good. You're always good." Tanner leans his head back against the wall behind him. "That thing you do where you look directly into the camera like you're talking to one person."

A beat.

"I *was* talking to one person."

Tanner closes his eyes.

"You can't say things like that."

"Potato, pooptato."

That makes both of them crack up, a kind of laughter that comes too easily and lingers too long, and when it fades the silence underneath is worse.

Because it is the kind of silence that used to be filled by one of them closing the distance. Now it is a kind of silence that makes you remember. He remembers the way Olivier used to

reach for him in the mornings, half asleep, hand finding Tanner's hip without opening his eyes. He remembers the rattle of his keys in the door when he came home. For a while, that sound had been the safest thing in Tanner's world, and also the thing that scared him most, because every time he heard it some part of him thought: *are you leaving?*

He is always waiting for people to leave. And Olivier had walked in and decided to stay and Tanner had spent their entire relationship showing him doors and expecting him to take one. Then, when Olivier finally did - when the work consumed him, the distance grew, dates got cancelled, the calls got shorter and the silences got longer and he realised he couldn't help someone who didn't want it - Tanner had felt the grim satisfaction of being right, which was worse than being sad.

The laughter fades. Neither of them says anything for a moment, and Tanner can feel the call tilting into something neither of them is ready for.

"I should go," Tanner says.

"Yeah."

Neither of them hangs up.

"Tan."

"Yeah."

"I'm glad you called. You can always call."

"I know, you said that last time."

"I'll say it every time."

Tanner looks around the gym. The bar racked. The chalk dust. The buzzing light. His whole life, contained in repetitions and routine and safety, and somewhere in Ottawa, probably twenty minutes away, Olivier Beaumont is on the other end of a phone line, glad to just have these scraps from Tanner, and that is either the saddest thing in the world or the most hopeful, and Tanner genuinely cannot tell which.

"Are people so unhappy when they love?" Tanner says, his voice almost a whisper.

He hears Olivier inhale. It is a game they have always played. Tanner starts a quote and Olivier finishes it. If he knows it. Most of the time he does.

"Yes, Christine," Olivier says, and there is something careful and cracked underneath it, like he understands exactly why Tanner has chosen this one, "when they love and are not sure of being loved."

The line hangs there between them.

Tanner presses the heel of his hand against his eye. His chest aches in a way that has nothing to do with the workout.

"You know that I..." Olivier starts. He stops. Tanner hears him exhale, unsteady. "You know."

Tanner's throat closes. He can feel the tears building, the ones he thought he had already spent in the shower that morning, and he thinks about how absurd it is that this man can still undo him completely. That they can go a year without seeing each other, months without speaking and then fall back into this in a span of minutes.

And that is the problem, maybe.

Not that loving Olivier is difficult. Loving Olivier has always been the easiest thing Tanner has ever done.

Everything else requires effort. Hockey requires effort. Existing some days requires effort. He knows how to work for things, how to earn his place, how to make himself useful enough to keep around. But seven years ago, Olivier had walked into his life and Tanner had loved him immediately, instinctively. And Tanner does not trust things that come that easily.

Because easy things can be lost just as easily. Because no one deserves to wake up every day carrying the full weight of another person's will to keep going. Because some part of Tanner still believes love stops being love the moment it becomes obligation. And soon, Tanner is sure, Olivier will have the weight of a whole country on him, and Tanner will no longer be a reason to look back.

"Yeah," Tanner says, barely audible. "I know."

"Then why won't you let me - "

"Because knowing isn't really the problem, Beau." His voice cracks on it. He does not bother hiding it. There is no point, Olivier can always hear everything he tries not to say.

Olivier is quiet. Tanner can hear him breathing, uneven, and realizes with a jolt that Olivier is crying too.

"Okay," Olivier says softly. Thick. "Okay."

They stay on the line for a moment and neither of them speaks.

"Bye, Beau," Tanner whispers, eventually.

"Bye, Tanner." A breath. "Call me, if you need me. Whenever. Please."

"I know."

"I mean it."

"I know you do."

I hope you don't mind another deviation from Hollanov 🙄 More than half of the remaining chapters will still focus on Shane and Ilya though 😊. Timeline for those who are maybe confused : this chapter happens in March 2021. Olivier is elected PM in September 2021. Present time in this fic (previous trivia and dinner chapter) is late February / early March 2022. The quote at the end is from The Phantom of the Opera.

End Notes

As always, I am a slut for kudos and comments ❤️

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!