

the limitations of maddocks questions

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the limitations of maddocks questions

by [viviolet](#)

Summary

when shane gets the injury that would come to end his career, in the moment he's just thankful he didn't break his jaw.

or: shane knew, in the abstract, that one day he would play his last professional nhl game. it never occurred to him that hockey would choose that day for him.

Notes

there's no type of angst i like to chew on more than thing you love killing you. so in a horrible world where shane doesn't get the choice to retire, hockey has to be what ends his career, right?

i was going to give him acl issues because write what you know, but i spent too long in ilya gets alzheimer's whump land and didn't want shane to be left out. so he's getting nerfed by the other injury that plagued me <3

shoutout to thrown off the ice by taylor fitzpatrick for absolutely planting this seed in the back of my mind.

january 2026 update: this has a podfic now thanks to [cottagepodfics](#). if you'd rather listen, find it [here](#)!

Chapter 1: one

When Shane gets the injury that would come to end his career, in the moment he's just thankful he didn't break his jaw.

They're kicking off a brief road trip in Chicago when Shane takes a puck to the head. He's doing his job on the ice, getting in the shooting lane to save their rookie goalie from a wicked one-timer. The puck would have hurt to take anywhere, but it is a particular stroke of bad luck that it ends up hitting his helmet.

Shane has no shame in the fact that the pain brings him to his knees, swearing loudly, as Chicago scrambles after the puck. He's trying to get his skates under him, blinking hard like that will do anything to clear his head when he distantly can hear the sharp whistle of a referee.

When Shane can drag his head to the net, Manny is peeling his glove up from the ice and offering the dead puck to the ref closest to him.

"Hey," Luca skids to a halt next to him, "you okay Hollzy?"

Shane's tongue feels like lead in his mouth. He shakes his head because he doesn't trust himself to make any sense if he speaks and skates to the bench. Once he starts shaking his head it's like he can't stop, like that will somehow clear the ringing noise.

Ilya is already going over the boards to take over on the ice for him, brow pinched in concern. He's absolutely going to get sent down the tunnel, and Shane can't leave Ilya looking so worried.

"M'okay," he promises, forcing his mouth to make words despite the resistance.

Shane's already being shepherded off the ice through the gate, but he can see the way some of the tension in Ilya's body fades. He'll be fine. The whole team will be. It helps that it's the bottom of the third and the Centaurs are up by one.

Wiebe doesn't let Shane get near the bench, just sends him down the tunnel with one of the athletic trainers. He's not surprised that Terry is waiting for them in the hall. He's got paperwork in his hand and accepts the iPad from the trainer, looping the video of the hit Shane took as he leads him away from the noise of the arena.

Perks to the cameras on every inch of the ice. It's not like Shane has to explain himself right away.

Terry takes Shane to a trainer room right off the main dressing room, and is patient while Shane methodically strips off his skates so he can do the balance test later. He makes the usual small talk, asking Shane to rate the severity of a couple of symptoms he's worried about.

Terry's good at his job, and Shane feels better that he's answering "no" to most. No loss of conciseness is the big one. Shane knows that he doesn't have that tell-tale headache, but there is an echo of pain on the side of his head that's making Terry frown.

Shane holds up his helmet. "It did its job, but getting hit still hurt. Like someone launched a disk of rubber a hundred and forty kilometers at my head."

Terry takes the helmet, assessing it for damage. "I don't think Ziedins has *that* hot of a shot."

"You get hit in the head with a puck," Shane glowers.

"You know the drill," Terry says as he hands the helmet back. "Where are we playing today?"

"United Center."

"What period is it right now?"

"It's the bottom of the third and the Centaurs are up by one."

Terry gives him a stern look. "That's not the next question."

Shane rolls his eyes. "Barrett scored the last point on a breakaway after the penalty kill."

"What team did we last play?"

"Toronto," Shane wants to close his eyes, finding the fluorescents in the room annoying, but stops himself because he knows he's not supposed to do that right now. "And before you ask, it was two days ago at home. We won, barely, in overtime."

"I'm probably supposed to find it off-putting that some of you guys have done this often enough to have the questions memorized," Terry says as he marks a couple things on his assessment sheet. "Okay, heel-to-toe, hands on your hips, eyes closed."

Shane follows the commands easily, and does his best to count to twenty in his head to keep himself entertained while Terry knocks his legs, checking stability.

He's only made it to sixteen when Terry tells him he's good. He opens his eyes, like he's supposed to.

"Okay Shane, want to tell me why I'm doing this to you?"

"I blocked a shot from Ziedins with my head," Shane says, though he hadn't noticed the number of the Chicago player and wouldn't have known who it was if Terry hadn't said so earlier.

"What were you doing before?"

"Playing hockey," Shane says just to be difficult. "I fanned on a pass from Haas and we were scrambling to get back. Can't believe I made it in time to get hit in the first place."

Terry does not look amused when he asks, “How’d you get off the ice?”

“I got myself up, Haas checked on me, and then I skated off. Ilya went on for me. Did I pass, doc?”

Terry’s eyes go up to the clock and records the time on the paper. “You know, Hollander, it’s a shame I didn’t get to meet you before Rozanov corrupted you. I bet you used to be a nice kid.”

Shane beams, because he’s exiting his mid-thirties and no one has called him kid in an age. “You would have had to meet me a very long time ago.”

That finally gets a chuckle out of Terry, who waves him off. “Game’s almost over, I think you’re fine but let’s play it safe. You let me know first if anything changes, headaches start, memory gets fuzzy. Even if you think it’s nothing.”

“Yessir,” Shane says, retrieving his skates from the floor and making quick work for the dressing room. A glance to one of the TVs shows that there’s only two minutes left on the clock and that Chicago pulled their goalie.

He’s rinsed off and toweling dry so he can change for the airport when the noise of a hockey team high on a win comes thundering into the dressing room.

Ilya finds him easily, smelling like sweaty hockey pads and buzzing with excitement. “Okay?”

Shane indulges him in a kiss, like he’s not obsessed with the way Ilya’s mouth gets inferno hot after a game. “I’m okay. What’d I miss?”

“Baby goalie got a goalie goal!”

That would explain the volume of their celebrations. Shane presses a quick kiss to Ilya’s cheek before kicking him out of his dressing area so Shane can get some clothes on. It’s a lot more public affection than Shane normally allows, but he knows it sets Ilya on edge when either of them get hurt. Kisses take less energy than constant reassurance. That can come later.

They’d played a good game, but Manny’s goal was going to have everyone riled up for the rest of the night. It’s probably a blessing that they’re due to face Nashville in less than twenty hours and don’t have time to go celebrate.

Shane is grateful not to be pulled for press, though when he says as much Wyatt laughs at him.

“They’re annoying, not evil.” Wyatt says while they wait on the rest of their teammates to get ready to load up the bus. “A heater like that to your bucket has to save you from answering any questions for at least twelve hours.”

Shane bobs his head. Wyatt can’t stop smiling at Manny as he fiddles with his phone. There’s a jostle with an elbow, and Wyatt’s showing him a video that’s already been uploaded to the

Centaur's Instagram.

It's an insane lob that two Chicago guys get touches on. Shane knows that Manny got the goal and he's still surprised when it deflects off the bar just the right way and rolls in the net.

"You planning on one-upping him?" Shane asks, pulling his hood up to escape the light and noise around them.

"Provided that everyone is awake enough on the wrong side of a back-to-back," Wyatt says. "Including you, Hollander. You look like you need a nap."

Shane feels like it. "I didn't even play the whole game."

"Pretty sure Chicago wishes those last couple minutes didn't count," Wyatt says with a laugh. "Do I need Roz to promise to behave and let you get some sleep?"

"Me? Promise?" Shane is crowded with an armful of a slightly damp Russian before he can place the voice. "As if I would do anything to hurt my husband's game."

Wyatt's smiling, crowd's feet deep and happy. "Who cares about your husband? I need my captain to play good tomorrow."

Ilya makes an offended noise, one Shane knows he's using when he's playing. He smacks a loud kiss to the side of Shane's head, muttering nonsense Russian nouns as he vows to make sure Shane will play with an indestructible helmet to protect his beautiful face.

Shane's so tired it takes him a moment to realize that Wyatt's talking about him. That three years ago, when Ilya had needed knee surgery and was going to miss at least a season, he'd demanded they give his C to Shane. Shane had tried to return it, of course, when Ilya had been back the next year. But he'd just stolen Shane's A that never got redesignated and wouldn't hear another word about it.

"My head's fine," Shane pulls away from the kisses so he can get a better look at Ilya's dopey smile. "Could have been worse. Could have hit me in the mouth."

A chorus of winces go up. Shane's inclined to agree. Forget the last couple minutes of the game, he'd miss the rest of the season if he'd broken his jaw.

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It's the bottom of the third and the Centaurs are up by one when Shane is jostled awake by the plane landing on the tarmac.

Expect, Shane is on an airplane and the only way he'd leave in the middle of a game is on a gurney, so it can't be the bottom of the third. He must have been dreaming.

It would make sense. Shane's not feeling particularly rested, he might as well have been playing in his sleep. Ilya is still drowsy in his seat, so Shane faces no resistance when he curls deeper into him and unlocks his phone.

Shane needs water, because he's already feeling like staring at the screen is going to give him a headache. There's a notification linking to a highlight of Manny's empty net goal last night, and the game comes rushing back to him.

It's less than a two-hour flight from Chicago to Nashville, and Shane clearly hasn't gotten anything out of the nap. Half the team clearly didn't even try to sleep, and while Ilya is his usual level of reluctant to be roused, he's already faring a lot better than Shane.

Shane more or less follows Ilya like an irritable shadow, not managing more than four or five words all the way to the hotel. He changes out of his airport sweats into pajamas because Ilya teases him incessantly at the idea that Shane would be okay wearing outside clothes in bed. It's not even a real bed, it's a hotel, and Shane is so tired he can't bring himself to care. The things he does for his husband.

He's pretty sure he's asleep before his head hits the pillow.

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It's the bottom of the third and the Centaurs are up by one when Shane wakes up to an alarm with a splitting headache.

"Water?" He rasps out, blindly groping Ilya over the duvet in the darkness.

"Yeah, yeah," Ilya mutters, pulling himself upright and away from Shane.

Shane whines at the loss of the warmth, but Ilya's back within a moment and a half-empty bottle he's offering Shane.

He takes it, greedy, and only leaves a little for Ilya. He's rewarded for his bad behavior with a couple of sweet kisses pressed to his neck.

"Where even are we?" Shane complains.

"Nashville," Ilya says gently as he rolls to put the water bottle back on the bedside table. "Remember? We have to go to that terrible bar with Dilly after."

Shane rubs his face, the text exchange from last week coming back to him. "It was irresponsible of the NHL to let him get traded here."

"The city of Nashville does not deserve Tanner Dillon unleashed on it," Ilya agrees. "But beggars and choosers."

"I don't think that's the right metaphor."

"Shh, I'm always right." Ilya's warmth disappears as he slings himself out of bed. "And you're being bad, Shane. If Wiebe scratches us for being late Hazy will kill me for real."

Shane knows marching orders when he hears them. He's halfway to the bathroom before it occurs to him that he doesn't know what Ilya's talking about. "Wyatt?"

Ilya throws a shirt at him. "Promise I made him last night?"

"Oh," Shane vaguely remembers dressing room threats. "Yeah."

Ilya hasn't moved and is looking at Shane with a hint of concern. "You sure you're awake?"

"Yeah, yeah," Shane's rummaging through their toiletry bag for toothpaste and Advil. "Just slept like shit."

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It's the bottom of the third and the Centaurs are up by one except it's not because Shane's in his warm up jersey and he's pretty sure there isn't this much yellow in United Center.

"Fucking hell!" Troy is out of focus above him. "You okay, Shane?"

Shane is on his back, jostled close to the boards and the unrhythmic drumming of fans tapping on the glass, pleading for warm up pucks.

He'd... slipped? Maybe? The ice is too bright; it's giving him a headache.

"Hand?" Shane asks, and Troy pulls him up with ease.

"Better stay up on your skates during the game," Troy teases, bending down to pick up a puck and skate over to a kid who had to be Arthur's age offering a trade for a bag of caramel apple pops.

Arthur's age? What was Shane thinking? Arthur was a teenager, and if Shane let it slip to Hayden he'd forgotten, the pack of Pike children were going to call him an old man for the rest of his life. Not that they didn't already. But it would get so much worse.

Since it's not the bottom of the third, Shane should probably figure out what he's doing on the ice in skates and his gear. He shakes his head, like that will rattle things in his brain around to spit them out in the right sequence of events.

He looks upwards, blinking into the bright arena lights, as he focuses on keeping his feet under himself and weaving around his teammates as they go through their pregame stretches and rituals.

Plane, nap, hotel, nap, morning skate, back to the hotel, lunch, nap, then to Bridgestone.

Another meal must have happened at some point. Shane had a game to play tonight.

Ilya, Ilya, always following Ilya around. Shane just needed to find Ilya.

He's having the thought as his head turns, spotting his husband near center ice, happily chatting with a familiar man in an obnoxiously bright jersey.

Shane's feet are moving under him and he's letting himself fold into Ilya's side.

“Hey Shane,” a man missing one of his front teeth, Tanner, Shane’s former teammate Tanner, says. “How late can Roz convince you to stay out tonight?”

Shane groans instead of trying to make words to respond and Ilya laughs. “He hasn’t slept well since Chicago.”

“Don’t blame him. Ziedins got me between the pads last season and I think I had the bruise for a month.”

Ilya spits out an unflattering curse in Russian that Shane should know and Tanner clearly doesn’t, but the venom in his voice is all Tanner needs to laugh. Shane should skate off, there’s no way he’s done everything on the ice he needs to in order for them to win, but he is enjoying the sound of them going back and forth. Shane doesn’t need to talk; it’s not like he’d have anything to contribute to about the bar scene. Ilya has a vengeance against whatever Hap and Harry’s is, and apparently Tanner would rather defend it than make sure he’s prepared for the game.

Shane’s hit with a wave of lightheadedness and suddenly it becomes very important he can get his mouth to cooperate.

“Ilya?”

Except it doesn’t come out right, Shane can tell it doesn’t come out right before Ilya’s face falls into unfiltered worry. “Sweetheart?”

“Ilya,” Shane tries again, “Donlemme put my head down.”

His husband’s arms wrap under his own, and there’s a slight jostle as someone comes to his other side.

“Shane, what’s going on?”

Ilya sounds so scared.

“I can put my head down,” Shane says. “M’ll pass out.”

He doesn’t even register anything as wrong really, just like this is something he should warn his husband about. It doesn’t occur to him to worry until Ilya is gone, and there’s a blur of people milling around him.

Shane’s off the ice and being sat down and someone or maybe someones are talking to him but he knows he’s not making much more sense than he was before and he’s upset because his head feels like it's swimming but he’s dry and he wants Ilya and his head and his neck are so heavy and it’s bright and he’s got this awful ache and Shane kept trying to warn them that if his head went down he was going to pass out but they’re making him get lower to the ground and then Shane can’t hold his head up so he hopes Ilya is here because he’s going to fall even though he’s on the ground and his head is swimming but he’s dry and if someone’s going to catch him Ilya will catch him.

It's the bottom of the third and the Centaurs are up by one, but when he opens his eyes, he realizes that must be wrong because while Shane doesn't know exactly where he is, it's hard to mistake a hospital room for a hockey rink.

There's a man in teal scrubs at his bedside that Shane's pretty sure he's never met before. He's typing away at a standing computer, the screen turned away from Shane.

"Am I in trouble?" Shane asks.

The man smiles, something else behind his eyes that Shane can't focus on hard enough to identify. "No, you're not in trouble. I have some questions for you, if that's alright?"

Shane nods, pushing himself to sit a little straighter on the gurney bed. "Yeah."

"Can you tell me your name and date of birth?"

"Shane Hollander," he says, tongue feeling heavy in his mouth like it does when he's just woken up. "Tenth of May, nineteen ninety-one."

"Good. Can you tell me where we are right now?"

"Hospital." Shane has eyes. Does he need to be more specific? "Could I get some water?"

The man hands him a half-full cup, hidden from Shane's view on a metal folding table.

"Thanks," Shane says as he manages a couple sips. When the stranger holds out his hand, he passes the paper cup back.

"Can you tell me what day it is, Mr. Hollander?"

"Shane is fine," Shane says. "It's January fourteenth."

The man nods, typing something. Shane looks around the room for someone else, and is surprised to find that he's all alone other than the man asking him questions.

"Where's my husband?"

"Can you tell me your husband's name, Mr. Hollander?"

Shane reaches for the name, but it's like trying to grab at a cloud. "Where's my husband?"

"Mr. Hollander, he'll be joining us later tonight. Do me a favor and breathe in with me, alright?"

Shane follows the man's breathing, taking long slow breaths. He's not having a panic attack, he just doesn't know why his husband wouldn't be here with him right now.

They chat some more, and Shane tells the man about his headache. When Shane asks, the man tells him that he's a nurse at the hospital Shane is staying at. He asks if he can rest his eyes for a bit, and the nurse allows him.

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“Am I in trouble?” Shane asks.

The stranger gives him a kind smile, but there’s something that doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “No, you’re not in trouble. I have some questions for you, if that’s alright?”

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Shane wakes up with Ilya’s head in his lap and the quiet beeping of monitors the only sound in the room other than his husband’s steady breathing.

Shane blinks in the darkness, trying to take in his surroundings. He’s laid mostly upright in a hospital bed, finger monitor a little sweaty and uncomfortable, blinds pulled shut and only illumination coming from the glow of the light under a door that must lead to the bathroom.

It’s a nice hospital. Something bad must have happened at the game in Chicago for Shane to end up here. Ilya should be in Nashville by now.

It can’t have been too terrible. Ilya is at least able to sleep. They must have held on to their lead.

He lets his fingers unburdened by the clamp run through Ilya’s curls, rubbing the hair on his nape that is still damp from the shower between his fingertips. Shane has a headache that’s nagging at him, and playing with his husband’s hair is a nice distraction.

Ilya’s in the wrong suit; he was supposed to save this one for tomorrow. They had plans after the game, plans with Tanner, and Luca and Troy missed that idiot so much that they were absolutely going to stay out far too late. Ilya wouldn’t have time to get the suit cleaned, because there was no way Shane was letting him wear a suit that smelled like a hospital.

He can picture the argument between them already, and it makes him huff out a laugh. The sound is like a shockwave through his husband, because Ilya’s head jerks up and he’s staring right at Shane and oh, he must have hurt himself worse than he thought, because Ilya looks like he hasn’t slept in days.

“*Moya lyubov*,” Ilya whispers, like it’s being dragged out of him with fish hooks.

“Ilya,” Shane says softly. “I’m sorry for scaring you. Was it bad?”

Ilya’s getting to his feet, curls rising out of Shane’s reach. He leans down to quickly press a kiss to Shane’s hairline, and then is around the curtain and gone.

A door Shane can’t see clicks open, Ilya shouts something, and then he’s back at Shane’s bedside with company. Two women, one in royal blue scrubs and a taller one in soft teal. The woman in teal tugs the identification badge clipped to her front to the computer, clicking away at a screen turned away from Shane.

“Hello,” says the shorter woman. “I’m Dr. Romi. Is it okay if we turn on a little bit of light?”

Shane nods, looking to Ilya for any recognition but doesn't see it in his husband's face. "I'm Shane."

The other woman produces a remote attached to the hospital bed and presses a combination of buttons until there is a low, warm light coming from somewhere behind his head. She nestles the remote between the bars of the bed and Shane's arm.

Dr. Romi's eyes are a heavy weight on his own, like she's boring into his pupils for some kind of answer. It's not unwelcome, just a little intense. "Shane, can you tell me the last thing you remember before waking up in this room?"

Shane nods. "It was the bottom of the third and the Centaurs were up by one."

There's no change in Dr. Romi's face, but Ilya makes a distressed noise that pulls Shane's attention. When he looks at his husband, Ilya's face is turned away so his eyes are obscured by shadows.

"I took a puck to the helmet," Shane says, "but I'm fine."

Dr. Romi sits on the edge of his bed. "Can you tell me where you are and what today's date is?"

Shane nods slowly. "Sure, we're in Chicago and-"

His response dies in his throat when he sees the way the doctor's eyes narrow.

"I'm not in Chicago," Shane whispers.

Ilya presses his lips together with force. The hospital staff exchange a look.

Okay. He's laid up in a gurney, in a private room, and clearly is wrong about where he is. It makes Shane think he might not know what day it is either.

This is probably not fine.

Chapter 2: two

Chapter Notes

i had an outline when i started this, i swear. and then i was actually writing everything and no, do not look at that word or chapter count, eyes on me.

everyone's responses have been so kind, thank you all for loving the same angst that i do.

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

It is not January fourteenth. Ottawa beat Chicago on the fourteenth.

It's January sixteenth. Shane's been in the hospital for thirteen hours.

He has no recollection of his transport to Vanderbilt, his brief time in the emergency room before they sent him upstairs, or either of his CT scans.

Ilya tells him that they're in the neuro intensive care unit at the hospital.

Shane doesn't remember shoving Ilya away when he tried to follow Shane out of warm ups. The way Ilya tells it, Shane hadn't been making much sense when the medics were preparing him to leave Bridgestone. Shane had gotten very upset when he'd noticed Ilya was out of his skates. Ilya had gotten close to the stretcher and Shane had shoved him, told him to stay and play.

He is not surprised when Ilya tells him that he'd been awful on the ice, and that he didn't return to the game after the second period.

Wyatt had gotten a shutout. One of their defensemen got his first NHL goal with the only point that was scored the whole night.

This would be a really good road trip if Shane wasn't in the hospital right now.

But Shane's in the hospital and the Ottawa Centaurs are headed over to Pheonix for a game tomorrow. Without their captain and one of their alternate captains.

Shane isn't going anywhere. Dr. Romi, Dr. Hiromi Hirano, associate vice chair of the department of neurology at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, told him as much. She'd returned later in the morning, because Shane had woken up with Ilya's head in his lap in the very early morning, this time with a resident and nurse.

She asks how Shane's doing, and he's honest and tells her he has a headache. He rates his pain as a four out of ten, denies the offered painkillers. When they ask Shane when his

headaches started, he shrugs.

“I didn’t have one when I got off the ice.” Shane says, squeezing Ilya’s hand underneath the thin hospital blanket.

“You took Advil,” Ilya says, “when we woke up yesterday. Heard you in bathroom.”

The resident frowns. “You’re sure it was Advil?”

Shane lets Ilya nod for the both of them. It’s the only over the counter painkiller they keep in their travel bag, because Ilya swears that Advil Migraine is the ultimate cure to a hangover.

“Ilya has been very helpful with catching us up to speed with what happened before you came to the hospital, but we’re going to have more questions for you, Shane.” Dr. Romi says. “Those can come later. Would it be alright if we told you what we believe has happened?”

Shane goes to nod, but catches himself when the movement starts to make his head swim. “Okay.”

The women behind Dr. Romi exchange a furtive glance.

“Would you like to be alone while we discuss this?” The nurse asks.

Shane blinks once, twice, before he realizes what they’re asking him. “No.”

He pulls their entwined hands out from under the blankets and presses them to his chest. The movement tugs Ilya closer, dragging the chair he’s sitting on with him. It’s an obnoxiously loud noise, and Shane can understand that they’re probably only asking him because they have to, but the idea of Ilya being forced to leave now is so unfair.

Ilya leans his head on the bars pulled up on the side of the bed, eyes locked on Dr. Romi. Shane can’t tear his away from Ilya as the resident launches into what is very clearly a prepared and rehearsed speech.

Shane obtained what was most likely a grade 2 concussion at the end of the game in Chicago. There was no clear loss of consciousness, and the Centaurs staff had provided Vanderbilt with the team’s evaluation of his injury as well as replay footage. No one had recognized the symptoms once they did present. When Shane fell during warm ups, he’d hit his head on the ice. The blow had caused another concussion that triggered a minor acute subdural hematoma.

Ilya stiffens at that, the squeeze in Shane’s hand a dead giveaway even if his sharp inhale could be ignored. Dr. Romi interjects to explain that the hematoma, the collection of blood between his brain and the protective layer of tissue right outside, had been small. That Shane had not had any seizures, no vomiting or complaints of nausea, and no one taking care of him at any point had concerns about his airway. This, on top of how small the hematoma had been on the CT scan and the fact that it showed no sign of growing, made everyone confident that it would resolve on its own. That Shane wasn’t going to need surgery.

The resident explains that Shane's team was pretty sure it was the second hit that caused it, because Shane's flight to Nashville hadn't been interrupted with anything like an intracranial hemorrhage. Changing pressure with loose blood in your head is a bad idea. Also, Ilya and Troy's report of his sharp decline during warm ups was apparently pretty damning evidence.

Their evaluation isn't complete, there's still going to be questions for Shane. He's banned from his phone or any sort of screen for the next few days, but that's a nonissue because the only reason Shane's phone is at the hospital is because it's buried somewhere in Ilya's bag, thrown in last minute before he left Bridgestone. Everyone keeps saying that it's reassuring that he appears less disoriented each time he wakes up. The nurse asks if they have any questions.

"If I hadn't gotten hit in Chicago, I wouldn't be here?" Shane asks, because he needs to be able to pinpoint what exactly went wrong.

"Playing 'what if' with head injuries is difficult," the resident says. "When it comes to your brain, we can only know what we observe. Any diagnosis you may receive is going to be an ongoing one, one that may change with you over time."

An unsatisfying answer that makes his head thud if he tries to think too much about it. Shane doesn't know what he expected, but he gives Ilya's hand a squeeze anyways, hoping it comes off as reassuring.

"Kay," Shane says, eyes half closed as he tilts his chin to Ilya. "M'good. You?"

His husband is quiet, breathing a little unsteady but showing no signs of discomfort that four sets of eyes are on him. Shane's hardly count at this point, but still. Shane can almost see him thinking in real time, and Shane wants to tell him that he can ask whatever he want, that there's nothing Shane can't stand to hear, that the words don't need to come out in the right order for him to be understood.

But the thought of having to move his tongue in his mouth to form new words makes the thud in his skull turn into a throb and Shane really wants to close his eyes now but it's important that Ilya gets to ask anything he needs to and if he moves too much or says something he's worried no one will listen to Ilya.

"Shane could have died when we got on airplane," Ilya says, and that's not a question but it's clear that Dr. Romi had been expecting it.

"It is very good that you and your team recognized that something was wrong with Shane," she says. "We can't pinpoint exactly when the hematoma formed. We're out of what I would consider the danger zone for this aspect of Shane's injury, but we're going to keep a close eye on it to make sure it doesn't worsen."

Ilya nods with force, finally looking over to Shane. The moment their eyes meet, Ilya's narrow.

"Your pain?" He asks, and Shane knows he's been caught.

Shane still can't make himself form words, so he has to let go of Ilya's hand to hold up six fingers.

Ilya doesn't leave his bedside and the room is much calmer than Shane would expect. The shades of blue scrubs swim in and out of his vision before Shane gives up on trying to keep his eyes open and lets Ilya's presence be the only thing he knows for certain before he's dragged out of consciousness.

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When Shane opens his eyes, his husband is sitting in the chair that can be dragged right next to Shane's bedside. Ilya is watching him, probably knew that Shane was awake before he realized it himself.

"Hi, *solntse*."

Shane knows he's supposed to recognize what Ilya's saying, but the Russian slides right off him. He manages a smile, and that appears to be enough for Ilya.

"Know where we are?"

"Mhm."

"Tell me?"

"Hospital." It takes Shane a moment to sort through the murky recollection of their game schedule in his head before he takes a stab. "Nashville."

"Tell me why we're here?"

"I got hurt during a game."

Ilya's eyes glitter with dampness in the low light of the room as he presses his lips together. "You know this or guessing?"

Shane reaches for Ilya's hand, so far away on the other side of the bars of his bed, only to be stopped by a tugging sensation in his arm. He scowls as he looks down, seeing the IV line placed and secured in the crook of his elbow.

His skin looks a little irritated around the clear bandage taped over the line. Like it's been there for a while, even though Shane's just noticing it now.

There's the sound of a chair dragging its legs closer to him.

"For fluids and pain," Ilya says. "I'm going to hold your hand?"

He doesn't, though, until Shane says it's okay.

This is all so wrong. It's bad. They should be heading to Arizona right now.

“Called your parents couple times,” Ilya says. “They are worried but okay. Did not say anything about hematoma.”

They’d already be at Shane’s bedside if he had, so he’s relieved Ilya didn’t. His dad had a scare with a blood clot in his lung last summer, and while he’d ended up being fine, Shane had banned his parents from using air travel to go to their away games as a result.

It was supposed to be temporary, just until the thought of losing his parents and having it be his fault didn’t make Shane feel like he was swallowing lead. Ilya hadn’t exactly agreed with Shane’s ultimatum, but he’d said they could discuss it again next season and backed him up when Shane told his parents. His mother had not taken it particularly well, but Ilya had talked her down.

Shane doesn’t have it in himself to say anything else, and Ilya doesn’t seem eager to try either. He’s content with just being close to his husband, to try his best to ignore the rhythmic beeping of the monitors he’s hooked up to, to let his eyes close and rest.

A gentle knock to the door is all Shane needs to rouse himself. Ilya seems to be a little slower to respond as a familiar woman lets herself in.

“Dr. Romi,” Shane says, and she gives him a smile. Shane feels like he’s passed some sort of test.

“Shane, Ilya,” she nods to both of them. “I’m just popping in quickly while we’re rounding. I don’t have any new results to discuss, which is why I haven’t brought anyone on my team with me. I was hoping we could finish up our conversation from this morning?”

Shane looks to Ilya, and hums his assent once Ilya nods. Dr. Romi confirms that Shane is going to stay in the hospital while they monitor the hematoma and would begin to evaluate the potential for prolonged post-concussion syndrome. Which Shane would have found annoying, because how would he know if he was having prolonged post-concussion syndrome until the post-concussion symptoms had become prolonged?

But Shane’s too tired to argue, and the news seems to relax Ilya. She reiterates that she’s sorry that they’re at the hospital, but she’s optimistic that Shane will continue to make forward progress.

Dr. Romi is kind and does not call him lucky. She does not tell him that he should be grateful it wasn’t any worse. She does not call him stupid, selfish, or reckless for not reporting that he wasn’t feeling well to Terry or any of the other training staff.

Shane’s more than capable of telling himself that he’s a fucking idiot for not realizing what was happening until it was far too late.

He doesn’t want to imagine what might have happened if he’d made it to the game.

Shane asks if he’s allowed to shower, because he’s aware of himself enough to realize that he feels disgusting. Ilya offers to help, but Dr. Romi says he can only do it with hospital staff.

They exchange goodbyes, and she's replaced with a bright-eyed nurse, who carefully unhooks Shane from every wire and tube that's attached to him. An extra layer of plastic wrapping goes over his placed IV line. Getting his feet back under himself is a very strange sensation, but not a bad one. The movement comes easy, even if the balance doesn't, but that's what the nurse is for.

The shower situation is embarrassing. There's a chair, anti-slip mats, and multiple bars on the wall. The mechanism doesn't look difficult to operate with one hand which is a relief, but frustration pings in the back of Shane's head when he realizes he's going to have to use the soap provided by the hospital.

The nurse lets Shane shower himself, keeping a close eye on him but not preventing him from doing anything. Shane does need to sit down halfway through, but he's satisfied with how clean he gets himself. He takes the opportunity to use the bathroom, and acquiesces to the nurse's suggestion that she help dry him off before he gets a clean gown.

It can't have taken more than ten minutes, even with Shane's slowed pace, but he still feels like he got backchecked at the end of a two minute shift. The idea of having to get back on the ice to move and think at the speed of a NHL game feels impossible. But there is someone in his room who that is not true for.

Because if they're in Nashville then the next place they need to go is Pheonix and Shane can't be the reason that Ilya doesn't play.

He waits to be resettled, fresh pillows and a change of the angle of the bed letting him sit fully upright, for the nurse to leave, before Shane tells his husband as much.

"You need to go be with the team."

"They do not need me," Ilya protests, looking up from his phone. "You need me."

"I'm already being hovered over," Shane says. He does not want to be having this conversation, but he needs to because if he doesn't Ilya will not bring it up. "They're missing two centers. It only needs to be one."

Ilya looks away, phone going into the pocket of his suit pants. "I am not leaving you."

Shane rolls his eyes even though Ilya can't see it. "You have a job!"

Raising his voice appears to be the trick to get his husband to look at him, although Shane wishes he hadn't done it. The headache begins to tap at his skull again, and the misery in Ilya's face makes his stomach twist itself into a knot.

With a force, Shane remembers being curled up against Ilya, a documentary about the two of them that didn't show anything about *them* playing, watching Ilya watch Shane take that hit from Cliff Marlow that had sent Shane to the hospital.

There's nothing to hide, no reason for them to have to swallow fear to save face, and Shane's still doing this to Ilya all over again.

But it's not like he has something communicable like the flu; he can't keep Ilya here for his own selfish reasons. It's a bad look. Ilya can't be seen as neglectful, Shane can't be clingy and demanding.

"I need you," Ilya whispers.

"You have me," Shane promises. "I'm going to be okay."

Ilya takes both of Shane's hands into his own, pressing kisses to his knuckles. He's as warm and gentle as ever when he can look at Shane again, and doesn't stop Shane from leaning forward, from capturing his mouth between his own.

God knows the last time Shane brushed his teeth, and it's not like he's been keeping track of what Ilya's been doing when he hasn't been hovering right next to his bed. It's like the worst combination of morning breath, after dinner breath, and cigarette breath.

He feels like this is the longest they've gone without kissing one another since they were married. Shane would drink the taste if he could.

It's Ilya who ends their kiss, pressing a few more chaste ones to the side of Shane's mouth.

"Don't want you to be alone," he says. "I will go, but not if you're alone."

Shane could point out the doctors, fellows, residents, nurses, and all the other letters and acronyms of hospital employees that would be rounding on him and taking his vitals but that's not what Ilya's talking about.

"What if someone else came and stayed?" Shane asks.

Ilya scowls. "I'd make Dilly come, but team went to Winnipeg."

Shane had actually been thinking of one person in particular. "Ask Hayden."

He waits for the teasing, for Ilya to put his foot down, for some reason that Ilya is going to stay and miss this game that Shane wishes they were both going to.

All Ilya does is nod. "Good idea."

Shane leans back into the bed, letting the exhaustion of the simple task of showering and a single not-argument with Ilya pull him down. Hayden is a good choice, the best choice, because he's Shane's best friend. It helps that he retired two years ago and hasn't done much more than play stay at home dad ever since Jackie's cooking vlogs went insanely viral.

She's working on her first cookbook. Stay at home dads are important. Shane can't just abduct him.

"Send my parents to their house. Jackie'll never forgive me if I just steal him."

"Way ahead of you. Sleep," Ilya says. "Everyone say rest is good for your brain."

“Okay,” Shane murmurs. “What’re you doing?”

Ilya presses another kiss to Shane’s knuckles. “Buying Hayden’s ticket.”

Shane can’t remember the last time Ilya offered to pay for anything for Hayden. Whenever they dragged them along to something outrageously expensive, Ilya would cover Jackie and the kids. Shane would sneak the extra ticket or fee behind Ilya’s back, with his full knowledge and playfully turned blind eye.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“He is cheap. He’ll get on budget flight and get trapped in Ohio.”

“He’s responsible,” Shane corrects, letting the faint pulse he can feel ticking away in Ilya’s wrist help lull him to sleep.

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He’s in and out of consciousness, someone parting the curtain to ask Shane questions and poke at him every time sleep comes close. They’ll type away at the bedside computer and Shane complains, but his grouchiness only seems to bring relief to Ilya.

It blurs together with Ilya’s steady presence at his side, with fingers in his hair, with whispered Russian he doesn’t understand a word of.

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It’s the bottom of the third and the Centaurs are up by one when he wakes again, gentle voices at the foot of his bed.

When Shane can focus his eyes, he sees Ilya nodding along to a person in teal scrubs. He’s dressed in a suit, one of the gameday ones that he’ll wear if they have plans to go out afterwards, because Shane likes the texture of the material and Ilya likes it when Shane touches him.

Ilya looks towards him, and Shane’s not on the ice, he’s in a hospital in Tennessee, he’s got a couple concussions, and he keeps scaring his husband.

“Ilya,” Shane says, and that’s all it takes to summon Ilya to his bed.

“You have MRI soon,” Ilya says, pressing a kiss to Shane’s cheek. “I have a plane to catch; Hayden will be here when they take you back.”

Ilya’s leaving.

“Phone is here, you can’t look but it is charging. Can’t bring your ring into the MRI, what do you want me to do with it?”

Ilya smells clean but wrong, like he’s showered without his shampoo that they always have an extra bottle of, that Shane fills those infuriating travel bottles with, and he’s leaving.

Shane doesn't want Ilya to go right now. One look at Ilya is all you'd need to know that Ilya doesn't want to leave.

He must have asked for this. It was important, to some version of Shane.

His wedding ring is in the palm of his husband's hand, the same hand wearing its mate.

Ilya has a flight; he's told the team he's coming. After everything they'd been through, after everything they put everyone in their orbit through, Shane wanted hockey to be the easy part. They couldn't be a liability for the team, beyond what their contracts did to the salary cap.

That grief of losing his presence is swallowed up instantly. This is about their jobs. Shane got hurt at work. Ilya still has to go.

It's what they signed up for. It's a privilege to get to do what they do, even when it ends up like this, and the word *lucky* feels like glass in the back of his throat.

"I love you," Shane says, closing Ilya's hand tight around the wedding band. "Take it for good luck."

"I love you," Ilya echoes. "Will be back. Not going home without you."

It's the end of their road trip then, Ilya's going to Arizona. There's two days off before their next home game. Shane will be out of here by then, it will work out fine. "That's between you and Wiebe."

Ilya kisses Shane briefly, all innocent, and gives the nurse a polite nod as he leaves.

The nurse is sweet, gently unhooking the IV catheter from the rack of bags strung up behind the monitor, and encourages Shane to stand with their help and settle himself in the wheelchair. They chat with him the whole trip to the MRI, going over what to expect.

It's not Shane's first time in an MRI machine, not even the first time sticking his head in one. He assures the nurse claustrophobia won't be an issue, asks if they're going to inject him with the contrast that makes him feel like he has to pee. The nurse laughs, tells him yes, and asks if they should stop at the bathroom once they make it to imaging. Shane agrees that it's probably for the best.

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It's the longest MRI of Shane's life, and he's hungry and tired and both things are probably causing his headache to crawl back.

The same nurse brings him back to his room, and doesn't seem offended that Shane is less talkative than he was on the way down.

Shane can't spare much brainpower on talking, he's trying to focus on the fact that Ilya is not going to be in his room, that Ilya is in Arizona, and that he'll see Ilya tomorrow.

Will he? Shane knows the game is late, puck drops is at seven, Mountain Time. Did Ilya say when he was coming back? Does Ilya have a ticket back to Nashville? Is Shane supposed to know? Will he get in trouble if he asks?

He's so focused on that thought, on the frustration of not knowing, on not crying over it, that Shane barely recognizes that the motion of the wheelchair has stopped, that they're back in his room. Shane needs very little prompting to stand up, using the bar of his bed for extra stability to walk himself back. He sits on the edge of the bed, offering his arm with the line so he can get hooked back up to the fluids and painkillers. Shane watches the skilled fingers connect his lines, set up the machines, and finds himself envious of the easy dexterity.

The noise of someone clearing their throat makes him look over, to the oversized chair in the corner of the room that can be converted into a makeshift bed.

There's a blond head of hair, familiar green eyes. Hayden.

"Hayden," Shane says, an echo only to himself.

"Hey Shane," Hayden's on his feet, almost trips over the bag by his chair, just catching himself on the wide arm.

"Careful," Shane says, "only one head injury allowed in this room."

Shane's never been the most observant, but he's loved Hayden forever and his face was easy to read before that. He doesn't appreciate Shane's attempt at a joke, but he lets it slide.

"Can I hug you, man?"

The rawness in his voice is strange, foreign to Shane's ears when Hayden's not talking about his children. It makes nodding easy.

Hayden's careful, nothing like the crushing hugs on and off the ice Shane's used to. Its good, even though the reason for the tenderness isn't.

Hayden pulls away, the weight of his arms leaving Shane first, so that he can rub the heel of his palm at his face. That's what it takes for Shane to realize that Hayden's crying.

"It's good to see you."

With a little bit of pointed urging from the nurse, Shane settles all the way back into bed. Hayden stays, sits at the foot, and makes no effort to stop the wetness from coming to his eyes.

"Thanks for coming," Shane says, careful not to add *so Ilya could go* because Hayden might be retired but Shane knows he misses hockey because everyone who leaves does, and maybe if Shane had stayed in Montreal Hayden wouldn't have had to say goodbye as early as he did. "I'm sorry I scared everyone."

"Sorry? Jesus, Shane I-" Hayden shakes his head like he has to physically cut himself off. "I'm just happy to see you. Up. Talking."

“Probably won’t be good for that for much longer,” Shane says, pawing for the remote so he can dim the lights in the room. He doesn’t remember the exhaustion starting to creep up on him. Maybe it never left.

“Can I do anything?”

“Talk to me?” Shane asks. “What’s new with Jackie, the kids?”

Hayden tells him about Jackie’s meticulous interviews she’s conducting with a couple of photographers to try to find the best fit for her book, what colleges Ruby has been hounding them about touring, the billet family Jade is staying with for her team in Mississauga, Arthur’s latest baking concoctions and how his soccer coach banned him from bringing cookies on game days because he thinks there’s a correlation between their presence and the team losing, and how he and Jackie are finally going to cave and buy the horse that they’ve been leasing for Amber, but she’s not going to know until her birthday.

Shane dances on the edge of unconsciousness, clinging to everything Hayden gives him, and feels like his father, trying to assemble a puzzle with one part muscle memory and one part guesswork.

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Nurses keep coming in to take Shane’s vitals and ask him the same questions. He gives his name, date of birth if they ask for it, tells them the current date and where he is. Sometimes they ask him to hold up a certain number of fingers, sometimes they ask him to repeat words or a phrase back to them. They ask about his headaches, any new symptoms, and his pain.

Shane tries to keep track of how often they’re stopping by and then wishes he hadn’t when he realizes. It’s every fucking hour.

Everyone at the hospital always introduces themselves, and no one seems to take offense to the fact that Shane forgets most of their names as fast as they tell him. One of the night nurses, who introduces himself as Mateo when he wakes Shane up for vitals, looks vaguely familiar.

Shane tries to be quiet when he answers Mateo’s questions, eyes straying over to Hayden curled up on the sleeper chair. Hayden keeps waking up, and Shane doesn’t want him to, doesn’t want to have dragged him away from his family so Ilya could go just to keep him up at night.

The guilt makes him look back at the nurse, and that sense of familiarity is so strange and it’s annoying Shane that he can’t place it. He’s in the hospital for a head injury, surely he’s allowed one rude question.

“Have we met before?” Shane whispers

“After you came up from the ED,” Mateo says, just as soft as Shane. “Uh, sorry, the emergency room.”

“Thank you for your help,” Shane says, even though he can’t remember anything about last night.

He powers off the computer and nods at Hayden. “Is that your husband?”

Shane lets himself laugh, even with the knowledge that it’ll make his head twinge a little. “No. He’s my best friend. My husband is busy with... He had to go to work.”

Mateo nods, and Shane must have been in bad shape when Mateo was taking care of him, because there’s something horribly sad in his expression.

“He was here,” Shane says. “My husband. I made him go back to work.”

“It was important?”

Shane wants to say yes, but he can’t get his mouth to form the word.

Mateo shakes his head. “Of course it was. None of my business, sorry. Use the call light if you need anything.”

They all tell him that. Shane nods as Mateo leaves, somehow pulls the curtain without making a sound.

Shane chews on the word *important*, thinking about NHL contracts renewals and talks with management and having a body that’s getting too old for hockey before sleep pulls him back.

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In the morning, Hayden leaves to go on brief run after a round of vitals. Shane’s trying to pass the early hour with a nap. He must sleep a little, because the sensation of bright lights and a headache building behind his eyes brings Shane back to his body, but the room is as dark as Hayden left it.

It’s easy to tell that he’s not on the ice when Shane spots two nurses hovering over the computer in the corner of his room. His eyes are barely open, but he can hear their whispering just fine.

“He’ll be easy unless he wakes himself up. If he does, page OT and SLP, they both want to see him.”

“Okay, in that order?”

“Let me open the consult note and check.”

There’s a moment of quiet, nothing but the monitors and the clicking of a mouse.

“Wait, does that say-”

“Yeah. I had the same reaction. You think every sports physician got their license in the nineties? Because that’s what it feels like to me.”

“They only asked him Maddocks? And no follow up?”

“Right? Add hockey to the list of sports my kids never are going to play.”

Shane suddenly doesn't want to listen anymore, he wants to close his eyes and sleep until Hayden is back, until Ilya comes back, until his headache goes away, until he can wake up and know where he is so they'll let him go home.

One of the nurses says something about the other enjoying their break, and Shane tries to remember which hospital he's in while his dreams drag him back on the ice.

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It's a rotating cast of who's who in the hospital coming in and out of his room. Everyone keeps saying they're doing baseline assessments to help Shane's treatment team for when he gets back to Ottawa. Shane goes through the motions they set him through the best he's able, and wonders how long of a waiting list he's skipping at the General by the grace of playing in the NHL.

Dr. Romi stops by, accompanied by a fellow and a resident, to interview Shane about his personal history with head trauma. They kick Hayden out, who takes no offense and offers to pick up more of Shane's meals from the university campus.

Which is how Shane finds out that Ilya called in a favor with Tanner, who asked the Nashville nutritionist to coordinate with Vanderbilt's athletic department to have meals made for Shane, approved by the hospital nutrition team.

“Familiar food can be a good medicine,” Dr. Romi says, nodding as Hayden tugs on a hoodie and a coat over that.

Shane frowns. “Is it cold outside?”

Hayden looks up. “Yeah Hollzy.”

“We're in Tennessee.”

“It's still January in Tennessee.”

Then Hayden is gone and the interview starts. Shane feels like he's walking into a trap he can smell but can't see, a familiar position he's often in with doctors. Talking to team medical staff is less anxiety-inducing. They're used to hockey players lying so they can keep playing and Shane's always been told he's refreshingly direct in comparison to his teammates. It's different outside of the shadow of the NHL, being asked the same question dozens of times, always by new faces, like they're waiting for him to trip up.

Shane recounts his three previous concussions, only two of which were actually diagnosed. From when he was a kid, before concussion was a word anyone in the hockey world used, he'd gotten his bell rung and no one had thought much of it at the time. The hit from Cliff Marlow that had sent Shane to the hospital. And at the 2026 Olympics, in practice before prelims, a teenager from Vancouver had tripped Shane and sent him head-first into the

boards. The kid had been mortified, but Shane had really been fine, only missed two games of the tournament before he was cleared to play.

When they ask him about other hits to the head, even if they didn't lead to concussions, Shane quickly finds out that *how long do you have* is the wrong way to answer that question. They ask him about fights off the ice, about car accidents, about intimate partner violence, about falling, about being near any explosions or blasts. He confirms Ilya's report that Shane has never had a seizure, no overnight hospitalizations other than the one for his concussion in 2017. They want him to go all the way back to childhood, to think about any serious illness, high fevers, or near drownings. About any potential history of learning disabilities or neurological disorders his husband might not be aware of.

It's exhausting. Shane feels like a broken record with how often he's been thinking that, but it is.

They walk him through more coordination tasks when they're done drilling him with questions. Shane knows he's moving too slow, can't tell if it's the dizzy spells, the tangle of tubes and wires he's connected to, or what else he could blame other than the obvious. Dr. Romi is encouraging, giving him familiar platitudes about forward progress and nonlinear healing. Shane wonders, uncharitably, if the medical school she went to made their students hang out with athletes to teach them how to say nothing with as many words as possible.

He wants to take the thought back almost immediately. Dr. Romi means well and she does not want to lie to him.

He returns the favor and doesn't lie to her when she asks about his pain. Shane's selfish and asks for more water too.

He has to let them draw labs off him before they hook up the morphine, but the nurse is a professional and is done with him before Hayden returns. Shane has no idea what time it is, but everyone tells him he needs to eat so he accepts the first thing Hayden offers without listening.

Shane does perk up when the meal tray is placed at his bedside, kale and quinoa, with chicken and some other vegetables tossed in the mix too. It does look like something he and Ilya would pick to make for themselves at home.

He's not hungry, but no one seems to mind that he wants to pick away over the course of a couple hours, between naps and a series of vitals.

"Is he an hour or two behind us?" Shane asks, because he rarely knows what time zone he's in when he's not in Ottawa.

"One," Hayden says. "Occupational therapy is supposed to come by soon; do you want to call your parents after?"

Shane wants to sleep after, but he's been sleeping all day and he still has a headache and Ilya won't play hockey until eight, so he probably won't be back tonight. He doesn't want to face his parents without Ilya, because Ilya's been talking to them this whole time.

“Yeah,” Shane says. “We can call them.”

Occupational therapy does visit sooner rather than later, and they bring physical therapy with them as well. Like everyone else, both specialists mostly just want to chat with Shane. Get his baseline so he can hit the ground running with whoever takes up his case in Ottawa. Hayden has a list of questions from Ilya as well, mostly things that need to be done around their home to make it easier on Shane once they get back.

Hayden and the occupational therapist exchange notes while the physical therapist reviews Shane’s physical symptoms. The questions are easy until the end.

“What is the highest level of pain you would report since your initial injury in Chicago?”

Shane sees flashes of the worst injuries he’s witnessed while playing hockey. He thinks about teammates screaming in pain, the sound of Taylor’s shoulder breaking, the players who are the reasons for neck guard rules, of blood on the ice.

He knows head injuries can be bad too. He’s seen head injuries that were bad. He’s seen people take dirty hits intended to cause harm, watched people lose control of their skates and slam into the boards, he’s seen that video of himself taking a clean hit that was just unlucky.

He understands that the puck to the helmet was bad. He still cannot get over the fact that he feels like breaking his jaw would have been worse. And falling on the ice during warm ups should be nothing. It should be slightly embarrassing, and maybe the source of a video that circulates online for a week or two.

Shane thinks he might not have a good idea of what a normal amount of pain is.

“A six,” is what he tells the physical therapist.

“What was the source of the pain?”

“A headache I had yesterday morning.”

The specialists don’t take much longer to wrap up. Hayden gets him water, lets Shane rest his eyes for a bit, before he pushes again.

“Okay, yeah, we can talk to them,” Shane says.

The phone call is brief, all things considered. His parents know everything. Almost everything. Ilya has done a good job keeping them in the loop. They just want to hear his voice.

Shane tells them that he loves them, that he’s sorry for scaring everyone, that he’ll be home as soon as it’s safe.

It makes him ache, the plain relief in his parents’ voices.

Shane’s getting older, they are too, and right now he feels like he’s all of five years old again.

He asks how Montreal is, and his dad can't stop gushing about how much more polite the Pike children are compared to how Shane was at that age, which everyone knows is a damn lie.

"I could be a brat, but they're terrors when you get them in the same room," Shane protests.

"Jade's in Mississauga," is his mom's excuse, and Shane has to stop, feels like he's digging through fog, before he remembers that Jade is away because she's billeting with her Juniors team.

The conversation has moved on, but Hayden can tell they lost Shane.

"Hollzy had to talk a lot today. He was very popular," Hayden says.

His parents can take the hint, wishing him goodnight and telling him they love him. Shane echoes it back.

Hayden clicks the phone off speaker, keeps chatting to Shane's parents as he ducks around the curtain. Shane lets his eyes close, listening for the rhythm of Hayden's voice more than the words he's saying, anything to fill his ears other than the beeping of the monitors.

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During his next round of vitals, Hayden steps out of the room, and returns with his hands behind his back.

"Please don't get mad at me," Hayden starts.

"I could never," Shane says.

Turns out Hayden was hiding Shane's dinner, and Shane regrets his promise almost instantly.

"I know you're not hungry because you're not moving," Hayden says as he produces flatware. "But doctors' orders say 'too bad, you need to eat'."

"Exactly that?" Shane asks. "Can I get it in writing?"

"You can take as long as you want, but you have to eat everything," Hayden says as he pulls up a chair to keep Shane company. "Also, your husband will kill me if he finds out I let you starve."

"Kill you?"

"He promised me."

"Jackie will never forgive me if I make her a widow."

"It would be Rozanov's fault. Less talking, more eating."

Shane's not lying about not having an appetite, but he can nibble away when ordered. It takes him about as long to eat dinner as it did lunch, breakfast, whatever that was. Hayden keeps him entertained with stories about Jackie taste testing one of the recipes she used to make for Shane, and the horrible first round of feedback his favorite meal got.

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Shane doesn't forget about the game, but it feels silly to bother the nurses. After they draw his blood in the morning, put down more food he has to eat in front of him, Shane asks Hayden.

"How did they play?"

Hayden winces. "Four three. Arizona."

Shane closes his eyes. He doesn't need to ask anything else. Hayden's reaction tells him everything. Those are the worst games to play; the ugly ones that were decided at the end of the third period.

They'd lost. He'd sent Ilya away for nothing.

"Rozanov played well," Hayden says, Shane's face clearly not hiding his misery. "I don't know how he keeps doing it."

Shane frowns, squinting his eyes open. "Keeps?"

"Yeah. You guys and Nashville both played pretty poorly, but Hayes and Mercer made up for it by being on fire. Your husband totally set up Kelly for his shot."

"Could have scored himself but made sure the guy got his first goal?"

"Yeah."

It was something Ilya was notorious for doing, ever since his time on the Bears. Shane didn't know if the NHL tracked primary assists on first NHL goals, but if they did, Ilya would lead it by a mile.

"Finished nicely in Chicago too, even though I know how he gets when you get hurt. You're just as bad as him, you know, when the tables are turned."

Shane shakes his head. "You know what he told me about Nashville?"

Hayden makes an inquisitive noise.

"That he played terribly, and that he didn't get back on the ice after the second."

Hayden scoffs. "Maybe terribly for Rozanov's standards."

"Setting up kids for their first goal isn't playing terribly and you know that."

“I know,” Hayden says, and if there was anything more unsettling than Ilya buying that plane ticket, it was watching Hayden let Ilya off easy for anything.

-

Shane has an interior room, facing another part of the hospital instead of the university or city sprawl, but the face Hayden makes when he peeks around the blackout curtain at the view when Shane’s getting his blood drawn makes him worry.

“What’s wrong?”

What’s wrong is that it snowed last night. Hayden is tapping at the screen of his phone as he excuses himself from the room, it already held up to his ear before the door shuts and he disappears from Shane’s line of sight.

The nurse taking his vitals makes Shane focus on her, talks him through slow breaths, says she’s trying to get him to relax before she records his blood pressure or heart rate.

Hayden’s not gone for long, and the phone is still up to his ear when he comes back. The nurse shuts off the computer she’s charting at and exchanges places with Hayden at Shane’s bedside.

“There’s a freak blizzard. BNA is grounding all flights until it stops and they can clear the runways,” Hayden says, as he passes the phone to Shane.

Shane pinches the bridge of his nose, focusing on breathing, focusing on not letting himself cry.

“Sweetheart.”

The sound of Ilya’s voice over the phone almost does him in.

“I’m coming,” Ilya promises.

“I love you,” Shane says, because if he says anything else it won’t come out right, too strangled with sadness that is completely disproportionate to what’s happening.

Ilya’s fine, he’s safe. There’s no snow in Arizona. He did not get hurt, he’s okay, Shane has no reason to cry over something that’s his own damn fault. He’s the one that got injured, he’s the one that sent Ilya away. Any way you cut, Shane is the one to blame.

He hands the phone back to Hayden before he says anything stupid.

-

It’s day filled with talking to too many people and Shane has another MRI, but his reward is that he’s been approved to be moved out of this unit and into the step-down one.

Moving is easy. Shane had been able to undress when he’d arrived at the hospital, despite having no memory of it, and Hayden has the bag of his base layer game clothes tucked in the

small duffle he brought. Hayden has taken responsibility for Shane's phone, and that's all they have between the two of them.

Once he's in the step-down unit, physical therapy wants to see him again to go over some mobility tasks with him. He's being weaned off anything stronger than the hospital-grade acetaminophen, which is fine by Shane because his headaches have stopped being unbearable.

His new room does have a view, a large window above a bench with cushions meant for family and visitors to sit at that overlooks some part of the university. Shane draws the blackout curtain shut when he walks by it during his session with the physical therapist, the sight of falling snow making something in his chest twist.

Hayden offered to keep him in the loop with Ilya, but Shane doesn't want to know. Ilya will get here as soon as he can.

-

It's the bottom of the third and the Centaurs are up by one when the click of the door wakes Shane up. Hayden stirs too, hair messy as he looks up from the recliner chair, as Shane pushes himself up in bed so the nurse taking his vitals can get everything done as fast as possible.

A nurse doesn't part the curtain. It's Ilya, empty-handed with his stubble growing in and hair crammed under a toque.

He comes to a stop when he sees Shane sitting upright, face softening instantly. He says something, something in Russian that Shane can't parse. Hayden's making some noise, cramming on his shoes and stumbling out the door as fast as he can, parting wave to the both of them.

Shane stares and stares and wants to blink to make sure Ilya's real, but worried that they're going to keep him here if he does anything to imply his memory might still be scrambled.

"I'm sorry," are the first words that come out of Shane's mouth.

Ilya looks like he's already about to cry. "Please stop saying that."

"But I am."

Ilya stumbles to the side of the bed like he's drunk, like Shane's words are physically hurting him. Shane needs to stop talking if this is what he's doing to his husband.

"Let me try again," Ilya whispers. "Let me start over."

His eyes are on Shane, wide, that swilling of green and brown that Shane never really landed on a color to describe because only using one word always felt like falling short.

"Okay," Shane says wetly. The bed he's in has bars that aren't locked in the upright position like the last one, so he pulls at the mechanism to lower the side Ilya's on. Ilya takes it as the

invitation that it is and sits, not touching Shane, but close, so close.

“I love you.”

Ilya is pulling his cross, Irina's cross, out from underneath his shirt. Shane's wedding band is nestled right next to it. He fusses with the chain, freeing the ring. Shane holds up his left hand and Ilya slides it home.

Shane taps his thumb to the metal, warm from Ilya's chest.

“I love you,” he whispers.

“What are you sorry for?” Ilya asks.

“For telling you to leave.”

Ilya slowly nods. “Which time that you asked me to leave?”

Shane can't lie. He's been lying. He needs to stop lying.

“Both. I don't remember either. But I'm sorry for both times.”

Ilya keeps nodding, opens his mouth to say something and then swallows it right away.

“I'm scared,” Shane whispers. “And I know you're scared. I don't want to make you scared, but I don't...”

Shane doesn't know what to say. He doesn't know how to end the sentence.

“You're not lying. You're just trying-” Ilya cuts himself off. “I do not have word for it. You're not lying. You're not trying to hurt anyone.”

“I'm not telling the truth,” Shane says. “I'm being difficult. It's not helping.”

“Pain is hard. Is not the same thing, but I had hard time talking about my knee. Remember?”

Shane laughs, not really, it's more of a wheeze, but the stabbing pain comes to his head all the same. “I get to be bad because we're both terrible at this?”

“Not bad. Just not used to talking about it.”

“What, hockey makes us liars?”

“Maybe,” Ilya shrugs. “I love you. Am here, *babochka*.”

Shane reaches for him, and Ilya meets him, letting Shane tug him to his chest. Ilya doesn't melt into the embrace like he usually does, clearly being mindful of the IV catheter still secured in Shane's arm despite the fact that he's not hooked up to anything.

“I don't want to be trapped in Tennessee.” Shane whispers into his neck.

Ilya gently rubs the scratch of his chin in Shane's cheek. "Will get you home soon."

Shane presses a messy kiss to his face. Ilya pulls away a little so he can kiss Shane properly, hands coming up so he can wipe away the wetness from Shane's cheeks.

That's when Shane realizes he's crying, that he's been crying since he saw Ilya come through the curtain looking like he hasn't slept since leaving Shane's bedside.

He focuses on matching his breathing to Ilya's, blinking his eyes dry under the watchful gaze of his husband.

"Go get Hayden," Shane mumbles after a minute, maybe. It was probably longer. "Can't make him sleep in the hallway."

"Mmm, but that sounds so tempting." Ilya teases, pressing one more kiss to Shane's cheek before he pulls away.

He retrieves Hayden, a nurse joining them to take Shane's vitals now so they don't have to wake everyone up again later. She's asking Shane about his name and where they are before she's even badged into the computer.

Shane recites the answers that he's drilled into his head, and is correct that it's past midnight and now January nineteenth.

Out of the corner of his eye he can see Hayden's moving his stuff off the chair and clearly hears Ilya makes a displeased noise in the back of his throat.

"No, stay Pike."

"Where are you going to sleep? The floor?"

"And you will?"

"Yeah, I used to when the twins were little, it's fine."

"You know," the nurse says dryly as she fusses with one of the electrodes on Shane's chest, "lots of people sleep on the bench under the window. Kinda what it's there for."

Ilya and Hayden both look a little cowed, which makes Shane smile. Normally Jackie is the only person who can do that to both of them at the same time. The nurse finishes up typing at the computer as Ilya twits to try to get himself comfortable, folded up so he's facing Shane.

Maybe Shane's just getting good about taking whatever rest he can get, but between the familiar trill of the monitor and watching the rhythmic rise and fall of Ilya's chest, sleep comes to him quickly.

if your gut reaction to this chapter was “wow shane is getting a lot of attentive care and an attending physician who has time to visit patients more than once a day?” my excuse is that he is a highly visible professional athlete in a sport notorious for head injuries. also it’s my fic, and i’m going to fantasize about the american healthcare system i want to see in the world. he’s making up for it by being a bad patient.

(and yeah if shane was in the neuro icu he should probably be in bed restraints and maybe have a urine catheter. i also didn’t feel like putting bedpan use to page. sue me. i’ve added the medical inaccuracies tag because this was eating at me.)

Chapter 3: three

Chapter Notes

yeah. i can see that the chapter count changed again too. they should invent a type of suffering that im not interested in dragging out in exhaustive explicit detail.

Ilya drove.

He says it casually, when Shane's getting his blood drawn in the early morning.

"You *what*?"

Ilya shrugs. "Flew to St. Louis. Drove from there."

No wonder Ilya had slept like the dead last night.

Hayden comes back with coffee and a paper bag he offers to Ilya. Shane still has to eat the prepared meals Ilya arranged.

They're picking over breakfast when Shane does the math and realizes what it means that the blizzard cost Ilya an extra day.

"You need to be home by tomorrow."

Ilya looks up from his breakfast sandwich. "Do I?"

"Florida game."

"Not right now, Shane." Ilya begs.

Shane looks to Hayden for support, which is his first mistake if he wants to win over his husband, but Hayden won't even meet his eyes.

"This is between you two," Hayden says, then busies himself with a sip of coffee.

"Smart." Ilya says darkly, and Hayden scowls at Ilya over the lid of his cup.

"Ilya," Shane pleads.

"Let Dr. Romi come back?" Ilya asks. "Plan from there?"

His second MRI was reassuring, his labs looked good, and Shane had no new pain to report. Dr. Romi would have advised against flying home, but she has no issue with them driving.

If they drive, they can get Ilya home in time to play. He might miss a morning skate, but if he asks, they can probably get away without him getting scratched. It's happened before, when Bood and Cassie's third kid was born the morning of a home game.

Hayden's amiable to milling around the airport until the snow stops and he can get on a flight back to Montreal. The hospital would really love having the bed open. Ilya was the one who asked if they could drive to Ottawa.

Shane's headache isn't anything worth making a fuss over. He's talking, coherent, and can get around the room without help. His discharge paperwork is ready before Hayden finishes his coffee.

They've mapped a route back to their home in Ottawa, printed on a ridiculously large sheet of paper so Shane can look at it. Ilya has the route saved to his phone, but it's nice that Shane's being included.

His version of the map does not have the flagged emergency departments that Ilya's does, for places to go if Shane has any worsening symptoms.

He does get the rest stops that Ilya has identified, as well as a couple hotels with standing reservations that Ilya will stop them at if Shane needs a break from the road. None of which they would be stopping at, because then Ilya wasn't going to get home in time if they did, but they didn't need to have that argument. Shane was going to be fine.

"It's only sixteen hours," Ilya had said, unworried. "Easy drive."

Like driving from Montreal to Ottawa and back four times. When he had still been playing for the Voyageurs, Shane would have found that proposition easy.

"It better take sixteen hours and not a minute less, or I'll find a way to get your license suspended." Hayden had said.

Ilya responded to the threat with a gentle, barely-there kiss to Shane's brow. "I would never speed with such precious cargo."

-

"You got the lounge pass?" Shane asks, only for the second time, because he's worried that both of them will read into him asking any more than that.

"Yup," Hayden says, looking into the rearview mirror to flash a smile at a scowling Ilya. "I'll text Rozanov once they start clearing flights for takeoff."

BNA isn't the biggest airport, and departures is almost deserted with the steady snow still falling. Hayden had offered to fly standby, which Ilya had called him cheap for, so Shane had made Ilya dig through their airline rewards until he found a guest pass for one of the nicer lounges for Hayden to kill time in. Jackie knows, Hayden's happy to not have to pay for overpriced airport food, and everyone is okay with the plan.

It's the only reason Shane hasn't asked Ilya if they can just drive Hayden home with them.

“Fly safe,” Shane says.

“Thanks for the lift.” Hayden pops the door open, giving Ilya a look. “Drive safe.”

Ilya rolls his eyes. “*Da*.”

Okay. Maybe not the only reason Shane hadn’t asked for him to drive back with them to Canada.

Hayden waves as they drive away, the only person at the gate who looks unbothered by the cold despite the fact that he’s wearing slides instead of real shoes.

“You spoil him,” Ilya says as he flicks the turn signal on to merge.

“Oh, do I?” Shane asks. “By making sure he has somewhere more comfortable than those plastic seats to crash before he inevitably gets stuck next to an angry baby on his flight back?”

Ilya snorts in amusement. “Sleep, Shane.”

-

Sleeping is easier said than done. Shane can get plenty comfortable in the car, Ilya had splurged on the rental, but the faint drumming in his head makes it hard to focus on getting his brain to quiet enough for rest.

Ilya checks in every now and then, and Shane lets him know he’s awake. Once they clear the snowstorm, Ilya has them stop at a rest area where Shane purchases a bottle of water from the vending machine.

If Shane is awake, which he always is, Ilya stops around every hour so they can get out and stretch their legs. Shane’s not an idiot, he can feel his husband’s eyes on him, he knows why he’s concerned. It would be better for them both if he could just sleep through this whole drive, but he can’t, so here they are.

Ilya is muttering, but when Shane squints his eyes open, Ilya’s mouth is covered by his hand and he won’t look at Shane. Shane makes an inquisitive noise and Ilya drops the hand.

“You shouldn’t have been on the ice.”

“I put myself on the ice,” Shane says, even though he doesn’t remember doing so. There’s no other way he would have been out there.

“Wouldn’t have happened at camp.”

“Huh?”

Ilya looks at him, and it makes something in Shane’s gut twist with how familiar the sight of tears in Ilya’s eyes are becoming. “If someone got hit. At hockey camp. We wouldn’t let them get back on the ice next day.”

“If any of the kids have a one-timer like that,” Shane slurs, “we need to get them out of summer hockey camp and find a way to ship them to Shattuck.”

Ilya’s mouth twists, and Shane knows his mouth so well that he knows Ilya’s not holding back a laugh.

“C’mere,” Shane mutters, reaching for Ilya. When his husband takes his hand, he tangles their fingers together, caressing the joint of Ilya’s thumb with the back of his own.

Shane closes his eyes, seeking relief from his headache he knows he won’t find.

“Been talking to Yuna.”

Of course he has.

“What’d my mother tell her favorite son?”

Ilya swallows, making a wet, sad sound. “That this started when you were young.”

“The concussions?”

When there’s no response, Shane cracks his eyes open to find Ilya nodding. He shuts them again, humming in confirmation.

“I was little, the first time. And it’s been fine. Really.”

“Marley,” Ilya protests.

“I was fine after that. Milan too.” Shane says. “This one’s just harder.”

“Don’t want it to keep getting harder.”

“Me neither,” Shane says.

They stop because the car needs gas. Shane beats Ilya to the pump, and Ilya offers to get them snacks.

“Will you get me another water?”

Shane drank most of their first one, and the two refills they’ve been through already. He doesn’t know if it’s helping with the dull throb in his skull, but it’s definitely not hurting.

The tank fills before Ilya gets back, so Shane pays it and uses the time to ask the attendant for a bathroom key, which is attached to the biggest ladle Shane has seen in his life.

Ilya has the car ready to go for them when Shane goes back outside. He’s gotten two bottles of water, a hideously salty bag of trail mix, and a can of Redbull.

“You’ll give yourself a heart attack,” Shane says.

Ilya opens a water bottle and offers it to Shane. “Not if you give me one first.”

His laugh is bright as Shane half-heartedly shoves him, awkward across the large center consol.

“Asshole,” Shane says, how sickly sweet it sounds plain even to his own ears.

-

They’re somewhere in Michigan when it goes wrong.

Ilya is talking about something with Anya, a toy he’s thinking about getting her, when Shane notices the twinge.

He thinks it’s just the angle his neck is at, he shifts himself in the seat and reaches forward to retrieve more water, only for the twinge to turn into a stab. Shane reflexively makes a noise of discomfort.

“Shane?” Ilya stops in the middle of his story. “You okay?”

Shane opens his mouth, but the twinge has exploded into a kind of pain he’s never felt before in his life. He thinks he lets out a hurt moan. He’s not entirely sure that he does.

Ilya says something, something about pain, and Shane slaps at his arm, hoping he understands.

The pounding, thundering sensation in his skull ebbs away, not gone, but changed into a suffocating throb instead of the vise grip it had him in.

“Sorry,” Shane gasps.

He’s dimly aware of Ilya saying something in a language he doesn’t recognize, and Shane feels like he can’t understand much, but he can tell the car is going well above the speed limit.

They stop, sooner rather than later, but Shane’s headache hasn’t shown any signs of quitting.

Ilya leaves the car running as he slides out of the driver’s seat, and is at Shane’s door. Shane can get himself unbuckled, but is completely reliant on Ilya’s support to make it into the emergency department.

Security waves them through to a nurse behind a desk, and someone is saying Shane’s full name.

“Headache,” Shane says, into the friendly face that’s suddenly right in front of him. “I’ve’a headache.”

Ilya rattles off Shane’s date of birth while someone comes up behind him with a wheelchair and urges him to sit down in it.

“Has he had any recent changes to his usual state of health?”

“Concussions and a hematoma.”

“In his brain?”

“*Da*, subdural.”

Someone’s asking where Shane’s headache feels like it’s coming from. He taps the back of his head.

Shane becomes very popular very quickly.

-

The CT comes back normal, and Shane’s right arm is sacrificed this time for the IV line. They draw his blood and hook him up to a bag the nurse calls a migraine cocktail.

They’re in their own private room so the staff can draw the curtains and turn off the lights. Shane does his best to keep his eyes closed and focus on his breathing.

Whatever is in the bag works. It works.

It makes him feel drowsy, and Shane won’t be fit for doing much more than lying around, but his headache is gone. There’s no trace of pain in his skull for the first time since Chicago.

Shane cracks his eyes open, to the familiar sight of Ilya sitting at his bed.

“How long?” Shane asks, tongue heavy but words coming to him easy.

“Not quite hour,” Ilya says. “We have to call them, now that you can talk.”

Shane screws up his face as Ilya takes the remote attached to the bed, pressing a button on it.

A man with a badge identifying himself as a nursing assistant sticks his head in the room. “Can I help you guys?”

“They asked to let them know when he was talking?” Ilya says.

Shane sits himself up a little straighter in the gurney. “I’m talking.”

The nursing assistant nods, and swishes the curtain shut.

“What’ dya think, another hour before they come back?” Shane says.

Ilya snorts a laugh and something in Shane settles.

The room is quiet, as quiet as it can get in the emergency department. There’s a baby crying not too far away, and Shane thinks they can hear a screaming match someone else is getting into. He’d always thought the ER was slower at night, but there is a doctor at their door and peering around the curtain in far less time than an hour. A pair of them, one of which politely invites Ilya to step outside the room with her.

The one who stays is doing all the friendly doctor things, getting himself in a stool and on eye-level with Shane to put him more at ease. It's a trick he learned about when talking to kids and, as Shane is disappointed to realize, still works on himself.

"Hi Shane, I'm Dr. Russell. I was hoping we could chat a little about how you're feeling, test your coordination to see how everything's working if you're up to it?"

Shane nods slowly, trying to be careful of his head.

There's a patient look in the doctor's eye. "Gill said that you were up for talking, could I get a yes or a no?"

"Yes," Shane manages. He misses Ilya's presence at his bedside. "I can talk. Can we wait for my husband to come back?"

The doctor clasps his hands together. "I'd rather we didn't, if that's alright with you. I was able to call up some of the team that was taking care of you in Vanderbilt, and they mentioned you were able to be the most objective about how you were doing when you were evaluated alone."

Shane vaguely feels like something has hit him in the chest, like someone's chirped him in the middle of a game and struck a deep nerve he didn't know he had.

Shane is dumb, slow, and probably more than a little high from the volume of painkillers in his bloodstream. So he does what he shouldn't do, and says what he's thinking out loud.

"You think I'm gonna lie for him."

The doctor's expression doesn't change. "We're trying to remove the source of an impulse that may impede our ability to take care of you."

Which is the same thing.

Shane rubs his eyes with his hands. "Fuck."

-

Ilya comes back with two paper cups of water and a couple of bags of pre-sliced apples.

"They tell you?" Shane asks.

Ilya shakes his head.

"So far so good." He fidgets with his arm with the IV. "Some of the blood tests aren't done but everything is reassuring."

"Other than your headache."

"Other than my headache." Shane pauses for a moment. "They're not exactly pleased with the brain fog either, but I can balance fine and I'm talking better."

Ilya presses a kiss to the side of Shane's head. "Not keeping you?"

"They want a couple more hours to decide." And here it comes, here comes what is sure to be an argument. "You should get home."

Ilya gives Shane a look that makes him feel like he's eighteen and an idiot all over again.

"Are you serious?"

"There's a game."

"We did this last time."

Yes they did, and Shane had hated it, but they were doing it for a reason, what was the fucking reason? "You have a job, you need to go play."

"And no one in NHL has ever has family emergency? No one has ever called out for game?"

"You need to be consistent," and, *oh god*, Shane can finally remember why. "You have contract negotiations at the end of the season."

"No, really?" Ilya says dryly. It's clearly no revelation to him, despite how it feels like one to Shane. "I'm supposed to leave you here?"

"My parents can drive." Shane says, because they can, they would if he asked. Ilya needs to go, he needs to prove that as hockey starts to become more than their bodies can handle that Shane isn't, that the two of them together isn't a liability, that-

Ilya lets out a low, rumbling noise. "And I will get on another airplane, leave you again, fly home, and go play hockey tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"You want me to go play bad hockey? On TV, in front of everyone?"

"Bad Ilya Rozanov is better than most of the NHL."

"Oh, only most."

"Go."

"This is ridiculous."

Ilya pulls out his phone and taps the screen a few times. He holds it screen up, with the receiver close to his mouth, phone dialing loud on speaker mode. It's how he calls everyone, everyone in the world who isn't Shane.

"Coach," Ilya says when the call picks up. "It's Ilya. I won't make it to Ottawa in time for the game. Shane and I are at hospital in Ann Arbor."

Brandon Wiebe winces on the other end of the phone. “I’m sorry to hear that. Are the both of you going to be okay?”

Ilya’s eyes flick away from the phone screen, and whatever he sees in Shane’s face makes his expression soften.

“Eventually,” Ilya says after a moment.

“Any reason you want me to give the media for why you’re out? You took that check in Arizona, we could say-”

“Personal is okay,” Ilya says, reaching towards Shane. “Can you tell front office? And tell them I will be back as soon-”

“Roz, don’t worry about it,” Coach says as Shane turns his palm upwards so his fingers can tangle with Ilya’s. “I mean it. Don’t let anyone badger you for information about your husband. I’m glad you can be with him. Let me, no, let *us* know if there’s anything we can do to help Hollander, okay?”

“Okay,” Ilya echoes softly, giving Shane’s hand a squeeze. “Thank you.”

“I’d say anytime Roz, but I really hope this never happens again. Stay safe.”

The screen goes dark, meaning Wiebe hung up.

“See?” Ilya tries to scoot his chair, like he could get closer to Shane’s bed if he tried. “No big deal.”

They’re lucky Wiebe is nice, more like it. But Wiebe is nice, not naïve, and it didn’t *sound* like there was an issue. Maybe the rabbiting sensation in his chest is for nothing. But maybe... “There are expectations-”

“Yes,” Ilya agrees. “Expectation is I take care of my husband. It’s a little difficult when the man I married keeps getting in the way.”

Shane bites into his lip, not enough to bleed, but enough to pull his focus to the new pain so that he doesn’t tear up at Ilya’s words.

Between the honesty and the headache, it’s too much.

Ilya doesn’t say anything else. He leans over to press a kiss just above Shane’s ear, and slowly strokes his thumb over the back of Shane’s palm, to the rhythm of the monitors tracking Shane’s heartbeat.

-

There’s no root cause for the headache, beyond the obvious, and his bloodwork is as reassuring as the CT was. They keep them a couple more hours for observation, and when nothing changes, they permit them to go.

Shane accepts the offered shot in his ass, and the pillow for the rest of the car ride. Even with the migraine cocktail and the shot, the pharmacy still allows them a handful of rapid-release painkillers that should help if a new headache starts. Provided the headache doesn't make Shane too nauseous to keep down the medication. If that happens, Ilya needs to take them to the nearest ER.

None of it is an answer. They're just trying to patch them up well enough to get Shane home.

Eight hours. He'll be home in eight hours. Ilya will have missed a game. But they'll be home. And he won't miss any more, and Shane will be able to rest and get better.

It's what Shane tells himself. He knows his husband well enough to see the hope for the same reflected in his eyes, whenever he takes them off the road to risk a glance at Shane.

Shane will get better and he will be able to stop losing himself and thinking he's still playing whenever he wakes and eventually it will be okay. Like he promised Ilya it was back in Chicago.

-

It's dark when Ilya pulls into the familiar driveway. Shane must have been in and out of consciousness, and that familiar nagging pain is starting to tap up again.

He just wants to sleep, sleep in his own bed with his husband and have this headache go away.

"David picked up Anya for us," Ilya says as he turns the car off. "He will bring her tomorrow."

Shane nods, wrestling with the seatbelt to get himself out of the car.

Following Ilya is easy as is toeing his shoes off. The routine of coming home is familiar. He's prepared to follow Ilya straight to their bedroom and pass out before Shane runs into him. His husband doesn't seem surprised, has one hand around his waist like he was expecting to have to catch him.

Dimly, Shane realizes Ilya is speaking to him, asking how he's feeling. How his head is feeling.

He's no worse for wear than he was the last game he played, and wordlessly grunts at his husband hoping he'll understand.

"Shane," there's a hand on his chin, gentle but firm. "Words. Please."

Ilya sounds so tired.

Okay. Talking. Words. He can do that. For Ilya.

"I have a little headache." Shane presses his head into Ilya's bicep, and when he looks up Ilya is frowning. "Can I have water?"

“Eat. Then medicine and water, yes?”

Shane nods, too weak to protest. He could navigate their home backwards and blind, so it might take him a little more time than normal to do so, but he’s changed into soft sweats and perched on the edge of their bed when Ilya returns to him. He chews the offered protein bar under watchful eyes, swallows the painkillers between sips of water.

Ilya takes the glass away when he’s drunk half of it. “Brush teeth then bed?”

That worried look is going to become etched into his skin if Shane’s not careful. “What, you hate my morning breath that much?”

The harsh lines soften. “Yes. Is terrible.”

Neither of them turn the lights on. Shane lets himself lean backwards a little as he goes for his molars, craving the familiar press of Ilya’s chest to his back.

Ilya leans around him to spit in the sink before he ducks his head to rinse his mouth out straight from the spout. When Ilya removes his head from the sink, Shane spits too, finds the half empty glass and swishes water from there.

While one hand plays with the waistband of his sweats, Ilya takes the glass from Shane’s hand and refills it before turning the sink off.

“It’s good to be home,” Shane says.

“Better to be home with you.” Ilya says, like a sap.

-

It’s the bottom of the third and the Centaurs are up by one when Shane rolls over in bed and finds his husband next to him. Ilya is awake, ever watchful, turned golden by sunlight.

“Sleep okay?” Ilya mumbles.

“Why’re you here?” Shane asks, pulling away so he can rub the sleep out of his eyes. Hopefully it’ll help with the heaviness he feels in his head.

Ilya blinks. “What?”

“You have a game, skate.” Shane can’t play, he can’t play because he hit his head, but Ilya didn’t do that. “Florida.”

“Today is January twenty-first,” Ilya says slowly as he pushes himself upright. “We got home after the game.”

Something in his skull throbs as Shane thinks about not being allowed to get on an airplane. “Coach-”

“I called Wiebe in Michigan.”

Before he can think better of it, Shane asks, “Michigan?”

“Shane. Shane.” The panic in Ilya is radiating off him. “Shane, please tell me you remember Michigan.”

There was the hospital in Nashville and Hayden and the strange car and so much time in that car and there was a can of Redbull that Shane didn’t touch and the headache that wouldn’t go away.

There’s a groove on the inside of Shane’s lip and when he presses in and pain blooms in his mouth, something trips his memory, something tangled up with the drumming in his head now.

“The emergency room,” Shane says.

Ilya sags into bed with relief. “Between the snow in Tennessee and stopping in Michigan, we lost day. I missed Florida game. Not big deal.”

Shane can feel his mouth gape as he stares at his husband. “Your contract extension negotiations are at the end of the season.”

“I know.”

“Do you want to keep playing hockey?”

Ilya looks stung. “Excuse me?”

“You won’t look like you do. You’re too expensive to miss games.”

“I want you to be taken care of,” Ilya drops his gaze and won’t look at Shane. “I want to play hockey too. I can want both things.”

“Well, you can only do one.”

Ilya swallows loudly, won’t look back up at Shane.

“That’s not true,” he manages.

“Yes, it is.” Shane says, and in his bones he knows it, even if he hadn’t been certain of where he was when he woke up this morning.

“No it’s not,” Ilya says, with the same level of conviction.

Shane can recognize, dimly, that he’s pushing this to a degree that’s not helpful. Even if he’s right. His head is throbbing, not as badly as it was when they were in the car, but the pain isn’t helping, isn’t allowing him to lay out the reasons he’s right in any way that will make sense to Ilya right now, not after he’s upset Ilya this much.

He needs to get out, remove himself from the conversation. He can’t say that to Ilya, can’t ask Ilya to leave, because he hasn’t, not for years, they don’t do that anymore. Not after that

fight that could have ended everything. You get mad, you step back. You don't make the other person leave. But when Shane pushes himself up and out of bed, the world swims in front of him.

Ilya's strong hands catch him, save him from the floor. Shane follows their anchor and lets his husband settle himself back in bed.

"We're not done with this," Ilya pleads.

"I need to be," Shane manages.

His eyes are closed, needing shelter from the daylight. He can still feel the weight of Ilya's on him.

"For now?" His husband asks.

"Yeah. For now." Shane says, and even with all the frustration of not being listened to and the fear knotted up in his anger, is a little surprised to find that it's the truth.

"Pain?" Ilya asks.

Fuck, who even knows anymore.

"Five?" Shane guesses.

Ilya presses two pills into one hand, a glass of water in another.

"Drink. Wait for your parents to come, will get food then."

Something cold settles in Shane's stomach. "Don't want them."

"Well, you can't be left alone," Ilya says gently. "So tough shit."

He knew why Shane had tried to get out of bed. It's sweet, it always is to be understood so easily, but the fact that Ilya knows he was trying to leave makes anything good from that knowing go sour with regret.

His father ends up being the one who stays with him, brings a banana and another protein bar for Shane to eat. Mom and Anya both stick their heads in the room when they arrive, exchanging places with Ilya. His parents steal brief hugs and Anya gets one wet kiss on the back of Shane's hand, before his mom scoots Anya out the door.

Dad draws the blackout curtains down, and Shane waits for questions, to be told to explain why he wants to be away from the one person who can take care of him the best.

They never come. Dad moves a chair across the hardwood floor and on to the rug where their bed rests.

Shane is struck with a twisted sense of déjà vu, of sitting at his father's bedside last year. Suddenly that fear, that worry that somehow going to hockey games would lead to the death

of his parents, feels very silly. That he'd demanded such a thing, tried to exercise a ridiculous amount of control over something so beyond himself. Like Shane could will a pulmonary embolism not to happen. He wasn't even strong enough to wrestle his brain back under his own control.

"I'm sorry," Shane manages.

That look of concern is just as ill-fitting on his father's face as it is Ilya's. "Sorry for what?"

"Not letting you come watch. Telling you that you had to stay. It wasn't my place, I was wrong."

Dad doesn't say anything, just leans forward so he can pat the bed, next to where Shane's face is sliding off the pillow.

"We love you, Shane." Dad whispers.

Shane closes his eyes, making a noise of acknowledgement.

"Can I do anything for you?"

"Talk?" Shane begs weakly. "Tell me m'bout Montreal? How're the Pikes?"

He falls asleep easier to Ilya's voice, but in a pinch, his father's can still do the trick.

-

His dad is there when Shane wakes, at whatever ungodly hour it is now. He's holding a book, but his eyes are on Shane.

"Mmh sorry," Shane says as he pushes himself up.

Dad just shakes his head. "We're glad you're home."

Shane is too, glad he's not in Chicago, or Nashville, or any hospital with dimmed overhead lights. "Can I have water?"

His dad closes the book and puts it down on the floor. "Ilya said if you asked for water to ask if you also have a headache."

Asshole.

Shane nods, trying not to jostle his head too much.

"Are you feeling up to walking? We could go get the painkillers and water together. Might be nice, to get a change of scenery."

He's not wrong.

"Arm?" Shane asks, despite how small it makes him feel. "Just in case?"

He doesn't end up needing it, but walking in step with his dad is still nice, comforting. It brings him back to the last time he'd needed to be babied like this, after his concussion in 2017. Staying with his parents had eventually gotten grating, and the broken collarbone had made him much more irritable, but it had been nice at the start.

When they round the corner to the living room, Shane is greeted by the familiar sight of Ilya and his mother in the kitchen. Mom's ordering him around as Ilya pokes at her with the handle of a wooden spoon. Shane's feet stop under himself and something in his chest cracks, gooey and warm.

Ilya must hear them come in because he turns to look over his shoulder, bright smile only softening a little when his eyes meet Shane's.

"Is Anya okay?" Shane asks.

Ilya nods, blinking his eyes a little before he rubs them with the back of his arm. "Yuna and I walked her."

"Fed her too," Mom says, squeezing Ilya's elbow as she passes behind him.

Shane leans on the kitchen island for support, narrowing his eyes as he tries to get a view on what's in the pot Ilya's watching over.

"Made your favorite sick food," Mom says, nodding to a plate.

Ilya starts to portion out the pasta while the chicken and broccoli finish baking. The plate Mom nods to has a boiled chicken breast and noodles without any red sauce.

"I tossed them in butter," Ilya says as he piles up the last plate, moving out of the way so Mom can get to the oven. "I hope you can forgive me."

"If you can forgive me," Shane says.

Ilya looks up, press of his brow betraying his surprise. "Always."

Shane's not talking about the pasta and Ilya knows. Shane feels his eyes swell and throat thicken.

He doesn't deserve Ilya. Ilya would disagree, but right now, in this moment, Shane feels like he could gouge out both of his eyes and give them to his husband and still be unworthy of him.

Ilya probably would think he's being gross and more than a little dramatic, but Shane doesn't know how to do things in half measures.

Mom checks the chicken and lets Ilya dole out the broccoli while Shane follows Dad to count out painkillers and make sure everyone has glasses.

"You can drink whatever you want," Shane insists.

“We want water,” Dad says firmly.

The shuffling around the kitchen, making sure everyone has utensils and napkins, is familiar and good. It is strange that Anya’s not underfoot, her need to beg for scraps always stronger than her desire to avoid being tripped over. Shane would suspect her of being holed up in one of their spare rooms to prevent exactly that, but when they do that for team parties, she always ends up crying. Maybe she really is asleep.

His plate isn’t as warm as everyone else’s, but that’s fine. When he’s tired like this, it’s honestly Shane’s preference. His mom definitely gave him the biggest chicken breast, though, like that makes up for it not being cheesy and breaded. He’s not sure he’s got enough of an appetite to eat the whole thing.

“Want me to cut it up for you?” Ilya whispers.

“No-” Shane starts, then thinks better of it. “Actually, yes. If we’re going to eat on the couch like animals.”

Ilya clicks his tongue playfully. “Whatever you say, my hedgehog.”

Shane snorts a weak laugh, which draws both his parent’s attention.

“You want your chicken cut?” Mom asks, looking confused.

Shane follows her gaze, but it’s just to Ilya. “Yeah, I told him it was fine.”

His parents look to one another, before his dad just shrugs. Ilya doesn’t seem put off by their behavior, so it must just be Shane missing something.

Whatever. It’s fine, they’d tell him if it was important.

“Can I sit with you?” Ilya asks as he passes Shane his plate.

“Yeah,” Shane can feel himself frowning. “Of course.”

“Did not want to assume,” Ilya says, hovering.

Oh. He’d normally give Shane a kiss right now. Shane’s made a mess of this.

Shane tilts his head slowly, trying to telegraph his move so Ilya can pull away if he wants. But he doesn’t so Shane presses a brief kiss to where Ilya’s jaw meets his ear.

Their meal, which is too early to be dinner, since a glance at the microwave in the open pantry door revealed to Shane that it’s a little before four, is lazy and slow. It mostly consists of Ilya reviewing the last handful of days, not too much of it seeming to surprise his parents. Shane knows they’ve been in touch. Ilya ends up ranting about how the state of Tennessee crumbles under the faintest dusting of snow, how Hayden had been trapped at the airport until he could catch a flight earlier today.

“They don’t have any infrastructure for snow,” Dad says around a mouthful of pasta.

“Then why do they have a hockey team?” Ilya’s not impressed.

“We’ve had this debate before,” Shane points out, knowing it will do nothing to stop them.

But it does, somehow, and the rhythm of Ilya tapping his foot against Shane’s soothes him despite the sudden quiet.

“Shane,” his mom says. “We’ve heard a lot from Ilya. Do you want to tell us how things have been?”

He doesn’t, but Shane knows he’s staring down a long series of appointments with all kinds of doctors, and this is as good of a time to practice as any.

He runs them down the injuries, what he remembers, what he doesn’t and has been told to him. He has to look just above the heads of his parents so he can tell them about the symptoms that have been following him, especially the intensity of his headaches and how he doesn’t always know where he is when he wakes up. He doesn’t want to see how they’re reacting to hearing it from his mouth, doesn’t know if he could withstand it.

Ilya’s foot is still pressing his own. It feels like an anchor, a grounding wire, the only reason that Shane can keep talking.

“There’s one more thing I haven’t told you,” Shane says, and this is when he’s going to get yelled at. “There was some blood loose in my brain. A subdural hematoma. They think it happened when I fell during warm ups.”

His parents exchange a look he can’t read.

“Your head isn’t shaved,” is what his mom says.

“What?”

“Did you need surgery?” Dad asks.

“No,” Shane says. “No, it self-resolved. But that was one of the reasons we drove back.”

His parents both look to Ilya, who nods.

“I told him not to tell you,” Shane says. “I didn’t want you to worry, to come.”

Mom looks sad. “We wouldn’t have come if you didn’t want us there, honey.”

“It’s not-” Shane’s not explaining himself well. “I lied to you; I had Ilya lie to you. About something important.”

“You’re telling us now,” Dad says.

“I’m angry,” Mom says, “but not at you. At brains. And hockey maybe.”

Ilya frowns. “Are you mad at Ziedins?”

“I never said that.”

“Then deny it, Yuna.”

His mother pointedly does not, and takes a long sip of water instead.

It’s so absurd. Shane can’t stop himself from coughing out a strange laugh.

Ilya’s hand is on his back before he realizes that Shane is laughing. That sets him off too, and Shane can hear his dad wheezing too.

“What?” Mom is acting like she’s the only reasonable one.

“Do you still hate Marlow too?” Shane asks, because it never occurred to him that she’d still hold the grudge.

She tilts her head. “I think a couple years playing in the Swedish Hockey League sounds like a nice way for him to retire.”

“Yuna!” Ilya gasps in exaggerated outrage. “He’s not a dirty player.”

“That is honestly what I think!”

“Oh, but if *I* said I wanted to go to Sweden-”

“You would leave my son alone in Ottawa?”

Shane meets his father’s eyes while Mom and Ilya go back and forth, and finds a warmth matched in his own. Dad just shakes his head and Shane does nothing to hide his smile as he takes another bite of chicken and pasta.

-

He wakes up with fingers slowly combing through his hair and Anya’s snoring.

“We’re playing Buffalo today,” is the first thing Shane says, before he opens his eyes. “Please tell me you haven’t missed the morning skate.”

The fingers stop, and he can feel Ilya’s weight leave the mattress before hearing footsteps go down the hallway. Shane counts five breaths before he sits up, finding himself alone in their bedroom.

Yogurt and peanut butter about all he feels up for making, even if mixing the spread where the oil separated takes a little more muscle than Shane was expecting.

Ilya doesn’t appear until Shane is halfway through his breakfast. He’s dressed to drive himself to the practice arena, holding an Irina Foundation branded water bottle, and frowning.

He fills the bottle in the sink, and Shane doesn’t take another bite, waiting, watching.

Ilya comes up on the breakfast bar and presses a kiss to Shane's cheek.

"I'm scared for you, but it's upsetting you when I change our routine. So I'll play today. I can't tell if I'm relieved you remember our schedule, or if I'm upset hockey can do this to you and the one thing it can't seem to hurt is your memory of hockey."

Shane opens his mouth, to say what he doesn't entirely know, but Ilya silences him with a kiss pressed right to the corner.

"I love you," Ilya says. "Yuna is waiting outside. I'm going to let her in when I leave."

"I love you," Shane says, because he means it, and because he's pretty sure he's not allowed to apologize right now.

-

Ilya comes and goes from their house as game day demands, but Mom stays. She's brought a notebook for Shane, wants him to keep track of what, if anything is worsening his headache. He works on the list with Anya curled up at his feet on the couch. Ilya brings him water and they get a gameday nap in on the couch.

Shane's head is throbbing too much for him to get much shut eye. That's fine. He could watch Ilya sleep through heavily lidded eyes for hours, keeping track of time by the growth of the drool patch his husband is leaving on his t-shirt.

When Dad shows up, that's Ilya's cue to get dressed. Mom asks what he wants for dinner and Shane shrugs.

"Whatever you want. I'm not that hungry."

Her eyes narrow. "Have you been?"

Shane shrugs again. "Not really."

"Doctor said familiar foods are helpful," Ilya's holding his dress shoes in his hands as he bends down to kiss Shane on the forehead. "We have sweet potatoes. More chicken too?"

Shane hums agreement, pulling Ilya's hand so he can kiss the back of it, right next to his ring. "Good luck."

"Don't let them keep you up late," Ilya teases, waving as he leaves.

"What did you two say?" Dad asks as he locks the front door behind Ilya.

It takes Shane a moment. "About food?"

Mom is already in the kitchen, and when Shane looks over there's potatoes and asparagus on the counter. "No, what you said in Russian."

Shane frowns. "Russian?"

“Just now.” Dad looks more baffled than he does worried. “Before he walked out the door.”

“I didn’t...” Shane doesn’t know where to begin. “I didn’t notice? That we were speaking Russian?”

His parents exchange a look.

“Write that down in your book,” Dad orders, gently but still firm.

Shane does, makes a note that he’s also had times since hitting his head where he hasn’t understood Ilya. Who knows how long that’s been going on. Who would bother with checking his fluency in a second language when he can’t tell Chicago from Nashville from Ann Arbor.

He forgets how slowly time passes before a game. Shane first mutes the afternoon pregame broadcast, before giving up and completely turning it off. He’s well outside the window for screens to be dangerous, but having to focus on anything for too long is still worsening his headache.

He helps his mom in the kitchen with the asparagus, the easiest thing she could have assigned him with. Shane pretends he can’t see his dad hovering whenever he picks up the knife.

His hands are as steady as they’ve ever been. At least this part of his body hasn’t betrayed him.

Dad takes Anya out while the oven heats, and the pregame show is on by the time the food is actually ready. His parents acquiesce to Shane’s demand that they eat at the table like adults, but his mom keeps the volume of the television on low so they can listen.

Roster shakeups are all he cares to pay attention for. Shane knows he’s been placed on IR as week-to-week, hasn’t met the AHL call-up filling in his spot. The guy is hanging around on the fourth line, playing wing while they’ve forced Stonkus to center. Ilya’s line is the first line again, for the first time since he’s been back from his knee injury, and while Bood is a fixture, the coaches can’t settle with Troy or Luca on the other wing.

“Haas is a lot faster,” Mom says. “But Ilya can’t read him like you do.”

They’ve decided on Luca for the Buffalo game anyways.

“It’s Buffalo,” Dad points out. “I don’t think they’ll need telepathy to win.”

He’s probably right. Manny is starting in the box, and Shane would bet he’s still coasting the high from the goal he scored in Chicago. When he’s on, he’s a nightmare.

When puck drop comes, Shane finds he can’t watch the game. It’s not out of a lack of desire, or some horrible jealousy. Even through the screen, the whistles are too loud, the ice is too bright, and the puck moves so fast it drives his lightheadedness into a more dangerous pounding sensation. The first line wasn’t the starting one, so he doesn’t even know what Ilya looks like on the ice.

Shane ends up lying down on the couch, away from the T.V. with a blanket draped over his eyes. His parents lower the volume even though he doesn't ask them to. It's still not enough, he can see the flashes of color when the game cuts to commercial and that is all it takes to nag at his head even more.

He only has one question he asks the whole game, although he doesn't stop asking it.

"Is he playing scared?"

"No," Mom answers every time. "He's playing like he always does."

-

The doctors in Tennessee kept talking about teams at Ottawa General taking his case, but other than the neurologist he's scheduled to see tomorrow, the Centaurs' training staff are the ones coordinating Shane's care. They can do everything at the facility at the practice rink.

Ilya drops him off on his way to an appointment with Galina. There's goaltender practice this morning, and when Ilya had asked, Wyatt had been more than willing to drive Shane home after the team was finished with him.

The route to the athletic trainers and team doctors is a familiar one, and Shane still knocks even though he knows they're expecting him. Terry looks like he might throw up when looks up to see Shane walking in.

"Kid," is all he gets out before there are tears in his eyes.

"Hey," Shane's not exactly the most comforting presence, but a hand on the team doctor's arm goes a long way. "You didn't know."

Terry's lip quivers. "I should have."

"I didn't know," Shane stresses. "I was lying to everyone, even myself. How could you have known?"

Terry just shakes his head.

One of the physical therapists, Abby, approaches them as she taps away at an iPad. "Wanna get started Shane? We have some physical evals planned and a meeting with an OT from General if that sounds okay?"

It sounds exhausting. But Abby is nice, and Wyatt has practice for at least another hour.

"Sounds okay," Shane says.

Abby nods. "Great. Let's start with you standing here. Get on one leg for me, hold your arms out, and close your eyes once you feel stable. Use the bench for support if you think you're going to fall, okay?"

-

Wyatt is waiting for Shane outside the trainer's room, freshly showered with his hoodie pulled over still damp hair, absorbed by something on the screen of his phone.

"You'll catch a cold if we spend too long outside," Shane says, closing the door softly behind him.

Wyatt looks up, has a bright smile for Shane. "That's not how viruses work, I know you know that Hollzy."

It's familiar, easy, makes Shane feel like nothing has changed.

He's got Wyatt wrapped up in a tired hug, printouts from the trainers crumpling against his back. It goes on for a little too long, and Shane's dimly aware of the fact that his eyes are damp.

Wyatt's great, but it's not so much that Shane's missed him. Wyatt is his teammate, his first teammate he's seen since he was taken off the ice. And it's like this. In the hallway, Wyatt fresh off the ice, Shane with a fistful of doctor's orders.

Ilya's his teammate too, finally, after everything, but this is different.

"Hey buddy," Wyatt says gently. "Let's get you home."

Wyatt is a careful driver under normal circumstances, so Shane can't tell if he's treating this trip any different. The radio is playing something orchestral on a low volume, and they don't talk beyond Wyatt passing on Lisa's offer to go over the growing pile of medical paperwork that Shane's accumulating. To review it with him, to answer any questions or explain terms he can't parse. From anyone else it might be patronizing, but Lisa does that for everyone on the team.

She'd done it for Ilya, dutifully figured out what kind of metal was in the screws they put in his knee, even as Shane had insisted for her to ignore him, that Ilya was just fucking with her.

He had been. Lisa had taken him seriously anyways. It had kind of embarrassed Ilya, which in turned amused Lisa.

His husband is home when Wyatt pulls into the drive, sitting out front with Anya. Wyatt makes a great fuss of greeting their dog as Shane lets Ilya pull him close to his side.

"How'd it go?" Ilya asks.

Shane offers up the printouts. "They have orders for you too."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Quit hovering so much."

"Terry said that? In writing?"

"Terry *and* Abby. More or less."

Ilya finally grabs the paper. “More or less, let me see.”

Samir, the occupational therapist, actually had been the most insistent that Shane try to have some independence at home, even if the headaches were still plaguing him. Terry and Abby had agreed, but both of them know Ilya, and were a little less optimistic about Ilya’s openness to being told to stop playing Shane’s shadow.

Not that Shane minds. He never could, not when Ilya makes an exaggerated noise of dismay when he finds the proposal that Shane try to do some simple tasks around the house without assistance.

Anya finally wiggles away from Wyatt, in between Shane’s legs so she can lick at his knee through his sweats. Her mouth isn’t wet enough to actually soak the material, but she’s making a good effort.

“Hi sweet girl,” Shane murmurs, stroking her ears.

“Your dad thinks I’m keeping too tight of a leash on him,” Ilya says to Anya. “After all these years! I thought he liked it.”

Wyatt snorts. “My captain’s on IR and his husband can’t even keep it in his pants until he’s feeling better?”

Ilya makes a show of running his tongue over his teeth and Shane laughs, even though he feels like he’s swallowing a stone, a pang at the way he and Ilya have had to leave any actual intimacy back in their hotel room in Chicago, before that unlucky puck.

-

The first time Shane tries to do yoga, the routine his occupational therapist and physical therapist approved, he throws up.

When he’s called for dinner but doesn’t show, Ilya comes to find him in their home gym in a bastardization of child’s pose, his arms wrapped around his head as he tries his best to block out the already dim lights.

“Mmph,” Shane gets out, “M’head.”

“I know, I know,” Ilya says, rubbing his back. “I am going to pick you up and get you settled in bed, *da?*”

Shane makes a movement that looks enough like a nod that Ilya proceeds, lifting Shane with ease, keeping them both out of the puddle of vomit.

Ilya settles him upright, wiping around the edge of Shane’s mouth with his thumb.

“Mm gross,” Shane protests, trying to pull away.

“Who cares.”

Shane does, but not Ilya, so he'll follow his lead. He follows Ilya to the bedroom, does his best to help himself get undressed. Ilya gets him water and painkillers before he draws the curtains to darken their room. Shane's settled upright in bed and lets Ilya slowly feed him small bites of dinner.

It's a while before his head settles. The nausea fades once he stops moving, but his tongue feels heavy and useless until the medicine kicks in.

"You're good at this." Shane whispers.

It's not a question, but Ilya knows what he's asking.

"I read up a while ago," Ilya confesses. "Wanted to be able to tell you what to do. When it was my turn."

Shane doesn't like his certainty. "When?"

"My father," Ilya says in lieu of anything else, but that's all the explanation that he really needs, isn't it.

Because Alzheimer's disease is genetic, and it's not a done thing, not by a long shot, but they do play a sport that puts you in a position where you're more likely to get head injuries than the average person. A sick brain is a sick brain. Ilya's been where Shane is before, but never quite like this.

Hell, Shane's been here before, but he's never thrown up after a beginner's beginner's Vinyasa from it, never had to go back to the hospital after leaving for it, never had it linger like this, where he wakes up in his own bed and he doesn't know if he's at home or on the ice.

He stopped eating at some point, and Ilya's taken the plate away, set it out of reach on a bedside table next to the water.

Ilya's hand is warm and familiar in his own, and when Shane presses his thumb against his husband's wrist, he can feel the way his pulse is rabbiting. One part anchor, one part lifeline.

"Shane, there's bad, and there's... there's whatever this is."

Shane wants to protest, push back for the sake of it, but what comes out of his mouth is, "Yeah."

Shane knows that concussions are dangerous. He's been told that his whole life, he has lived through dangerous concussions. His coaches have always taken them seriously, even when the standard for what that meant wasn't what it is today. He's seen the effects of the ones that don't resolve, the way they change lives.

He doesn't understand how his head injury is one of those concussions.

And he hasn't crossed that line yet, it's not out of the realm of possibility that with more rest and time things could resolve. And yet...

“I think I might not be okay,” Shane confesses.

Chapter 4: four

The first neurologist he meets with at Ottawa General has an aversion meeting his eyes and is somehow more awkward than Shane. The overview of everything that transpired before their meeting is clinical in a way that makes him both feel unsettled and like they're talking about someone else. The neurologist is clearly smart, but speaks at a level that would have been way over Shane's head even before he'd gotten his bell rung.

It was a mistake sharing that thought with the neurologist though, who narrows his eyes. "Do you feel like your head injuries have impacted how you feel about your intelligence?"

"No," Shane shakes his head, even though he knows it's going to intensify the throb that's been building all afternoon. "I just. I was never going to be a doctor, right?"

The neurologist shrugs. "Okay. Do you like the way this appointment is going?"

"Does anyone?"

"Some people do," he doesn't seem offended, even though Shane would probably be in his shoes. "It's important you feel comfortable talking with the people taking care of you. All you've told me without prompting is that I'm making you feel stupid. I can offer you a referral, our department is fairly deep."

Shane looks down, afraid whatever his face might reveal to the neurologist. He knows he's only gotten an appointment as quickly as he did thanks to the Centaurs and the NHL.

"You can't hurt my feelings," he says. "I'm not really the guy people go to for long term care."

Shane bites his cheek instead of asking why the neurologist is so certain that Shane's going to need long term care.

"The doctor patient relationship is an important one. You can always ask to see someone else if something isn't working, okay?"

"Okay," Shane echoes.

"I'll see who can see you in the next week or earlier," the neurologist starts typing away at the computer in front of him. "We've been over a lot, is there anything else you think I can do for you before you go?"

Shane pages through the notebook that Mom gave him, past the log of the ways his headache changes, through the gaps in each day that he's been trying to identify. "Yeah, this might be strange, but should I talk to you guys or someone else about difficulties with a second language?"

The neurologist keeps typing. "Ah, *Français*?"

“No, actually.” Shane responds in French.

That gets the doctor to look up. “Oh?”

“It’s my Russian. I haven’t forgotten, I mean, I’m still using it. But only if I don’t think about what language I’m speaking in, I think?”

He hadn’t known what he’d felt, when he realized his French hadn’t been affected. Embarrassment. Anger. Shame. All of that, more, tied up in some terrible knot.

It happened earlier today, when the team’s shared playlist Ilya queued up shuffled a song Shane didn’t recognize when they were driving to the General. Ilya had scrambled to skip it, cursing out Bood for giving Chouinard access despite the fact he’d retired half a decade ago. Shane had been too caught up in the pit in his stomach at the realization that he’d recognized and been able to translate the French that he hadn’t had much of a reply to Ilya, just a distant hum.

Ilya had recognized that something was off, Shane said his headache was bothering him when he asked. The admission that something else might be wrong, that a puck to the head and a fall had taken away something that was *theirs*, that felt too awful to own up to.

“I’d need more time for an assessment to diagnose you with anything, but that sounds like it might be a type of aphasia. I can put in a consult with speech language pathology, see if any of our providers speak Russian or have experience with a case like this? I can’t promise anything, but if your English and French are both fine, there’s a chance it resolves on its own. But you should ask someone who knows more than I do.”

Just like in the car, Shane feels like his words get stuck in his throat. “It’s... it’s fine. You don’t have to do that. The headache going away is more important, right?”

The neurologist shrugs. “Seems pretty important to you.”

Is it any more important than being able to play hockey again?

Shane has his answer the moment he has the thought.

“Yeah. Yeah, it is.”

-

Shane scrolls through some of his roughly three thousand missed emails from the past week while he waits for Ilya to return from the hospital’s parking garage. As the Jeep Cherokee pulls up, Shane taps on one about the upcoming All-Star Game.

Shane was supposed to go as the sole Centaurs representative; Ilya had been making an exhausting itinerary of what he was going to do in the Twin Cities while Shane was busy playing. Like an absolute liar, as if Ilya was going to do anything other than hang out in the arena as close to Shane as he could, like some lovesick puppy and not his husband of eight years.

“They wanted Haas in Saint Paul?” Shane asks as he lets himself in, buckling while still reading the email. Luca’s great, Shane loves having him on his wing, but he still shares a roster with Ilya Rozanov. Between him and Shane, the rest of the Centaurs have had a guaranteed break during All-Star week.

Ilya is suspiciously quiet. When Shane looks over, the guilt is plain on his face.

“I told the organization that I would not go.”

“They’re going to suspend you for that.”

“Just one game.”

The argument from a couple days ago simmers. Shane doesn’t poke at the bruise, no matter how badly he wants to. The suspension won’t be until after the break. And Ilya won’t bring it up. Shane can tell he wants to talk through it with Galina.

“Is Luca excited?” Shane asks as a peace offering.

“You know Haasy. Never met a NHL obligation he didn’t like.”

“Is his boyfriend?”

Ilya outright laughs. “He’s pissed. Was going to take them to Turks and Caicos.”

“Turks and Caicos, Minneapolis-Saint Paul, what’s the real difference?”

“Oh, only about twenty degrees and thirty centimeters of snow I think.”

Shane should let it drop, should change the subject, tell Ilya about his appointment. But the date of the All-Star announcement is from before they’d argued about Ilya missing games, when Shane had pointed out that he’d put the last years of his career, the end of his playing legacy, in jeopardy if he dropped everything for Shane.

He hadn’t said it exactly like that. He probably should, at some point, when his head isn’t throbbing and he’s able to string his thoughts together properly. Just like he should talk about anything other than the upcoming All-Star Game, but Shane has to ask.

“Did they do something stupid, like tell you in Arizona?”

The turn signal clicks on, and Ilya hums out a “Mmhm.”

“Jesus,” Shane mutters, because what else is there to say.

“You’ll get better,” Ilya soft vows. “It’ll get easier.”

-

He tells Rose about it over the phone, because she’s in Slovenia filming a project for a tiny studio that she’s financially backed, meaning she can’t come visit. She’s furious about the

distance, and Ilya's update means she can turn that anger to the lack of sensitivity of the NHL.

"Would it kill them to have a touch of tact?" Rose rants. "I can't believe- ugh, it's like there wasn't a single woman in the room."

"Probably not," Shane will give her that. "Maybe one. It's part of the problem, for sure."

"Sveta will never leave the Bears because she's loyal, but she'd have handled that shit a lot better."

"Svetlana would be better at it, wouldn't she."

"*Wouldn't she*," Rose echoes, voice dripping with sarcasm. "You let me go on a tear. Do you want to talk about your appointment?"

Shane holds back a sigh, because she'll pounce on him for that, because Rose always has and always will be a bloodhound for the slightest social cues. "Not really, but everyone's going to ask and practice will be good for me."

"I'll go easy on you."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

-

His parents are out walking Anya when Bood and Cassie come by, bearing takeout and a bottle of wine. They just wanted to see Shane and drop off the food, but once some gentle prodding reveals that they don't have any plans for the rest of the night, he pushes down his headache and asks them to stay for dinner. Their kids are scattered between sleepovers, giving them a random night off in the middle of the week. Cassie follows Ilya into the kitchen for a bottle opener while Bood lets Shane boss him around the dining table so they can eat family style once Anya drags his parents home.

"This is going to open the floodgates," Bood warns him as they exchange serving spoons. "Roz almost bit Stormy's head off during the Buffalo game when he asked about you."

"Brave of you to show your face," Shane teases, making a note to text Daniel and apologize.

Bood shrugs. "Cassie heard through the grapevine that Hazy was driving you around the other day. You know she can hold her own against Roz."

More like Cassie could make any of the Centaurs cower before her. She wouldn't, but she could. She runs the WAGs group chat for a reason.

"I don't think that you and Wyatt can really be considered the dam bursting."

“God forbid the old fucks are the only ones with the balls to drop by.” Bood surveys their work of evenly distributing the takeout boxes. “Haasy said the baby Cens were talking about it, but that whole group can be all bark.”

“If Ilya doesn’t want anyone to know where we live, he can stop offering to host team parties.”

Bood snorts, and Shane thinks it’s because despite the fact that Shane now wears the C, Ottawa still treats Ilya like their captain. Nothing has changed since Shane and Bood were the As. Unless they need someone to go argue with the referees over a call. Ilya can pitch a fit like no one else, but Shane will actually get results.

But then he opens his mouth and says, “What, is he threatening to billet Chel?”

Shane doesn’t recognize the nickname, and his blank expression must betray his confusion.

Bood’s grin drops immediately. “Shit, sorry, Kjell Holmberg, they called him up from Belleville.”

The winger who had pushed Zenonas Stonkus into playing center. The guy they’d called up to make up for Shane being on IR.

“Is he okay?” Shane asks. “He’s not stuck in a hotel, is he?”

Bood shakes his head. “Kelly has a two bedroom, basically dragged him home after the roadie.”

Shane nods. Good. Good. He’s probably going to be in Ottawa for a while.

“My garden,” Ilya calls, “water with ice or without?”

“Without,” Shane says. “You’re having wine?”

There’s a nearly unintelligible noise from the kitchen that Shane recognizes as a no.

“Have a glass, I saw the bottle they brought.”

The front door clicks open and the skitter of Anya’s nails on the floor betray his parents’ return.

“My mom’s going to want to see those ice-skating photos of the boys,” Shane warns Bood.

“Please,” Bood says, “David is so much worse than she is.”

-

His parents stay late after dinner, and Dad is back before Shane is fully awake. He makes them breakfast as Ilya drags his feet getting ready for practice.

Shane has a headache, because it feels like he always does now, but he's holding off on taking painkillers. The Centaurs training team and the neurologist both recommended he try to manage as much of the day as he could before leaning on them, especially since Shane didn't think they were providing him with much relief to begin with. He's saving them for Anya's walk once they come home, or maybe cooking dinner, whichever takes more energy out of him.

The Centaurs have practice and Shane's got an appointment with Abby and Terry. More assessments, more low-impact paces to put him through.

"Have a good practice," Shane says, aiming for a quick kiss when they reach the point in the hallway where they'll have to part.

Ilya doesn't let him leave his circle; fingers caught on Shane's jaw as his thumb reaches up to stroke his cheek. "I love you."

"I love you too."

With that, he's gone.

Shane takes a deep breath before knocking on the door that leads to the trainers' room.

His appointment is about as uneventful as practice ends up being, the way Troy tells it to him at least. They linger in the entryway of the Centaurs' facility, waiting for Harris to get out of a meeting.

"Not so boring," Ilya says, resting his chin on Shane's shoulder. "Barrett got a promotion."

"Wiebe is swapping you and Luca?"

Troy shrugs. "Just for the last two games before the break. We'll see what sticks after."

"He missed me," Ilya teases.

"I missed Bood," Troy corrects. "And Haasy deserves first line. He can outskate me any day."

"Let him turn thirty," Harris says, coming from around a corner with an oversized paper bag in his arms. "We'll see who stays faster in old age."

"Ah, yes, we can do competition." Ilya says with a nod. "Shane will win."

Harris and Troy roll their eyes in sync. They've gotten worse about that since they got married.

The bag is full of homemade applesauce, Drover family recipe with the perfect amount of cinnamon. Shane takes the bag while Harris keeps kicking Troy's ankle.

Ilya asks if Harris wants any help putting Troy on IR when Troy caves. He confesses to getting in contact with the house cleaners Shane and Ilya use after the Nashville game. Which

isn't strange, most of the team uses the same company, but Troy got in touch with them to request that they used as many unscented products as they could in the Hollander-Rozanov home. Troy still didn't know what exactly Shane's concussions have left him sensitive to, but he remembers a teammate in Toronto who couldn't stand the floral scent of his counter cleaner after getting concussed during practice.

Troy looks vaguely mortified with himself the whole time he forces out the explanation, despite the sincere thanks that Ilya and Shane pass on to him. He's eager to herd Harris out to their car, both of them giving rushed goodbyes and telling Ilya they'll see him tomorrow.

Ilya clicks the key fob, unlocking the car doors from the warmth of the building. "What does it say about what we do for work that everyone we know has had a concussion, knows someone that has, or both?"

Shane shakes his head as they leave the facility. "Don't repeat that in front of my new neurologist."

It takes a little shuffling once they get in the car, Ilya throwing his bag in the backseat while Shane settles the gift from Harris and Troy in his lap, mindful of how the glass containers clink together.

Ilya tugs the side of the bag so he can count the number of jars. "Does Harris think I put you on an applesauce diet?"

Shane snorts. "Could you imagine."

"You'd smother me in my sleep," Ilya teases, starting up the car.

-

It is the walk with Anya that ends up doing him. Not as badly as the yoga, but it reduces him to his hands on his knees, stumbling home. The only reason he doesn't have to crawl is that Ilya practically carries him, hand wrapped firm around his waist.

Kate sees them from her house, comes out to their driveway to help Ilya get Shane inside and settled horizontally. The house is too much of a mess for her to be seeing it, and Shane keeps trying to apologize, but the band of tension makes speaking unbearable.

Anya whines even as Dad shushes her. Shane rejects half of the painkillers that Ilya tries to get him to take, barely able to tolerate sitting upright to drink enough water to get them down.

Once his head isn't making it impossible to string more than a handful of thoughts together, Ilya joins him on the couch with a plate of cold dinner, sharing bites of fish between the two of them.

"Dad?" Shane asks, eyes mostly closed.

"Left. Took Anya."

“M’sorry.”

“Not your fault,” Ilya murmurs. “Not your fault.”

It takes another hour for the food to settle in his stomach. Shane refuses the additional painkillers Ilya offers, the headache smothered down to a whisper instead of a shout. He can clean up in the kitchen as Ilya puts the rest of their house back to order. He’s done by the time Shane empties the dishwasher, and beckons him to the bedroom.

They’re alone, alone and the house is quiet and they had a pretty good day before Shane’s headache had ruined things. He’s got his beautiful, softhearted husband all to himself. He doesn’t care about his stupid body trying to sabotage him.

Shane can barely get his hand down Ilya’s pants before his husband is gently pulling at his wrist, pinning it next to Shane’s head on their bed.

“You still have headache?” Ilya asks.

Shane scowls, but doesn’t answer because they both know the truth.

“I want,” Shane whines.

Ilya cups a hand between Shane’s legs and gives him an unimpressed look at the softness he finds.

“We don’t need to fuck,” Ilya says, leaning down to capture Shane’s mouth in a kiss.

Shane’s other hand goes to Ilya’s waist. “You’re-”

Ilya swats him away. “I don’t want to come without you.”

That makes Shane go still. “Oh.”

Ilya strips his shirt, and Shane watches, not moving his hands from where his husband pinned them even without the gentle force to keep them in place. Ilya catches him watching and flexes his pecs for Shane, making them bounce. Shane makes a strangled noise, half amusement at Ilya’s antics and half frustration that body won’t respond the way it should.

It must show in his face, because Ilya lets his legs go slack and tumbles into bed. He’s warm against Shane, a sturdy force anchor himself to as sleep comes.

-

“It’s dumb,” Shane says the next morning, “but my first thought when that puck hit me was *Thank God I didn’t just break my jaw.*”

Ilya looks at him over his bowl of applesauce, identical to the one in front of Shane. “You said something like that. In the dressing room.”

“I remember. I almost wish I had. Broken it.”

“We can still you put on a liquid diet. Might run out of applesauce. You want smoothies? I can steal Hunter’s husband.”

“Not a bad idea, Kip’s cute,” Shane says, just to watch Ilya scowl.

“Not really why you say that,” Ilya says. “You think, maybe no concussion if it hits your mouth.”

The one thing every doctor has told them is not to play what if. And yet here they are.

“Maybe.” Shane says.

“Maybe you break your jaw and get concussed.”

“Maybe,” Shane is good and he does not gnaw at his cheek. “Then I don’t go to Nashville.”

“I don’t like this game,” Ilya says, so Shane stops.

-

The second neurologist calls Shane lucky during their consultation. Twice.

At least the meeting with the speech language pathologist goes well, if only by comparison. They don’t exactly have any answers for Shane, but they don’t make him feel guilty during his appointment.

-

Shane calls Hayden after his parents retrieve him from the hospital, Ilya already off to the arena for their afternoon game. It’s a Friday, but Hayden’s in Saint-Tite for a youth rodeo event and has hours of downtime while Amber is preoccupied with horse things that neither Shane nor Hayden have ever been able to make much sense of.

They’ve been texting a little, whenever Shane’s felt up to it, so there isn’t much to fill him in on. He’s curled up in bed, hiding from his parents while they pretend not to do his and Ilya’s laundry, while Hayden curses Ilya out for gifting Amber that trip to horse camp, like he does every time he has to attend a rodeo in less-than-ideal weather.

They will never, ever let Hayden know that gift was Shane’s idea. Or that Svetlana had urged them to follow through on it.

“If you’re up for talking about them,” Hayden says when he runs out of ways to call horses evil, “you want to tell me how your appointments at the General have been going?”

Shane rolls on to his back, phone still cradled to his ear despite putting it on speaker being the far more sensible option. He closes his eyes, like that will help at all with his headache. “If I tell you something, will you promise not to repeat it to anyone?”

Hayden lets out a long breath.

“You can tell Jackie,” Shane amends. “But no one else.”

“Okay,” Hayden agrees immediately.

Shane lightly gnaws at the inside of his cheek, like that will distract him from the pit in his stomach. “I can’t tell when I’m speaking to him in Russian.”

“What?” He can hear the rustle of fabric somewhere near the receiver of Hayden’s phone. “How does that even work?”

“No one can tell me. But I think if I don’t notice, then I can speak fine. But if I know Ilya’s using Russian, or he switches halfway through, I can’t follow.”

“Do you know if that’s true for other languages?” Hayden asks, switching to French.

“I know French,” though, comparing his accent to Hayden’s and how rusty it’s gotten with disuse, some Montreal fans might argue that Shane shouldn’t be allowed to use it in public ever again. “Doctors checked me for that. One of them said maybe since I’ve been speaking it longer it’s easier.”

“But you worked really hard to learn Russian,” Hayden says softly, and if that isn’t the kindest he’s ever sounded while talking about Ilya.

It makes something swell in Shane’s throat. “Yeah. I don’t know. I can speak it. I just don’t know it.”

“Shane. That’s awful.”

It is. Whatever’s in his throat is so thick now, Shane doesn’t trust himself to speak.

“Who’s home with you?” Hayden asks. “Your parents?”

Shane manages a sound of affirmation.

“Hug them,” Hayden orders. “And I hope Boston falls flat on their faces tonight.”

Shane thinks the noise he makes is a laugh. “Tell Amber good luck.”

“Buddy, if I figure out how good luck for any of this horse shit works, you’ll be the first to know.”

-

Shane follows Ilya to the practice facility the next day, but the intensity of his headache makes Abby frown. When Shane can’t hide his dizziness while on the exercise bike, she makes him get off, take some Tylenol in front of her, and call his parents for a ride home.

Mom gets him, stands guard outside the bathroom while Shane tries to drown himself in the shower out of frustration. Ilya has another appointment with Galina today, so he has the time

to pull it off. What he does not have is the energy to stand upright for long, so he only leaves with clean skin.

The pain that started up on the bike disturbs his attempt at nap, causes him to take longer than normal to orient himself. Shane recognizes the sound of Ilya's footsteps in the living room before he becomes aware of the fact that he's not on the ice.

It feels like a day of failure and the sun hasn't even started to set.

There's the familiar sag of the mattress, Ilya sitting near Shane's side of the bed. Shane rolls to the indent, wrapping himself around his husband so he can rest his head on Ilya's thighs.

Ilya's hands in his hair are an apology for how frustrating today has been. Ilya leans down, pressing a kiss to his ear.

"We need to talk," he murmurs. "About me playing the next couple weeks."

Shane blinks his eyes open, because he knows they do, but they're in uncharted territory and thinking about whatever direction this conversation is going to head will likely be a bad one, given how their last attempts at it have gone.

Shane and Ilya have been lucky for hockey players. They've missed time for injuries before, everyone has. But comparing a strained rotator cuff, broken hand, an injured back, a bad cold, to this feels silly and inconsequential. Almost inappropriate. Shane had followed the roadie the last time he'd been on injury reserve with a broken foot. He'd hobbled around in the boot and shelled out for his own hotel room. The whole team had given him shit for it. Shane had gotten to know Daniel's fiancée, whose nursing schedule had worked out that she could come out for the games, and he'd gotten to watch Ilya's face light up with every moment they'd stolen on that road trip. Travelling like that was out of the question, if Shane was still spending half his time awake lying supine and got lightheaded after ten minutes on a stationary exercise bike.

Not even Ilya's knee surgery had loomed over them like this. They hadn't needed to have this fight. The Centaurs had just stumbled out of contention in the first round of playoffs in a vaguely embarrassing series that was only salvaged by the fact that Florida would go on to win the cup.

A week after their last game, Anya had been spooked during a storm and Ilya tripped over her in the dark. There'd been a horrible popping noise when he fell, followed by swearing as vicious as anything Shane had ever heard from him on the ice. There'd been a lot of hemming and hawing over if Ilya had weakened or maybe partially torn something during the playoffs, but the end result had been the same. He'd torn his ACL, MCL, and meniscus.

Ilya had been post-op and getting around on crutches when Game Changers camp rolled around. He'd stayed far away from the ice and Shane had hovered all summer. By the time training camp started up it stopped feeling like someone was ripping out his fingernails when Ilya drove them to the practice arena and didn't head to the locker room.

The worst of it had passed in the off season, they were comfortably in the middle of both of their contracts, and Ilya's recovery had already been promising when Centaurs hockey started up again.

This was not the same situation. Not by the half of it.

"You can't miss games because of me," Shane says.

"I will have one game suspension from skipping All-Star Game."

"I know."

There are fingers tickling his ribs, leading Shane to sit himself upright. He's not without help, still leaning back on the mountain of pillows in their bed, but they're looking eye to eye now.

"You can't just play home games for the rest of the season," Shane whispers.

"I will play," Ilya says slowly. "But if you end up in the hospital again, I'm going to be with you. I cannot leave you there again."

Shane closes his eyes, trying to arrange the words in the right order. "I'm worried about what people will say about you. How it's going to reflect on your legacy."

A knuckle brushing his cheekbone makes Shane's eyes flutter open to be met with Ilya's sad gaze. "I don't give a shit what anyone else has to say about my career."

"I do."

"And they know me better than you?"

Shane scowls reflexively.

"That's what I thought."

"I want them to see you the way I do," Shane mutters, irritated with himself that Ilya's probably right and being the reasonable one.

Ilya presses a quick kiss to the spot his knuckle was stroking.

"Okay," Shane says. "Okay. That's our plan? You play, unless I end up in the hospital."

"Swear it?"

"I swear it."

"Won't be like last time?"

Shane squints, not liking the way Ilya's voice trembles. "What?"

Ilya takes a slow, steadying breath, and Shane can see the effort it's taking for Ilya to maintain eye contact with him. "You told me to leave."

Shane can feel the way his mouth drops in confusion, the flutter of his lashes as he rapidly tries to recall whatever conversation Ilya is referencing.

"In Nashville," Ilya says gently. "Twice. After you fell, and before I agreed to go to Arizona."

And Shane can't remember exactly what he said because he doesn't remember either of those conversations, but he knows what Ilya told him, knows why he would have said anything.

"That wasn't. I didn't." All Shane can think of is that Boxing Day argument and how this wasn't what that had been. "It wasn't us; it was hockey, it was the team--"

"It felt the same."

Shane's feeling lightheaded and like there's something rotten in his gut, and for the first time in a long time it has nothing to do with his headache. "Ilya, can I--"

"Please," Ilya begs.

Shane crawls into Ilya's lap, making his best effort to melt his body into his husband's. His fingers tangle in Ilya's curls, which feel more unkempt than they normally do. He searches for the rare strands of silver, rubbing them between his thumb and forefinger when he finds them.

"You said sorry. Once I came back," Ilya mutters. "And I know you didn't mean it, not like that, but--"

The sound of the sob in Ilya's throat makes Shane want to turn his own skin inside out.

"I still said it."

"You were the one in the fucking hospital, no idea where you were and I--"

"I was scaring you. You were afraid."

"Selfish. I had no right."

Shane leans back, cradles Ilya's head between his hands so he can stroke the strong lines of his neck with his fingers while his thumbs wipe the few tears away.

"You had every right."

Ilya silently shakes his head.

"I tried to make you leave me in Michigan," Shane says.

Ilya shakes his head again. "You didn't say it the same way."

Shane presses their foreheads together, gently, mindful of the tenderness of his own head. "Thank you for telling me."

Ilya chases the kiss now, nuzzling his face into Shane's neck with pure affection.

They stay like that until a rumble rips through Ilya's stomach.

"Eugh," Ilya groans, making Shane laugh. "I guess we should eat?"

It's easy to follow Ilya to the kitchen, to check on Anya's food and water and put a little more out for her. Ilya keeps it easy, reheats leftovers while he shares a banana with Shane while they wait for the microwave to work its magic.

They head to bed early, because they always do these days. Ilya's up reading something, one of Shane's boring hockey books, but his chest is a soft place for Shane to land, nestled just above his heart, thinking about what negotiations Ilya was going to have with management come summer.

A quirk of Shane signing when he did has left them with uneven contracts, Ilya's lapsing one season before Shane's. Farah, their agent, hadn't been worried about her ability to negotiate small extensions to even them out as their professional careers arced towards an eventual end.

Even after Ilya's knee, none of them had planned for what to do if it turned out them crossing the finish line together wasn't meant to be. Because that had been a fluke, it wasn't going to happen again. They got through it.

Shane thinks that maybe he won't have to stay away from the ice for so long. That maybe he'll wake up without a headache, understanding all of Ilya's Russian, and everything can go back to normal.

-

The next morning he wakes up on the ice in the bottom of the third period in Chicago. Centaurs are up by one. When Shane remembers where he is and why, the dream comes crashing down all over again.

-

His phone rings, right as Ilya should be finishing up the morning skate. Shane picks up, but not before it disturbs Anya, who drags her head up from Shane's chest to give him a concerned stare.

"You up for a guest, my love?" Ilya asks. "Haasy wants to come pick our brains about All-Star Game."

Shane frowns, unsure why Ilya's asking in the first place. "If you're okay with it."

"He wanted your permission."

"Luca could have called me."

"Don't make me explain the behavior of the Swiss." Ilya complains.

Anya has decided her job this morning is to serve as Shane's weighted blanket, so Ilya and Luca find him still trapped on the couch. Anya isn't even moved by Ilya's presence, just

thumps her tail a few times to show acknowledgement.

Luca does have some questions, things he really doesn't need Shane and Ilya's insights on, but it's good to see him so Shane ignores his weak excuse for coming over. Ilya's happy to do most of the talking and their Anaheim game is at a weird enough time that Ilya's usual nap is inadvisable, so having an excuse to stay awake is good for him.

Luca starts on the floor and stays there, ending up sprawled on the rug like a child instead of a fully grown NHL forward.

When his curiosity is sated, they lapse into talking about nothing until Shane's stomach growls. He permits Ilya to fetch them takeout from the Mediterranean restaurant that's a five-minute drive away. Luca glances at the website and picks out something that looks good to him.

The small talk turns into silence when Ilya leaves, Anya now interested in following him. Silence with Luca has never been awkward and it isn't now. Shane expects it to hurt, but it's just Luca. It's no different than before, except for the fact that at least one of them is usually drunk when they get like this. Not always, though, so it's not even new.

Luca lolls his head to look away from Shane. "Tell me to shut the fuck up if you need to, but I miss playing with you so bad."

Shane can't help but smile at his honesty. "Oh? It's not like we're always on the same line."

Luca isn't amused. "Not like this. Not like-"

He cuts himself off with a noise of pure frustration.

Shane drops a hand off the side of the couch, gently taps the floor until Luca looks back his way. "What's it like?"

"Like I'm playing with a hand tied behind my back," Luca whispers. "Like there's a missing step in my play, and everyone can see through me."

Shane has missed five games, is about to miss his sixth, hasn't been able to concentrate long enough to watch any or really obsess over stats. But a couple passing comments from Mom and Ilya makes him think that Luca might not be the only one who feels that way about his play right now.

"Johnno is fine," Luca says, "which is the worst part. Roz too, you know, of course you know, but I thought maybe... But Johnno is fine, and it's just me who can't roll with the punches."

"All-Star week will be a big shakeup," Shane says. "Maybe the change will be good for you."

"Shock my system?" Luca asks, without a hint of a smile.

"Maybe," Shane says again, this time softer.

“Maybe,” Luca echoes. “It just sucks. It fucking sucks, and I don’t know if it’s my place to say it to you, but I have to. I miss you.”

Shane beckons with his fingers and Luca rolls closer to the couch, just enough that Shane can capture his linemate’s hand in his own and give him a gentle squeeze.

“It does suck. And I miss playing with you too.”

Finally, smile ghosts across Luca’s face.

It’s not everything, but it’s a start. He’ll adapt. He’ll be okay. Shane won’t ruin the rest of his season.

-

Shane’s asleep when Ilya comes home from the game against Anaheim, missed his mom leaving. He only wakes up because of a headache.

A headache. The same headache. Whatever.

He’s able to get himself to the bathroom, but his stumbling wakes Ilya up. His husband appears over his shoulder in the mirror while Shane squints at the first bottle he found, trying to read the worn label.

“That’s Tylenol.” Ilya says with confidence, taking the bottle so he can open it for Shane.

“You can read that?” Shane asks, filling a glass with tap water.

“Got rid of all other over the counter pain relievers.”

Now that he mentions it, Shane doesn’t think he’s spotted a bottle of Advil Migraine since their unplanned road trip. “What about your hangover cure?”

Ilya shrugs. “Haven’t been drinking.”

“But you will,” Shane says slowly.

“Eventually.”

“So you threw it away?”

“Don’t need it.”

That’s not the whole story, and as bad of a liar as Shane can be, he knows Ilya’s tells too.

His husband doesn’t last longer than a minute under Shane’s scrutinizing stare. He caves once Shane swallows the Tylenol. “Bad for your brain after you get hit. Ibuprofen and stuff.”

Shane frowns. “Bad how?”

“Bad for bleeding.”

Which is exactly what had made things go from bad to worse in Nashville. The last time Shane had taken Advil, taken it because he had a headache and they never packed anything else, and he hadn't thought to connect the headache to the puck he'd taken to the head the night before.

It's not Ilya's fault, not in a thousand different ways of looking at it, and Ilya must know that, but knowing and believing are two different things.

Shane's arms wrap around Ilya, tight and grounding.

"I love you," he murmurs. "It's not your fault."

Ilya doesn't say anything, and Shane stays as he feels the flutter of his husband's chest, just a little tension sapped from him.

-

The revolving door of visitors that Bood threatened Shane would come start to roll in during the All-Star break. It's a lot, too much, but Shane also knows that the reason people don't stop coming is because they're all worried. Same thing happens whenever any of them suffer a major injury.

Which is the first time Shane considers his concussions a major injury.

Wiebe comes by twice, although one of those times is while Shane's doing yoga and he really only talks with Ilya.

The second time, Coach has a beer while Shane starts on a fresh glass of water while they chat on the couch, Ilya throwing a couple things together so they can have lunch later.

"You're putting me on LTIR during the break, right" Shane asks.

Coach shrugs. "How does your head feel about that?"

"Like it's the right choice. Trainers must have told you the same. You've been talking to Terry, Abby. Samir too."

"Yeah," Wiebe nods. "Not Terry so much."

He still feels awful. Shane can tell every time they talk, doesn't know how to fix it.

"He can't keep blaming himself."

Coach shakes his head. "Hell will freeze over first."

"And crayfish will whistle on the mountain."

Coach snorts. "That's a new one."

It's not, not to Shane, and he realizes that's the first time he's ever said it in English. It's an idiom he first heard while learning Russian. Shane feels like he's stepped into a mire, forgets that he's talking to Coach for a minute as he tries his best to parse the language, put the words in the order he first heard them in.

Wiebe doesn't seem to notice, caught up in his beer.

Shane takes another slow sip of water to match him. "How's Kjell Holmberg doing?"

"Chel?" Wiebe gives him a look, and whatever he sees in Shane doesn't stop him from continuing. "He's okay. Adjusting. Some of the guys... they'd rather you were still on the roster."

Shane winces. "Luca?"

"No." Coach looks surprised, then tilts his head considering. "Maybe his boyfriend. Even I heard about Turks and Caicos. Zeno's the one really giving him a cold shoulder."

"Stonkus doesn't like playing center?"

"Not particularly."

"I'll tell Ilya to talk to him." Shane promises.

Wiebe waves a hand. "It's not the end of the world. Roz normally would have noticed by now, you know how he is. He's just been a little distracted."

Shane lets out a huff that might sound something like a laugh. No one but himself to blame for that.

Wiebe's expression suddenly turns sheepish, like he's been caught doing something he shouldn't. "I'm not supposed to be talking shop with you other than return timelines and you let me run my mouth."

"It's okay," Shane says, and means it. "I don't mind. I think I asked, actually."

"Now you're comforting me even though you have the concussion. This is so weird and backwards."

"What have I been saying, Coach!" Ilya hollers from the kitchen, because there isn't a soft surface in this house and Ilya's probably been able to hear their whole conversation but is choosing now to pipe up. "Hollander is fucking nightmare!"

"Terrible, terrible patient." Wiebe agrees, and Shane recognizes that smile, its one that Wiebe normally saves for his girls.

Shane rolls his eyes. "You two can get in line. All my doctors already hate me."

The third neurologist he meets with at Ottawa General is sweet. Shane sees her a couple of times, but he never feels like their conversations go anywhere. She'll order whatever test the team wants, but Shane can't get a direct answer out of her about what his future in hockey is going to look like.

Their relationship breaks down when Shane complains about his headaches not even being good pain.

She frowns, concern plain on her face. "What is good pain?"

Shane thinks of Ilya only a week after knee surgery and refusing the strongest of the pain medication, the effective stuff, because he didn't like the brain fog that came with it. Of the Voyageurs rookie clinging to the fourth line with his knuckles who played the last three of their 2020 cup run games with broken ribs. Of Jackie choosing to deliver Arthur and Amber without an epidural because the twins had to be a planned C-section, calling it the best pain of her life.

"Not this. This is just taking things away from me."

The neurologist doesn't get it.

-

The Ottawa Centaurs kick off a two-week road trip after the All-Star break. Ilya missed the first game thanks to his suspension and will come back for a stint in the middle, when they have three days off. It's not really a break, there's two practices he'll be skipping, but Wiebe and the rest of their coaches already approved it.

"You could have asked me first," Shane protested.

Ilya had just glared at him from over his suitcase, and Shane starts to consider if he should stop regarding himself as the more stubborn of the two of them.

Shane's parents leave for Bruce Peninsula the same day Ilya goes to New York, and they've had the trip planned for almost a year so Shane was not going to let them cancel it. During their power struggle, word made it back to the Pike house, so Jackie had volunteered to come stay with Shane until the Hollanders were back in town.

Jackie's a saint, shuttling Shane around to appointments and scans and cooks a truly offensive amount of freezable meals for them. She doesn't sneak Anya people food she shouldn't have, and even lets Shane help her in the kitchen when he's up to it.

"Why do you have the exact dimensions of my freezer memorized?" Shane asks, watching Jackie stack deli containers and tupperware into a perfect fit.

"Oh please, I didn't memorize anything. I asked David." Jackie says as she pulls out a bag containing something wrapped in parchment paper. "What's this?"

"I have no idea." Shane says, trying to remember the last time they dug that deep in their freezer. Two summers ago?

“I’m trashing your mystery meat,” Jackie decides.

The next day, over breakfast, she’s going through her phone before Jackie suddenly drops it on the counter and grabs her keys before bolting outside.

Anya perks up from her bed, giving Shane a worried look. He shrugs, like it means anything to Anya, before they both look at the door.

Jackie is back moments later, open cardboard box clutched to her chest.

“I can’t believe I almost forgot. Hayden had me bring these for you.”

She’s got a stack of CDs, beginner Russian lessons, and a portable player he can use.

“Oh.” Shane recognizes one of the CD cases from the first few months of throwing himself into studying. “I didn’t…”

“He thought trying to start at the beginning wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

“Very retro,” Shane says, fidgeting with the buttons on the player. “How much do I owe him?”

“He said it was a gift.”

Shane looks up to Jackie in surprise and finds her face just as grim.

“The two of them not pretending to hate one another is so weird.”

“I know,” Shane says, letting his gaze fall back on the CDs. “I need to get better so they stop.”

-

The road trip ends and Ilya is home until he isn’t.

He travels with the team and spends the rest of his time at Shane’s side. If Shane were to keep a stopwatch, measure it all out, they’re probably spending the same amount of time together. It’s the intensity that’s changed, some sick mirror of when their lives revolved around two-hour drives and the schedules of the Voyageurs and Centaurs.

Shane sneaks in the Russian lessons when Ilya is out of town, box of CDs hidden in their trophy room. He thinks the language is coming back, he’s able to stumble through an order for takeout that Mom picks up. Speaking Russian gives him the sensation of digging through a bathroom drawer with the lights off. He’s knows what’s there, it’s familiar, but knowing he should know something he can’t quite identify is still disorienting.

He finally gets his husband back between his legs. It takes a lot of work to persuade Ilya that Shane doesn’t need to be handled like he’s made of glass. He convinces him first with a blowjob, then naked in their bed after Ottawa crushes a visiting Montreal. Ilya’s strict, doesn’t let Shane get too ambitious with anything, but as long as they’re able to both get off

Shane doesn't care what they do. He just wants to feel married, to have sex with his husband on the rare occasion they have the house to themselves.

The headaches, the one continuous headache that he's had since the drugs from the ER in Michigan wore off, waxes and wanes but won't ever really leave Shane alone. It doesn't ruin every day, but if he's exercised or been around lots of people, Shane usually needs a little help to quiet it down enough so he can fall asleep at night.

Thankfully, everything else seems to be getting easier. He's been upgraded from only being allowed the stationary bike to treadmill privileges twice a week, always under Abby's watchful eye. The days he runs makes him feel like he's been bag skating, and he knows this is more off time than he's taken in years, but Shane's still surprised he feels so out of shape. Abby keeps calling it fatigue, insists to no avail that it's not a lack of fitness. But he'll take the exhaustion over the inability to do anything, and the improvement in his brain fog means that he sees Samir less and less.

Whenever his appointments overlap with practice, Ilya has to bring them early and stay late now that whatever embargo he put on the team talking with Shane has clearly been lifted.

Daniel Dahlstrom broke a couple fingers in a fight in Philadelphia and is rehabbing with the trainers too. Getting clumped in with Stormy makes it feel less awkward, less like Shane's been singled out. The guys treat him the same. A positive energy behind the scenes has always been important in Ottawa, especially when they sucked, but Shane's never appreciated it as much as he does right now.

Even his first season here, when he'd given them a hometown discount and still gobbled up so much of that salary cap, Shane still had something to offer them. He brought baggage, sure, but he also brought his soft hands and a stupid high plus/minus too.

Shane has nothing to offer them now, and they still want to see him. They still like having him around, even if it's just Wyatt wanting to eviscerate the latest comic-book to television adaptation for character assassination of one of the leads, Stonkus desperate for whatever insight Shane can offer for him to get less shitty at face-offs, Bood coordinating where they're going to go out to eat when Young comes town with Seattle, or Manny complaining that Wyatt is the most frustrating person he's ever had to tandem with because somehow Hazy can play three periods without actually thinking about hockey and then Manny can't debrief with him after a game.

The call-up, Kjell Holmberg, introduces himself while practically hiding behind Kelly's leg. The kid's only nineteen, management was probably planning on letting him mature a little longer in the AHL, but you know what they say about best laid plans. Hopefully he's not bringing too much of his nervous energy on the ice. He does have a beat-up hockey card of Shane in a Voyageurs jersey that he pulls out of his wallet, cheeks bright red as he asks if Shane will sign it.

"It was from first pack I ever opened," Holmberg says.

"You kids sure know how to make a guy feel old," Shane says around the Sharpie cap that's in his mouth. Ilya gets a good laugh out of that.

Only Troy is skittish. Shane doesn't know what exactly is the cause, but he suspects it has to do with the fact that Troy picked him up off the ice after he fell in Nashville. They haven't spoken about it, but Shane's seen the account he gave Terry, what's been passed on to the other doctors taking care of Shane. It's exhaustive. One of the speech-language pathologists had called the tone apologetic.

Ilya can't get anything out of him either. Harris is a good husband, won't snitch to either of them, but Ilya figures it won't hurt to buy Troy's coffee until he can relax around Shane. Shane's proposal, that the surplus of caffeine might only wind him tighter, falls on deaf ears.

The weeks trickle by, Ottawa putting in the work to stay near the top of the Atlantic division. Listening to the games, because watching for too long is still driving him to intense headaches, sometimes gives Shane the sinking sensation of watching sand slip through his fingers.

He thinks about grabbing at a cloud, the desperation of knowing he needs something but it's so far out of reach he can't begin to touch it. He knows he's had that thought before, but try as he might, he can't place when it came to him.

-

The fourth neurologist folds his hands on his desk halfway through their second appointment.

"Can I speak freely, Shane?"

Shane shrugs.

"This isn't a conversation I'll have with you if your answer is 'whatever'." He says. "I may be off base, but I'm getting a feeling you'd appreciate a pretty frank conversation of what I'm anticipating? Based on my experience with other athletes, the notes in your chart, and chats I've had with other people who have taken care of you since January fourteenth?"

Since Chicago. Okay. Yeah.

Shane nods. "Sure. What do you think?"

The neurologist sits up a little straighter. "Shane, I think someone needs to have a serious discussion with you about if returning to professional hockey is in your future."

Shane hasn't been hit in the head again, that couldn't happen, not here sat down in another familiar but strange nondescript doctor's office. But there's a ringing sensation between his ears that makes him feel like he has.

"I'm sorry," Shane says, faint even to himself. "Did you say if?"

The neurologist nods. "If."

"I don't..." Shane shakes his head, pushing through the twinge of discomfort the motion causes. "I'm getting better at exercise. I've had concussions before."

“That might be part of the problem,” the fourth neurologist says.

Dr. Sung is not the only doctor he’s seen at Ottawa General who has a window view out his office. It isn’t much to look at, just the other wing of the building, not high enough to get a glimpse of anything beyond the hospital. It’s gray outside, a completely unremarkable late February sky.

Shane needs to stop looking out the window. He needs to look at his doctor.

“Shane,” Dr. Sung says, firm but not unkind. “How long after you fell during warm ups in Nashville were you taken off the ice?”

Shane doesn’t remember, but he’s been told enough times. “A little more than four minutes.”

It had taken longer to get him in the ambulance, to take him to Vanderbilt.

“I don’t know if you’d have four minutes next time.”

Shane knows he hasn’t been able to open his mouth more than a few millimeters, jaw wound intensely tight, but can’t find it in himself to really care. “Are you saying this is what, CTE?”

They won’t know if it’s CTE unless they cut open his brain after he’s dead. Shane knows that, Dr. Sung knows that Shane knows that.

“I’m saying we’re past the window of expected recovery for concussion symptoms, especially at the severity that you’ve described.”

“Prolonged post-concussion syndrome, yeah, I know. I know guys that have played after, guys who have gotten better. I’ve had a worse concussion and I came back fine.”

“When you say worse concussion, are you comparing it to the one you got in Chicago or the one from Nashville?”

Shane frowns. “The one from Nashville barely counts, I didn’t even get hit.”

“From what you’ve told me,” Dr. Sung says. “You remember the hit in Chicago. You’ve got a pretty good idea of everything that happened from when the puck hit your helmet until the end of the game, right?”

Shane nods, dumbly, realizing he’s been set up.

“What do you remember from Nashville? Not what you’ve been told, not what you’ve seen video of. What do you remember?”

Having to say it aloud makes it worse, which is probably why Dr. Sung is making him do it.

“My teammate, Troy Barrett, got me back on my skates. I found Ilya. I remember needing to tell him that something was wrong with my head, but I also remember not being afraid of whatever was wrong. And I remember waking up in the hospital with his head in my lap.

Thinking he was wearing the wrong suit. The rest..." Shane waves a hand, unable to catalog everything he's forgotten. "That's all I remember."

"How much time does that cover?"

Shane wants to laugh, despite it being wildly inappropriate. "Fourteen hours, give or take."

"Both head injuries, and the subdural hematoma, have informed your recovery." Dr. Sung says. "When we talk about your concussions, I understand the puck to your helmet feeling like the more significant one. I think seeing them as being in conversation with one another and equally contributing to you ending up in my care might be helpful for you going forward."

Something about the way his tone changes in the end, how soft it gets, puts Shane on an edge. "What do you mean by that."

"I want to help you manage your expectations while you heal."

Shane turns the word *expectations* over in his mind, searching for a secret double meaning he can't find. "When you said I wouldn't have four minutes..."

Dr. Sung is nodding. "I'm saying, based on the information that I have available, I would not advise that you return to hockey."

There's a lump his throat, and Shane's not sure what it's made out of. Stone. Lead. Regret. It doesn't really matter.

"Ever?" He asks.

"Ever."

-

He says he wants to go on a walk alone when they get home. Ilya frowns slightly, so Shane promises he'll be back before the end of the hour. He just needs air, needs to be able to think outside of their house. If he doesn't come back, Ilya can ping his location on his phone and come find him.

He doesn't go far. There's a patch of woods near their house, a little slice of trees that hasn't been developed yet, that Shane can sneak into. Out of eyesight of any neighbors, enough of an illusion of privacy that Shane can turn over what his newest neurologist told him.

The thought of retirement, that he would never play a professional hockey game ever again, feels unreal. Shane can't make himself come to the understanding that he's thinking, not in the abstract, not about a teammate, but about himself. What the right choice for him is, going forward.

To never play. No goodbye tour, no trading jerseys, exchanging tokens of admiration, any hint of ceremony for himself or his family. Shane Hollander's professional career ending in the last minutes of an away game on a random Sunday in January.

Or it doesn't. Shane gets his headaches under control, keeps being able to tolerate exercise, adapts to the speed the puck moves on the ice, and he plays again next season. It feels impossible now, sure, but Dr. Sung had agreed that Shane's post-concussion symptoms, while present, were getting better. He'd just advised that Shane not return. He'd ignored the advice of doctors before. He wouldn't have to get up to the level of play he'd been at to still be an asset for Ottawa.

What's the danger, really, that it happens again? Shane's getting older, but he's got two more seasons on this contract. He could play it a little safer, cut down on the heroics. He could still have hockey.

It would be an adjustment. The headache will probably still follow him, but Shane's had worse. He dragged Montreal to the playoffs with a broken foot once. That had been caused by a blocked shot too.

He could also get unlucky.

Shane thinks of the countless ways he could hit his head again, in practice, in a game, wonders if there's a right way he could knock his skull to stop it from causing any harm to his brain. Probably not. Someone would have figured it out by now.

He could get hit bad enough, in just the right way, that he might not even know it. That all the damage would compound and everything would end right there.

Shane would leave Ilya alone.

And that seals his fate, doesn't it?

Because Ilya hasn't asked Shane to leave, not since that horrible Boxing Day. That had been Shane's fault, no matter what Ilya said, and Shane can't read minds but he was still going to hold himself accountable for not having realized everything Ilya had sacrificed for him.

Shane had been pushing himself so hard, so caught up in what everyone kept expecting from him, demanding. He and Ilya let their shared secret nearly eat them alive and he hadn't noticed how selfish he'd been back then. And going to Wiebe, to management, to the trainers, begging them to let him back on the ice would be far more selfish than that.

The idea of trading his life for, at best, a couple more years of hockey, suddenly feels incredibly shortsighted.

He'd probably do it if hockey was still the greatest love of his life.

But it isn't. It hasn't been for a long time.

They'd decided no kids until retirement. Their schedule was already unfair to Anya, it would be cruel to a child. Shane thinks about losing that because of hockey. Of never having lazy mornings in bed, with an extra body or two between them, of never knowing the mundanity of rides to school, practices, games, whatever hobbies their children fall in love with.

Of not getting to watch Anya, gentled by her age and gray hairs like they've all been, trailing behind short legs with her watchful eyes. Of not getting to learn what new nonsense Russian names Ilya will come up with her, for Shane, for their children.

He thinks of Dr. Sung saying that if Shane hit his head again playing hockey, he might not have four minutes.

Shane wants a lot more than four minutes could ever give him.

Shane knows that this isn't acceptance. That the pain is going to come later, that there's going to be grief that feels worse than an amputation. This is just the first cut; he hasn't even started to bleed from it.

But it has to start somewhere. So it starts, alone, with the thought of leaving Ilya behind and never getting to watch him become a father.

It's enough for now.

-

He tells Ilya first.

It's a lazy morning, with no practice and no appointments for Shane. They have two days before the next game, a home match, but they're not sleeping in. Ilya already got up once when there was barely any daylight to let Anya out, but he'd come back to bed with water for Shane. He has a headache, but it isn't close to unbearable yet. He sits upright, making sure the swimming sensation isn't still following him.

Shane looks down to where Ilya is sleepily blinking at him. The curtains are drawn, so Shane can't blame the sunlight for the way his husband glows.

Ilya's eyes are so soft, so gentle, and Shane has to tell him now, because keeping it to himself for any longer is going to feel like a lie.

It's safest here. They have good memories here. If this ruins them, Shane will buy a new bed.

"I'm going to retire."

He says it low, just above a whisper, but you wouldn't know that by the way the words tear through Ilya's body.

"What?"

Any chance of keeping this conversation calm already went out the window, so Shane has no reason to deliver the blow gently. Better to come out and just say it.

"My new neurologist, the one I'm keeping, told me outright I might not survive getting hit in the head again." Shane says, closing his eyes. "We both know that's going to happen if I try to get back on the ice."

Ilya's hands go to Shane's temples, which he'd kind of expected. The touch is gentle, aching so, maybe more than Ilya has ever been with him before. Shane presses into the warmth of his fingertips, waits for Ilya's response.

It doesn't come. When he opens his eyes again, Ilya's lip quivers. But still, he doesn't speak.

"My headache isn't getting better," Shane says steadily, trying to remember the cadence every doctor he's spoken with has used on him. "The amnesia related symptoms have improved, and I'm getting better at some of my exercises. But that doesn't change what's going on with my brain. If another hit could kill me, I can't play hockey ever again."

The stillness that overtakes Ilya betrays what he's about to say next, so Shane cuts him off before he can start.

"You can't quit with me," Shane says, because that's the fear that's been guiding his every reaction to Ilya's disregard towards missing games in favor of staying at Shane's bedside. "It can be your knee, you don't like the way you're playing, you don't love it anymore. But you can't quit because I'm never going to play again."

Ilya has a look in his eyes reminiscent of a wounded animal. He's breathing like one too, a deer on the side of the road struck by a truck but not lucky enough to have been killed by the blow.

He folds, pressing his face to Shane's bicep, curling into the heat of his body so he doesn't have to look him straight on. Shane cradles his other hand around Ilya's jaw, stroking the line of tension as Ilya struggles to breathe evenly. Gently, cautiously, he taps the bone, guiding Ilya to tilt his head up so Shane can see what's in his eyes.

It's nothing more than a wet mirror of the grief that's leeching into Shane's heart.

"It wouldn't matter," Ilya says thickly. "No one would miss me, without you."

Ilya might not, and he might be the person who matters most to Shane, but he can think of a roster of twenty-one other guys who would miss playing with Ilya Rozanov. A capacity stadium for home games, Boston fans who still mourn his move, wave after wave of rookies that they get to meet on the ice or at NHL events once they make it to the show, kids who tell them *I play hockey because of you*.

"That's not true," Shane says.

"Have you seen what I've looked like since January?"

"I haven't... Watching has been difficult," Shane says, because Ilya already knows, and it has. It hurts too much, literally. Looking at something he can't have is one thing, Shane became an expert at tolerating that in his early twenties, but the pain isn't coming from there. It's the speed of the game, the brightness, the noise that's keeping him away. His inability to watch a NHL game removed, through a television screen, should really have been his first clue. "But even when I was in Nashville, Hayden said you were playing well, said-"

Ilya scowls. "Don't trust Pike."

"Don't," Shane says. "Just. Listen. Mom says you look the same on the ice. When you play, you're playing well."

Ilya shakes his head slightly. "I have been waiting for you. To come back. To play with me."

"Is there no other reason you love hockey?"

"No greater reason."

It would be inaccurate to say Shane bursts into tears. His eyes were already damp. He just stops trying to hold them back.

"The only thing I ever loved hockey for was giving me you," Ilya whispers.

And that has always been the difference between them, when it comes down to it. Because Shane loves hockey, loves it for the way it has opened his world, brought so many people into his life, but he loves the game when he knows it can never love him back. When Crowell was hell bent on stamping out their chance at happiness, when the game protects dangerous people, when the pressure to be perfect if he was ever going to be allowed on the ice was so heavy Shane felt like he was choking on it, he still loved hockey through all of that.

For Ilya, hockey has been an escape hatch for most of his life. Ilya would talk about his career like he was resting his hand in a wild dog's mouth, trying to pull out before it bit him. He'd compared his knee surgery to getting nipped. But he's good with dogs, better on the ice, and he's always had a talent for trouble. But Ilya has also always seen hockey for exactly what it is.

"You still have me. As long as you want me."

Ilya stops letting Shane hold any distance between them, wraps an arm tight around Shane's waist to pull him close in his lap. The heat of his mouth on Shane's neck is familiar, as is the way his breath flutters when Ilya whispers *mine*.

"Do you understand exactly what you're telling me?" Ilya asks minutes, hours, later, whenever they're able to separate enough for Ilya to look him directly in the eyes.

"Yes. No," Shane sighs. "This still doesn't feel real."

It's only been a month and a half since that puck hit his helmet.

"Like it's happening to someone else," Ilya says, completing his thought.

"Yeah."

"It's not the same thing," Ilya says, "but sometimes I wake up like you. I dream we're in Chicago."

"Bottom of the third?" Shane asks. "We're up by one?"

“But you don’t take that hit,” Ilya whispers. “Sometimes Ziedins scores, sometimes he doesn’t. We win, we lose, we go to overtime. But is just normal game. Unremarkable.”

He says that last word slowly, every syllable hitting Shane like a punch to the gut.

“I like your dreams better than mine,” Shane whispers back.

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He tells his parents when they come over for dinner, and all four of them cry. He calls Hayden, calls Rose, tells them not to repeat it but that they deserve to hear it first from him. Ilya joins him to call Svetlana, because it would kill him if she found out any other way.

Shane forgets to do the time zone math, so Rose picks up in the middle of the night. She’s the first person not to cry, doesn’t ask him if he’s certain this is what he has to do.

“I love you, Shane,” she says from sixty-five hundred kilometers away. “That’s not fair.”

It isn’t. He doesn’t know how often he’s about to hear that going forward, but it means a lot to hear it first from her.

Telling Farah sucks, but having her with him when they have to tell Centaurs management and coaching staff sucks less. Shane doesn’t want to deal with the money situation of his contract at all, and Farah is more than capable of handling that. There are so many more tears than he knows what to do with. Professional ones, but still. Shane does not envy any of the social media team, is thankful that he’s not going to be the one telling them, or managing any of the accounts after the announcement.

When he gets out of that meeting, Ilya is waiting outside the door to walk over to the room full of the current active roster of the Ottawa Centaurs.

Shane gets a sick sense of satisfaction that disbelief is almost everyone’s first reaction. It makes Shane feel like wasn’t stupid for hoping he’d get better.

Luca is the first to hug him, pressing an affectionate kiss to his cheek while he mutters apologies.

The tenderness makes him think of Luca’s visit weeks ago, sprawled on their carpet, unable to look Shane in the eyes. Had he known, before Shane did? Shane had known that something was wrong, worse than normal. Ilya too, Ilya had to bear witness to the worst of what Shane’s concussions had done to him. But Luca?

Then again, he’s always been smart. All it takes is one look in his eyes to tell that Luca wishes he’d been wrong.

Shane is swallowed up in a sea of his teammates, old, new, recent trades, and call ups. He’d never pictured what the last team he played on would look like, but it’s plans to keep close, ways they’re going to get him into games, promises to keep Roz out of his hair and keep him honest at practice, and his rookie goaltender offering to fight management if they don’t let Shane have whatever involvement he wants in the organization.

Harmon overhears the offer, out loud wonders how Manny plans on doing that since he's a goalie and has never been in a fight. Boody points out that Wyatt has, which is apparently news to all of the younger Centaurs. Wyatt thinks they should avoid outright combat, call up Evan Dykstra, do their own version of Operation Nifty Package, and at this point he's gone on such a sideways tangent that Shane thinks even he won't be able to defend Wyatt's weird goalie brain.

Troy hangs on the outskirts, comes up to Shane so he can whisper low, "I'm so sorry."

Whatever's been weighing on Troy hasn't gotten any lighter, but now that he's bridged the gap Shane can tell him, "It's not your fault."

"Yeah. Sure." Troy shakes his head. "It's sure as hell not yours. I bet everyone's told you that. But in case they haven't."

"Just part of the game," Shane says, words they've heard countless times.

Troy isn't looking at Shane, but at their bickering teammates. "Dumb fucking game, isn't it. Always ends in heartbreak."

Ilya must have been hovering, because he sneaks up on Shane, presses a quick kiss to that soft spot under his ear. "Most things do."

That pulls a bitter laugh out of Shane, one that Troy echoes, and things aren't even close to okay, but that's how it goes. The game will go on, and so will their lives.

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"Something is wrong with my Russian," Shane tells Ilya after he comes home from the game, an overtime loss against Vancouver.

Ilya presses a handful of kisses down Shane's neck before softly confessing, "I suspected."

Shane pulls away slightly so he can get a clear look at Ilya's face. "When?"

"You didn't complain about my lovely nicknames for you in the hospital," Ilya says entirely serious, like he's never called Shane a tomato and gotten no reaction for it. "But also in the car. With your big headache. You weren't really talking, but you didn't register any of the Russian I spoke to you. But we've used it since?"

"No one really knows what's wrong," Shane says. "But if I'm not thinking about it, it's fine. It's only when I try that it takes effort. I think it's coming back. The language people I see at the hospital say so at least."

Ilya worries his bottom lip in his own mouth. "You didn't want to tell me."

"I was upset," Shane would admit that to anyone. "This was just for us, you know? I learned Russian for you. I shouldn't be able to forget it."

“I wish...” Ilya shakes his head, the motion turning into a nuzzle against Shane’s chest. “I wish for a lot of things.”

“Tell me one.”

“Easy. I wish you were okay. Okay enough to still play.”

“Woow,” Shane teases. “Just play? Not be at the top of my game? What are you trying to prove?”

Ilya laughs, pulls away, dragging Shane with him so they’re both sitting upright. Impossibly tangled, Ilya in grubby outside clothes in their bed and Shane unable to make himself care about that.

“I wasn’t supposed to be the last one on the ice.”

“No,” Shane agrees. “We were supposed to retire together.”

Ilya shakes his head. “You were going to outlast me.”

They’d never talked about *that*.

“What?”

“Your runs, your yoga, you not having any fun during the season,” referencing the fact that Shane still does not like getting drunk or high if they’re playing, which he’d still argue is just common sense, “I had to go get a brand-new knee. Your perfect body was never going to break on you.”

“I’ve broken my foot twice,” Shane points out. “And you really babied me the second time.”

Ilya pouts, “Because I missed the first one! Had to be twice the nurse to make up for it.”

Shane rolls his eyes so he doesn’t laugh, because he does remember Ilya saying something to that extent, and because he’d stolen it as his excuse to hover while Ilya was post-op with his knee.

Shane isn’t convinced that Ilya would give up so easy. If it was just his body that was breaking down, Ilya would have let them turn into a bionic hockey robot to keep playing with Shane. Shane might too. But it’s not his body that’s the problem.

“Guess we both were wrong.”

Ilya makes a deeply unhappy noise. “All of those records we were supposed to break as old fucks.”

An ancient fantasy of Shane’s flares up in the back of his mind. “How many goals do you think we’d have scored as a duo if we were on the same team our whole careers?”

Ilya raises a brow. “What, just on the power play?”

Shane pretends that their hypothetical coach never would have forced one of them to the wing so they could be linemates and nods, pushes through the twinge of pain the movement causes. Ilya blows out a big exhale.

“The most. Forever.”

Shane leans forward so he can catch Ilya’s nose with his own, gently nuzzling them together. He can feel some of the tension ebb out of his husband, his arms going from a firm hold to a puddle against Shane’s back.

“You’ve got a lot of records still to break for me.”

Ilya makes a surprised noise in the back of his throat. “A lot?”

“Sure,” Shane says. “The most. Forever.”

“Oh, I play hockey for you now?”

“You play hockey for you.” Shane kisses his cheek, arcing a trail down to his lips but stopping before he captures them. “Pick any reason you want.”

“Mm,” Ilya reaches forward, but Shane pulls away, delighting in the way that false outrage makes Ilya’s lips curl. “You-”

Shane laughs, defenseless to the lock of Ilya’s leg as he gains the advantage and flips them on the bed. Once he’s got Shane pinned, he kisses him lazy and slow.

Ilya only pulls away so he can pet Shane’s cheek with the back of his knuckle, and Shane knows the expression on Ilya’s face means that he’s counting Shane’s freckles.

“I am going to play hockey for my husband,” Ilya whispers, “because it gets him hot and bothered to see me on the ice.”

Shane snorts a short laugh, wiggles to try to get leverage the throw Ilya off. But his husband was expecting that, and presses his weight to keep Shane under him.

“I will play until my knee explodes again or I ruin shoulder. I will make my husband nurse me back to health while Canada and the rest of the world mourns the fact that they will never get to watch us play professional hockey ever again. I will play until all these kids can skate circles around me, and all of Ottawa begs me to retire so I stop embarrassing the organization we saved.”

Shane catches him with his foot for that, not a good enough angle to actually kick him, because even though he knows Ilya is teasing, that’s still his hometown team.

“I will play,” Ilya whispers, “until it no longer makes you happy to see me out there.”

Shane makes his husband’s mouth his own, wedges an arm out so he can wrap it around Ilya’s neck and pull him close.

Ilya makes a pleased noise as he does, rolling their hips together without much urgency. That changes when he finds Shane half hard, grinding up on him again as the sigh turns into a growl.

After, once Ilya has let Shane drag him into the shower, and they're under clean sheets, Shane has one more thing to ask of his husband.

"When they offer you the captaincy, take it back."

It's not dissimilar from a conversation they had three seasons back. Ilya laid up on the couch, shushing him while Shane ranted about a leadership meeting he'd just gotten out of with Wiebe, about how he didn't want Ilya's C.

"I told them, give to you," Ilya had slurred in Russian, sweet and lazy on painkillers.

"Oh please."

"I am serious. You best player. Ever. Should always have been you."

"Okay, okay," Shane had said, still not really believing Ilya because the MRI had only been earlier that morning and Shane was maybe still a little bit in denial about how bad Ilya's knee was. "I'll keep it warm until you come back."

Ilya had needed multiple ligament reconstruction. He'd been back on the ice in a year. He never gave Shane a chance to return the C.

If there was a cure for what was wrong with Shane's head, it hadn't been discovered yet. There isn't even an estimate for when he'd start tolerating his morning 10ks, for when he'd feel safe driving on his own, to watch his husband play hockey.

If they found it, it still wouldn't come in time for him.

"I'll keep it warm for you," Ilya says anyway, finger slowly tapping Shane's chest, above where the patch goes, above his heart.

"No," Shane says. "Own it. It never stopped being yours."

"Is that what you want, sweetheart?"

Shane lets his head fall from the pillows so it nestles in to Ilya's shoulder. "More than anything, *moya lyubov*."

Chapter 5: epilogue

Chapter Notes

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

It's the bottom of the third and the Centaurs are up by one.

It's the last game of the season and they don't need to win this one to secure a spot in the playoffs, but it would give them home ice advantage.

Shane is at the arena, but he's not in the box that the WAGs and other family members had splurged on. His parents are, and Shane will join them later, but he needs sunglasses and earplugs to tolerate the game. There are too many people in the box already, and he'd really rather not have photos of him like that circulate online.

There had been a huge fuss when Shane had asked if it would be possible for him to hide in the press box. The entire Centaurs organization had been offended that Shane felt like he needed to ask.

"You can go wherever, whenever you want." Wiebe had said. "Always."

"That doesn't need to be true forever," Shane had said. "So I'll keep asking."

He still doesn't believe it, because half the time the fact that he was retired didn't really register. Despite it being a fact, one that's been out in the open for the last six weeks. He thinks it'll probably get trickier next season. Like a quiet summer that never ends, but only for Shane. The idea of having to watch everyone else go back and play hockey while he fills his days with something else still is kind of impossible.

Dr. Sung had recommended that Shane add a therapist to the rotation of doctors and specialists he already saw. Shane had pushed back, protested that Dr. Sung should be able to prescribe him whatever antidepressants he thought Shane should take, because they both knew it was going to be antidepressants, even if it was just for the brain injury. He could see a psychiatrist if it came to that. Dr. Sung had politely suggested that other aspects of therapy might also be beneficial for Shane.

"I'm not saying it's going to fix anything for you," Dr. Sung said. "But I want you to go. I want you to try. And if you hate it, we can try something else."

Jackie had auditioned more cookbook photographers than Shane did therapists before he found one that clicked, one that made him understand why Ilya still sees Galina.

There are growing pains, and Shane doesn't particularly like therapy. But appointments with Charlie feel more like stitches than gauze. A long-term plan instead of emergency room triage.

So he's up in a private Centaurs suite, alone and hidden from any cameras. It's the first game he's been to since January fourteenth, the first one he's been able to watch straight through, thanks to some preventative Tylenol and a couple of pills folded up in a plastic bag in his pocket. Just in case.

He's keeping Ilya honest, tracking all of those records he promised Shane. He's one goal shy of having eighty-one points this season. How often you get the same number of points as your jersey number isn't really a statistic that anyone watches. But Shane's counting it anyways. He hopes Ilya gets the point.

Ilya's invented records he wants Shane to break. He doesn't have many, but they just started. So far the biggest one is back from March. Shane went three whole days without having a headache.

Ilya skates to the face-off, and he looks like he always does on the ice. Strong, confident, the hottest man in the arena.

He's favoring his bad knee a little, but he always ends up doing that in the more physical games. Shane's known about that bad habit since Ilya came back from surgery. He doesn't know if anyone else can spot his tells. Shane doesn't want to ask, doesn't want to let anyone other than Ilya know if this ends up being something that just he's picked up on.

Ilya knows, of course. Shane told him years ago.

He's got the C again. It looks good on him.

It's too early for any real negotiations, but Farah knows what Ilya wants her to do for his contract. One more season. To match when Shane's was supposed to end. It feels right, to both of them.

Ilya leans in, mouth moving as he says something to the guy on the ice across from him. Shane's too far away to read lips, but he's been in the other guy's skates countless times. He's got all of Ilya's face-off taunts memorized.

The referee's arm goes up and the puck drops. The crowd comes alive as Ilya swipes it back between his legs, feeding it to defender sat on the top of the blue line. Who was waiting for him, stick raised, ready to hit a mean one-timer.

Shane closes his eyes and braces for the wail of the goal siren and thinks about good pain. He lets himself feel the stab of agony that he's not on the ice, and knows that it's different from the faint throb that's starting to build in his head.

When he opens his eyes he finds his husband on the ice, going through the fist bump line. Ilya can't see him, no one can, but he's looking right at where Shane's sitting. Shane's pretty sure he winks.

Shane thinks about heartbreak and hockey, and how they're kind of one and the same. And how they say hockey won't ever give you anything, but that's not really true. He'll love the game, no matter what it takes, because it will always be what gave him his husband.

Chapter End Notes

thank you all for going on this little journey with me, it's been a privilege to live in this hurt/comfort with you. thank you for all your comments and kudos and sharing your enjoyment of this incredibly self-indulgent fic, and i hope the hr finale last night treated everyone as well as it did me <33

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