

ask anything of me (except to leave you).

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by [Jooocccc](#)

Summary

“Go away,” Ilya said, his voice muffled by something. Shane would bend space and time to give Ilya anything, but he would not grant him this.

Instead, he pushed the door open, his heart breaking at the sight of Ilya in his massive bed, somehow looking tiny beneath the covers.

“Ilya,” he said, the name escaping like an exhale. He had so much to say. So many things that needed fixing. So many apologies he owed him.

“Shane, please-“

“I’ll go.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“No - not... not to Montreal. To the party. If you’ll still have me.”

OR

Shane attends Boodram’s Boxing Day Party. This is how it goes.

Notes

Prompt:

Fanwork : Fanfiction

Pairing: Ilya /Shane

Prompt : Shane goes to that team party Ilya invites him to during TLG. And if possible they come out to team then or later for another team gathering.

Thank you for the wonderful prompt! This is something I’d been thinking about writing for a while, and I’m excited to have gotten the perfect excuse.

Mild TWs for a brief, non-detailed description of an anxiety attack, implied/referenced homophobia from the v*yageurs, and an allusion to Shane’s ED/compulsive exercising! <3 please read carefully!

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

He had called him Hollander. The entire conversation - *argument* - had left him feeling unmoored. Untethered to the earth, like he was flying against the force of gravity to get back to the one thing that held him here.

God. He'd called him Hollander.

They still called one another by their last names occasionally. The familiarity of it was comfortable, and the sound of all three syllables of his last name rolling off of Ilya's tongue still made his heart clench.

This time, though, it felt as earth-tilting as it had the first time he'd called him Shane.

Shane had known for a while that something like this was coming. That they were drifting apart, patching the holes in their perfectly sculpted bubble with easy conversations and amazing sex.

God, he wanted Ilya back. The space between them seemed insurmountable, and he was just a staircase away. The drive back to Montreal seemed unfathomable. Like if he were to get in his car and drive the now-familiar route, it would break something in them that could never be fixed.

Was *this* even reparable? Could Ilya ever forgive Shane for his selfishness? He wouldn't blame him if he didn't. Maybe Ilya deserved better. Maybe Ilya deserved to be set free, unburdened by Shane and his cowardice. Ilya loved with his whole heart. He loved his team. He loved just about every dog he came across. He loved his mother, Shane's parents, the children he'd gotten to know from his hospital visits.

He loved Shane.

He loved openly, with everything he had, and Shane didn't know how to be brave enough to let him share this huge truth about the two of them. He didn't know what the other side of this looked like, the two of them being out. He didn't know if he could survive the fallout, the things he would lose, the abrupt disappearance of his name in the arenas that cheered for him.

He didn't know how to survive that. The hypothetical worst-case scenario that haunted him nightly.

But mostly, he knew he *wouldn't* survive losing Ilya. An outcome that was much less hypothetical as he sat on the unforgiving floor of Ilya's home. He didn't even remember sinking down to it.

Ilya had asked him, point-blank, if Shane would choose him over hockey. Yes. Of course, the answer was yes. He would choose Ilya over *anything*. Only, he'd been struck once again with the terror he was gripped by every night, the dreams he had sometimes jolting him awake. The fear and loss and loneliness of a reality in which the world knew the deepest, darkest secret he held. For a moment, panic had wrapped its icy hands around his vocal cords, and it had been a moment too long. The pain on Ilya's face had scared Shane even more than the

idea of losing everything he'd worked for years to earn. Had punched him in the gut so horribly that he still felt it like a physical ache.

Tugging at his hair, Shane found himself rocking where he sat, forward and backwards over and over, crumpled against Ilya's couch.

God. He loved this couch. He loved the home that Ilya had made. He loved stepping through the entrance and shrugging off the weight of the world's expectations. The moment the door shut behind him, he could be exactly who he was. There was no hiding.

Except that's exactly what it was. Hiding. He'd confined Ilya to a tiny box, a minuscule corner of the world in which he could freely be himself. To Shane, this home felt like an oasis. Did Ilya view it as a prison?

Shane thought of Ilya's stories about the team. About Troy. About Harris. About Wyatt's sister. He thought about his own team. How everything felt different now that he'd come out. He'd denied it for months, now, but he couldn't pretend that wasn't part of the reason he panicked at the thought of attending another team's party. The jokes they'd made together, the ridiculous slaps on his ass when he scored a goal, the jovial mood even in the showers as they all cleaned off another successful game. They'd all disappeared. As if Shane were suddenly a different person than he had been. As if he were going to enjoy an ass slap from Gilbert fucking Comeau. As if he might suddenly develop a wandering eye in the team showers.

He thought about Scott Hunter, and Eric Bennett, and Ryan Price. He thought about all of the other players in the league who were just as terrified as Shane was. He thought, perhaps ludicrously, about the goddamn Hannah Montana movie the twins had forced him to watch. About how the whole town kept her secret.

Would the Centaurs keep theirs? If they didn't, could he handle the aftermath?

Shane decided it didn't matter. He could lose anything as long as he didn't lose Ilya.

And so Shane decided to fight for this. To be brave. To face his fears and make sure Ilya didn't doubt for a second that he was worth *anything*.

He gave himself a few more minutes on the floor. A few more minutes of his lifelong self-soothing method of feeling the control he had over his own body. A few more minutes of telling himself he could do this. He had to do this. He wanted to do this. He loved Ilya so much that his bones ached with it, his heart throbbed with his, his blood sang with it. Ilya wanted a refuge, was begging Shane for permission to build one, and Shane wanted to give it to him.

Finally unfolding himself, Shane shook the nerves out of his body, bracing himself for whatever would come next.

He knocked on Ilya's door, which felt ridiculous. He'd never so much as bothered to warn Ilya that he was coming in. Ilya had wanted space, and maybe Shane should've given it to

him, but he couldn't. He had to fix this. He had to put the pieces of them back together, like one of his dad's puzzles.

"Go away," Ilya said, his voice muffled by something. Shane would bend space and time to give Ilya anything, but he would not grant him this.

Instead, he pushed the door open, his heart breaking at the sight of Ilya in his massive bed, somehow looking tiny beneath the covers.

"Ilya," he said, the name escaping like an exhale. He had so much to say. So many things that needed fixing. So many apologies he owed him.

"Shane, please—"

"I'll go."

"Yes. Thank you."

"No - not... not to Montreal. To the party. If you'll still have me. If this... if we're okay. If we *can* be okay."

Ilya finally perked up at that, his head lifting up from the pillow it had been buried in.

"Ilya," Shane repeated. "Sorry doesn't even begin to cover this. I said horrible, horrible things. Things that I didn't mean. Things that make it seem like I don't owe you *everything* for all of the sacrifices you made for us. I've been selfish, and scared, and ungrateful, and I'm so, so sorry. Of course I'd choose you over hockey. I'd choose you over anything. Over my own life. I didn't mean to blow up the way I did, and I should never have questioned you. I've just—" he broke off, his voice cracking as he lost the battle against his tears. "I've been so scared. So scared of what comes next, and scared of losing you, and scared of waiting ten years. I've been terrified, Ilya. But worse than that, I've been a horrible boyfriend. I've only ever wanted to protect the both of us. I thought that's what I was doing, but I was wrong. You deserve a wealth of support, a team that knows you and loves you for it. And so... I'll go. If you still want to. I'll go to the party. I'll go to your games. I'll go to your next post-game interview and kiss you while the world watches. I'll do anything. You're worth it. You're worth whatever it will cost."

Shane took a deep breath, then. His cheeks were soaked with tears, and he tugged at the sleeves of his sweatshirt - *Ilya's* sweatshirt - nervously as he waited for Ilya's reply. Maybe he'd still send him away. Maybe Shane would have to make that lonely drive back to Montreal, but at least he would know. He would know that Shane would choose him. Always.

"Sweetheart," Ilya croaked out, tears spilling down his face as well. He'd sat all the way up in bed, his back to the headboard and the blankets draped around his hips. His arms opened wide, waiting for Shane to fit inside of them. "Come."

And god, wasn't that the most beautiful word Shane had ever heard?

He ran to Ilya, flinging himself into his boyfriend's arms and clutching him like he might disappear. Ilya returned the hug, their embrace so desperate that Shane felt more than one of his joints crack. Still, he didn't move. For long, endless moments, they held each other, hoping their bodies might say the things words couldn't even begin to cover. The position was awkward, Shane was sideways in Ilya's lap, his knees curled to his chest, his torso twisted to hug Ilya properly.

"I'm so sorry," Shane sobbed, burying his face into Ilya's neck, his tears hot against his face, against Ilya's throat. "God, Ilya. I'm so sorry. I didn't - I didn't know, I thought you were happy-"

Which was maybe only half true. He'd known they were both missing *something*. He'd blamed it on proximity, an adjustment after the honeymoon phase had ended. He knew that something was wrong, he just hadn't known the extent of it.

"I didn't see how hard this was on you, and I should have. You're right. I have people who I'm safe around. I want you to have that, too."

"I am sorry I sprung this on you," Ilya said, his hands stroking Shane's hair. He felt sweaty and greasy and *gross* from all the tears and the time spent raking his damp hands through his hair in agony just moments before. He felt ridiculous, crumpled up in a weird, desperate position up against Ilya's chest. He felt relief like nothing he'd ever experienced, rushing through his veins as Ilya held him. "Is too much to decide so quickly. We have been hiding for years, I cannot ask you to be ready in hours."

"Can you tell me where it came from? Why you wanted it?"

"I always want the world to know you, Hollander. To know you have chosen to love me. I want to brag to strangers on the street that you are mine. I am scared, too, but I am so proud to love you, Shane."

"I'm proud, too," Shane insisted, desperate for Ilya to understand. "I am. I promise. I just - I panicked. But I shouldn't have. I didn't think about how important this might be for you. I should've listened."

"I should've said something a long time ago. When I was first getting very lonely."

"Are... are you still lonely?"

"Sometimes, yes. Not so much, though. I love my team. I do. I miss winning. I miss being the best at something I am best at. Is worth it, to be here. And I think we will win, one day. Is just hard. Not being best all of a sudden. I miss you more than I did before. I did not know I even could. You are so close now, and I just wish we are together all the time." His fingers continued raking through Shane's thick, messy hair as Shane's fingers traced small lines up and down Ilya's forearm. "Most times I know, we keep our secret for good reasons. Sometimes I think... I think I might die, holding it all in. I love you so much it fills my whole body, and the hurt of hiding it feels like it will crack me open. Spill me all out."

“I’m so sorry, Ilya. I’m sorry you’ve been feeling like this and I didn’t know. I should’ve pushed. I should’ve asked.”

“I would not have wanted our time together to be...” he paused in the way he did when searching for a word. “Tainted. Is so precious to me. I thought... I could keep it secret, too. The hurt.”

“You shouldn’t need to, though. Our time is precious to me, too, Ilya. But *you* are even more precious. You. And this. *Us*. And I never, ever want you to hide even more than I’m already asking you to.”

“You are not asking. Is important for both of us to hide. I just thought... my team is okay. Good. They would be alright. You are not ready, though. But maybe soon?”

“I am ready,” Shane said, sounding more sure than he felt. “I meant it, Ilya. I am ready. I will go tonight. If you want to. Or I will go next time if you don’t want to tonight. But I will go. Anywhere.” *I will do anything*, he thought.

Shane had thought he was protecting Ilya. Keeping him safe from the backlash they would face upon discovery. He thought they’d agreed, the risks were too plenty, and so Shane had made a plan, and he had made this possible, and he had done everything he could to stick to it. He’d been rigid, unbending, terrified of straying from the clearest, safest path, because he wasn’t just scared for himself. He was scared for Ilya. For Ilya, who would have to fear the wrath of the country he’d been born in, who would lose his brother in a permanent way, who would never be able to show Shane all of the places he’d grown up.

But plans changed, and he needed to change with them. To bend so he didn’t break.

“I love you, Ilya,” he said. “More than anything in this life and the next.”

“I love you, too, moya lyubov,” he said.

“When does the party start?”

“Five hours, I think.”

“Can we go?”

“You are sure? You do not need to. Was silly of me to ask.”

“I want to go. I want them to know, and... maybe, seeing us together, they will understand better. We’ll control the narrative.”

“Narrative?”

“We’ll control the story,” he corrected. “They won’t have to wonder why we’re together. They’ll see us, and they’ll know.”

Shane oftentimes found himself in awe that they hadn’t been discovered already. Every time they were in a room together, he was certain he would give it away. That someone would find

out. That they would know.

Because seeing them, they would have to *get it*. They would see what Shane saw; they would see how perfectly they fit.

“You are not just doing this for me?”

“Of course I’m doing it for you,” Shane said, cupping Ilya’s jaw in his hands. “But I’m doing it for us, too. I need to be brave eventually, or I never will be. Let’s do it. Let’s go to your teammate’s party. Let’s tell them that we’re in love.”

Ilya let out a quiet little sob of his own, pulling Shane fully into the bed, manhandling him around until they lay face to face, nose to nose, toe to toe.

“I love you, Shane Hollander. The best person in the world. My whole heart.”

“I love you, too. So much. You are my everything, Ilya. And then some.”

“Five hours,” Ilya exhaled. “Five hours, and they will all know. God. *God*. I love you. Moya lyubov. Dusha moya. Zhizn moya.”

My love. My soul. My life.

“Ya tebya lyublyu,” Shane said, holding Ilya’s cheeks in his hands, brushing their noses together.

“Thank you,” Ilya whispered against his lips, pressing soft, endless kisses against them. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

Shane could only hold him, meeting each kiss with another of his own.

There were dozens of jokes to be made about how they could spend the next five hours. Shane could almost sense them on the tip of Ilya’s tongue, but they both said nothing. They kissed, and they held one another, and that was it. Shane had run out of words to say, of thoughts to share. He felt empty in a cathartic way, like the weight of the dread he’d been carrying was finally gone.

“I think I could use a nap,” Ilya said, reading Shane’s mind in the way he always seemed to be able to do. “We will be refreshed for the party.”

“Please,” Shane whispered against Ilya’s chest, snuggling even closer to his boyfriend.

“Am setting an alarm for one hour. We will nap, and then shower, you always shower after you cry-“ Which, like, true, but Shane didn’t think he cried enough for Ilya to have noticed that. “Then we will get ready for the party. Then my friends will meet my boyfriend. Is the best day.”

They’d had many *best days*, Shane thought. He hoped they would have many more.

“Perfect,” Shane agreed, folding his hands up under his cheek where he pressed it against that stupid Bear tattoo. He loved it so much. He loved Ilya so much. He said as much before the exhaustion and promise of peaceful cuddles pulled him into sleep.

Shane and Ilya luxuriated in a slow, unhurried shower. Their bodies pressed together, each touch equal parts a promise and an apology.

Ilya’s hands were reassuring as they massaged shampoo into Shane’s hair, he murmured soft Russian pet names against the warm flesh of Shane’s shoulder, told him how thankful he was, how brave Shane was being for him.

And as Shane scrubbed soap along Ilya’s body, worshipping every inch with his hands, he returned the favor. He whispered endearments in French, his lips following behind his fingertips. He told Ilya he was worth everything, that he was so proud to love him, that holding Ilya’s heart was the biggest accomplishment of his life. Stanley Cups be damned. He’d earned the kind of love they wrote books about.

By the time they were finished, dried off, and getting dressed, the mood had shifted drastically. The heavy cloud that had loomed over them when Shane had first arrived was gone, the weight of the impending implosion that Shane had sensed coming was no longer bearing down on them.

“I have an idea,” Shane said, wrapping his arms around Ilya’s waist, his chin resting on Ilya’s chest as he smiled up at him. “Next time either of us get scared, or lonely, or angry, or anything, we just... talk about it. I know why you didn’t, and I don’t know if I would’ve if it had been me feeling that way. But... we have so much more time together this year than we ever have. If a couple of our days and nights together have to be spent talking things out, I... I still want to spend it doing that. Fuck, Ilya, I’d be happy being tortured as long as it was with you.”

“Talking about feelings *is* torture,” Ilya joked, his large hands holding Shane’s hips. “Is good idea. Yes. We will talk. Have important conversations. Even if I only want to kiss you.”

“We’ll talk *and* kiss,” Shane said, stroking his jaw. “I just... don’t want it to get this bad again. I hate that I was hurting you and didn’t know. But we’ll do better, right?”

“Yes,” Ilya said, his voice so certain that Shane believed him. “Better. I promise.”

Shane tipped onto the balls of his feet, kissing him sweetly. “I promise, too.” They parted, getting their shoes and jackets on. “And... you know what?”

“God, I cannot handle more,” Ilya said, holding his chest.

“I’m putting up that picture when I get home. My home. Well, our home. In Montreal. It should be there.”

Ilya’s face crumpled a bit, and he swept Shane into his arms. “I will cry again. You are too much. Too good for me. I love you. You are so brave. Braver than I should have asked you to

be. Thank you, moya lyubimyy.”

Shane could only hold him tightly, breathing in the soothing scent of his many products, the cologne Shane had purchased a bottle of to spray on his pillows when he especially missed Ilya. Finally, *finally* they managed to stop kissing one another, clinging to one another, and made their way to the car.

It was a quiet ride, they held hands on the center console and Ilya stroked his thumb along Shane’s knuckles, a constant reassurance that things would be alright.

“How should we do this?” Shane asked as they parked. “I’ll follow your lead. You know them best, and I trust you.” Those words were a bandage on Ilya’s heart, healing hurts that he’d never even acknowledged.

“Maybe I will go in first, tell them I have brought someone special. A partner. Then you come in? That is okay?”

He held his breath, waiting for Shane’s response.

“Yes. Yes, that’s perfect.”

Leaning across the dash, Ilya pulled him into a deep, passionate kiss. He lost himself in it for a beat, cupping his boyfriend’s face like he was something precious.

“I will be back. It will be okay, great, even. I love you. I will come get you.”

Shane nodded, releasing Ilya’s hand and flexing his fingers against the top of his legs. With one last look at him, Ilya left the car. The walk to Bood’s front door had never felt as daunting as it did now, but it was going to be okay. It *had* to be okay.

It would be okay.

Letting himself in, he followed the noise to the backyard, letting himself soak in the raucous laughter and joyful voices. As soon as he stepped on the patio, he was greeted by a cacophony of his teammates and their partners. Various exclamations of *Roz is finally showing his face*, and *he’s aliiiiive*.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” Bood said, pulling him into a welcoming hug.

“No cat could drag me,” Ilya teased. “Barrett, maybe, but not me. Unless it is a lion.”

“What the hell?” Barrett called out. Ilya was pleased to see him sitting near Harris. Good. They were perfect for each other. The realization that this team would accept Troy emboldened him to jump this final hurdle. If Shane could be brave, he could be, too.

“I have brought someone with me,” he announced to the group at large. “My...” he thought of the word Shane had used, the one that was apparently much less embarrassing than *lover*. “Significant other.”

“What?! Dude! No way! Bring her in!” Voices overlapped one another as they all let out their surprise. Ilya smirked, shaking his head.

“I will save you one of two surprises,” he said. “I will bring *him* in right now.”

“WHAT?!” That was Dykstra.

“Fucking called it,” that was Wyatt.

“As long as he’s not a vegetarian,” that was Bood.

Ilya left them to their shock and walked back to the front, where he saw Shane’s face only barely illuminated by Boodram’s porch lights. He looked beautiful, equal parts terrified and determined in the passenger seat of Ilya’s car. His eyes were glued straight ahead, and if Ilya knew him - which he did - he was running through every scenario that could possibly happen. He approached, gently rapping his knuckles against the window. Shane startled at the noise, but seemed to steel himself, offering Ilya a wobbly little smile. His cute little nose scrunching up as if preparing himself for battle.

“Bood says you are welcome as long as you are not a vegetarian,” he said, opening the door for Shane.

“Thats... it?”

“Da. Yes.”

“You came out to your team and their biggest worry was that I would be a *vegetarian*?”

“You will understand when you try Bood’s chicken.”

“I...” Shane followed him to the front door in a daze. “Wow.”

“I told you,” Ilya said, lacing their fingers together. “These are good people. I would not have brought you if I did not trust them.”

With a nod, Shane lifted their joined hands, pressing a kiss to the back of Ilya’s. “I’m ready.”

As they stood just inside the door to the patio, their appearance went briefly unnoticed, giving them a chance to listen in on the conversation.

“I’ve got fifty on it being Marlow,” Evan said.

“No way. It’s Scott Hunter for sure. Maybe Kip’s just a cover.”

“You’re both wrong, it’s obviously Ryan Price.”

“God their babies would be monsters.”

“You do know two men can’t make a baby, don’t you, Dillon? It’s important to me that you know that.”

“Can’t they mix their, like, jizz in a tube or something?”

“Oh my god,” Wyatt interrupted. “You’re *all* wrong. It’s obviously Shane Hollander.” Shane watched Hayes count out three hundred dollar bills and drop it on the table, snickering to himself.

“We have a winner,” Ilya announced, finally stepping outside, lifting he and Shane’s hand up in the air like a trophy. Maybe, in a way, it kind of was.

“Fuck yes!” Hayes said, ignoring them completely in favor of raking in the... *significant* pile of cash that had been gathered.

“Scott Hunter?” Ilya asked, leveling Chouinard with a look. “I am offended. I obviously have much better taste than that.”

He gestured at Shane, whose cheeks burned under the attention. Weakly, he lifted a hand in a sad attempt at a wave.

“Er, hi. I’m Shane.”

“*I’m Shane*, he says,” Evan Dykstra said. “*I’m Shane*, like he’s needs an introduction. Like he’s not the sleep paralysis demon of half the goddamn NHL.”

Then, without warning, he approached the pair. Shane didn’t even have time to worry about what he was going to do before he was being wrapped up in a hug. He smelled like cologne and weed and dressed like a cowboy who suddenly got a shit ton of money, but he was hugging Shane. He was hugging Shane, who he’d just learned was some flavor of not-straight, and it maybe patched together one of the pieces of his heart that had been broken that day in the Voyageurs locker room. That day, when he’d come out and had *felt* the palpable shift beneath him. But now this probably-stoned, cowboy defenseman was hugging him like it wasn’t weird at all that Shane was there.

Hesitantly, he took his hand back from Ilya and returned the hug, looking around as if waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting for Dykstra to recoil and laugh in his face and call him something horrible.

Instead, the hug broke naturally, and Dykstra moved to embrace Ilya.

It broke a dam, and suddenly Ilya was being swarmed by hugs, beaming at his teammates and smiling up at the sky as if thanking the universe for something. He’d never looked so beautiful.

“You weren’t *my* sleep paralysis demon,” Hayes said, coming up to Shane with a goofy grin, extending a hand. “Thanks for all the money.”

“You’re welcome?” Shane said. “How did... how did you know?”

“Goalies notice everything. People think we don’t, ‘cause of all the headshots,” he joked.

“But we do. Plus I was like, Roz never does anything halfway. It’s gotta be the wildest shit you can think of. Thus, you.”

Shane laughed, the sound a little less forced this time. “Yeah, he never makes it easy.”

“But you love ‘im?”

“Yeah,” Shane said, smiling at Ilya, who beamed right back at him. “I really do.”

“Good. ‘Cause we do, too. All you gotta do is treat him right, and you’re welcome at every party you wanna show up to.”

“Thanks, Wyatt. I’m really glad he’s got such an amazing team of people around him.”

The fact that Shane maybe *didn’t* have had an amazing team of people around him was left unspoken, but he seemed to understand.

“Welp, you’ve got us now, too. Do you drink? Grab a cider if you drink, Harris’ sisters make it, and it *slaps*.”

“Hollander!” Bood yelled, coming up with his arms wide open. Shane wasn’t sure he’d ever been hugged this many times in his life, but he leaned into it, wanting to make a good impression. “You’re not a vegetarian, are you?”

“No, not at all,” he said. “I’ve heard great things about your cooking skills. What should I try?”

“Do you like spicy food?” He asked.

“Say no!” Yelled Ilya.

“I really don’t,” Shane admitted. “But if that’s what I need to try, I’ll try it.”

He *refused* to let himself agonize over the calories right now, even though his stomach twisted as he mentally calculated how much time he’d have to spend on the treadmill the next day. For tonight, he could just be Ilya’s boyfriend, meeting his friends, eating their food, and laughing at their jokes.

Bood walked him through the offerings, grinning as Shane added a few pieces of the secret barbecue sauce chicken, come callaloo, and peas and rice.

“Shane, you *have* to try his pepper sauce,” Holmber said. “He makes it himself and gave us all our own bottle.”

“Oh, uh - sure, what do I put it on?”

“Put it on the callaloo, you’ll love it.”

“Alright, yeah,” Shane said, innocently adding a dollop on top of the delicious-looking leafy greens. “Thanks!”

Ilya was still getting grilled with questions from a few of his teammates, so Shane sidled up next to him, poking around at his food with a fork before taking a large bite.

“Why do I smell-” Hayes said, glancing around at everyone’s plates.

“Shane *no-*” Ilya said.

“Shane *yes!*” LaPointe interrupted.

Ilya was cursing in Russian as Shane’s face turned from pink to red to an alarming sort of purple color. He shoved a cider into Shane’s hands, who chugged it gratefully, coughing on the spice of whatever liquid fire he’d just eaten.

“Oh my god!” LaPointe howled.

“You should’ve seen your face!” Young said.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Holmber said, though the tears in his eyes as he doubled over with laughter negated the sincerity of his words. “I just - it’s hazing! It’s how we welcome everyone to the team! Ilya got his clothes stolen after the shower, Barrett got his practice jerseys dyed pink, it’s a ritual!”

Everyone was laughing, but not *meanly*. He felt Ilya seemingly looking at him like he was a flight risk, hands raised slightly as if Shane were a startled animal. Shane waited for the humiliation to set in. To be stung by the realization that he was the butt of the joke. Ilya seemed to be doing the same, bracing for impact.

Instead, Shane burst out laughing, fanning himself as he leaned into Ilya’s side. For the first time in a long time, he could tell that he was not the butt of a joke, but the victim of a (mostly) harmless prank. It felt... juvenile in a refreshing way. Even as a rookie, Shane’s abilities had isolated him from the rest of the team - he’d never really experienced the silly hazing that others had to go through. It felt... nice. Like he was part of this group of people, even if only by extension of Ilya.

He felt Ilya let out a soft exhale of relief, squeezing Shane’s shoulders.

“Bood, what do you put in that sauce?!”

“It’s a secret I’ll take to my grave,” Bood said, his eyes crinkled up in a wide smile.

“Speaking of graves,” Ilya said, his voice stern but playful as he stared down Holmber. “You will be sent to yours early, I think. This is how you treat your Captain’s honored guest?” With a cluck of his tongue, Ilya sprung on the young player, wrapping an arm around his head and halfheartedly sparring with him in the middle of the patio.

“They’ll be at it for a minute,” came a voice from behind Shane, a soft hand placed on his shoulder. “And I’m sorry about the kids. It really is just their way of welcoming you, believe it or not. Come into the kitchen, I’ll get you some water.”

“That’d be amazing,” Shane said, smiling at the woman in front of him. “Cassie, right? Ilya’s told me a lot about you.”

“He hasn’t told me *anything* about you!” She teased, guiding him into a massive kitchen and getting him a glass of water. “I’m glad you’re here, I knew Ilya was always sneaking away to see someone. The mystery can now be put to bed.”

“I-“ Shane started, biting on his lip after taking a few big drinks of water. “I’m not - *we* aren’t *out* or anything. Officially. But Ilya really loves you all. And he wanted you all to know about this.” A few more drinks of water. “I have a hard time... being open about it. I can’t help but worry. But we’ve been hiding for a long time. He deserves to have people he doesn’t have to hide around.”

“I can imagine. It’s got to be awful, with the whole... story the league’s built around you two. I’m honored that he trusts us all enough to share this. I promise we’ll all keep the secret safe, for as long as you need us to. Hockey’s a gossip-y sport,” she admitted, hitting on one of the many reasons Shane felt so terrified of attending the party. “But we’re a tight-knit group. Nothing like this will get out until you’re both ready for it.”

“Thank you, Cassie. That’s really nice to hear.”

“It’s the least we can do for the guy who brought *Ilya Rozanov* to the Centaurs!” She said, immediately bringing up the mood.

“Yes!” Ilya’s voice boomed from behind them. “Is biggest blessing of the team, I know. Shane, moya lyubov, how is your tongue? Still in working order? Is very important to me, you know.”

Cassie giggled as a young player - Luca Haas, Shane thought - squeaked in surprise from behind Ilya. Shane flushed immediately, shoving Ilya’s shoulder.

“Go to hell.”

“What? I only meant so you can keep tasting Bood’s delicious food! What did you think I meant?”

“I hate you.”

“I think you love me very much.”

“Not of my own volition.” Shane replied, his tone dry.

“So rude, using big English words just because you’re angry.”

“Can you help me get a plate of food that *won’t* melt my face off?”

“Da. Yes. Come, we will eat together.”

Which was how the two ended up sitting next to one another in front of a fireplace, plates on their laps and smiles on their faces.

“Hey,” Shane whispered, just for Ilya to hear.

“Hm?”

“I’m glad we came. I’m sorry I almost missed this chance.”

Ilya beamed, his smile so bright Shane nearly felt blinded by it. “I am, too. Thank you, moy lyubimyy. I am so proud, and thankful, and lucky.”

Bravely, Shane rested his head on Ilya’s shoulder as the conversation continued around them. Nobody so much as glanced at them as he did. It was just... okay. He was just a person, resting against their partner. Chouinard’s wife had her tiny frame sprawled across her husband’s lap. Dykstra had both arms wrapped around his wife, whose fingers traced up and down one of his biceps. Nobody glanced at them, either. They just... existed that way. The fact that Shane was allowed the same thrilled him in a way he didn’t expect. In fact, he was *so* excited that he wrapped an arm through one of Ilya’s, his heart racing with the adrenaline of holding him in *public*. He felt Ilya melt into the touch, could swear Ilya’s pulse kicked up a notch at the open affection.

“I love you,” Shane whispered.

“Ya tebya lyublyu,” Ilya whispered back.

And they ate, and they talked, and nobody made things weird, and for a brief few hours, Shane and Ilya got to be just that - Shane and Ilya.

They would go home and fall asleep and wake up, and Shane would spend hours in Ilya’s home gym, and Ilya would face the day feeling a million pounds lighter, and they would have to go back to being Hollander and Rozanov eventually, but for that night, they had both been gifted this amazing thing. The chance to just be Shane and Ilya.

End Notes

Thank you for reading!!! I hope you enjoyed 🥰💖 the affirmation ghouls within my soul love kudos and comments, if you feel so inclined to share them. Have a wonderful day!!!

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