

frequently, secretly fond of each other.

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/75380761) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/75380761>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov , Yuna Hollander , David Hollander , Svetlana Vetrova , Cliff Marlow , Hayden Pike , Jackie Pike , Connors (Boston Raiders) , Other Teammates (Boston Raiders)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Same Team , Secret Relationship , Mutual Pining , Mental Health Issues , Autistic Shane Hollander , Coming Out , Slow Burn , Team Dynamics , Friends With Benefits , Rivals With Benefits , POV Alternating , Boston Bears Boston Raiders Player Shane Hollander , Angst with a Happy Ending
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of frequently, secretly .
Stats:	Published: 2025-12-07 Completed: 2026-05-14 Words: 222,222 Chapters: 28/28

frequently, secretly fond of each other.

by [milominderbinder](#)

Summary

Shrugging one shoulder far more casually than he possibly feels, Ilya says, “I like both. Is secret, okay?”

“Okay,” Hollander says, voice cracking.

He doesn’t say anything else. The air’s so heavy around them that it feels like being in the middle of a scrum, the weight and heat of all those bodies pressing down on you. Danger always feels like hockey; it’s the most dangerous thing Ilya knows, except for this. Everything dangerous in his life involves men’s bodies and just how close he can get to them. Closer than he probably should.

A year after mysteriously dropping out of the 2009 draft, Shane Hollander is signed by the Boston Raiders, right behind Ilya Rozanov. Having the two biggest stars in the league on the same line is great for Boston — but playing alongside their worst rival was never exactly in Shane or Ilya's plans. Especially not when staying away from each other starts to feel just as impossible as getting along.

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: [\[翻译\] 时常隐秘地爱着彼此](#) by [Yening](#)

Chapter 1: get lost forever.

Chapter Notes

do not interact with this fic using ai or feed any of my writing into ai under any circumstances

well, here we are. another gay tv show has hit my hyperfixation glands in a way that is physically painful, and no hollanov in ep 3 left me so distraught i had to immediately write something

i have both read the hr books and know real nhl hockey things, but this fic will be based on the show, and i will happily change anything about hockey leagues and rules that doesn't fit with how i want to write this because i am first and foremost here for gay reasons

title from the orville peck cover, and some backstory inspiration taken from jack zimmermann in check please (but you don't need any prior knowledge of that to read this, it's just that if you just put a mildly autistic highly anxious secretly queer french canadian prodigy hockey player in front of me what am i supposed to do???)

this fic is now being translated into russian [here](#) 

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

The flash of cameras is blinding, the shouts of English voices all speaking at once already too much for Ilya to begin translating in his mind. This is only his third time visiting America, and now he will be here to stay, for however long his career lasts. His tie is too tight around his neck; his suit itches; his hand is cramping from holding up the *number one* finger for so long in photos. Ilya shuffles at the press table, and tries to pinpoint a specific question he can understand.

When he starts focusing, a lot of the reporters seem to be asking the same thing.

“Mister Rozanov,” one woman with a loud, shrill voice calls out, shoving her microphone closer to his face. “The talk of the hockey world is the last-minute withdrawal of Shane Hollander from the draft. Do you know why he’s not here today?”

She’s speaking too quick, but he can pick up the name anywhere, so he can figure out what she’s asking. Fucking Shane Hollander.

Something irritated knots in Ilya’s stomach. “No, sorry,” he says, ducking forward to speak into the mic. “Have only met him one time. Not my business.”

Another explosion of voices erupts. Another reporter emerges from the masses to say, “Much was made of the rivalry between you two in the Junior leagues. If Hollander were here today, do you still think you would have gone first in the draft?”

Ilya pauses for a moment. Clears his throat. Leans into the mic.

“Yes,” he says.

The voices start up again. Ilya’s manager leans into the front and says, “Thank you, everyone, I think that’s all the questions we have time for today! We’ll be setting up further interviews once Ilya is at training camp, so feel free to save any other questions about the draft until then.”

Ilya stands up with a screech of his chair legs, gives one toothy smile-and-wave to the cameras, and escapes off into the dark hallway beyond the press room. He stands there for a moment sucking in air, desperately wishing for a cigarette.

He went first in the draft today. This should be the best moment of Ilya’s life. And it is - it most definitely, certainly is.

But where the fuck is Shane Hollander, and why isn’t he here for Ilya to rub this in his dumb, freckled face?

On Tuesday, his manager calls him and tells him they want him in a special commercial to promote the new NHL season. Since he went first in the draft, it’ll be him, alone, in the commercial.

On Wednesday, there is an hour-long segment on ESPN theorising about what took Shane Hollander out of the draft. The prevailing theory seems to be a hidden major injury, or that one or both of his parents dropped dead the night before. One panellist, particularly asshole-ish, suggests he’s been caught for doping or drugs and the NHL is trying to cover it up. Ilya thinks of awkward, stiff-postured Hollander cornering him in a freezing cold alley and telling him, “*You’re not allowed to smoke here,*” and laughs his head off at that one.

On Thursday, Ilya goes to the mall and buys a CD called *The Russian to English Phrase Book* to listen to in his car. He feels like he’s only picking up half the words when he tries to listen to ESPN. There could be context he’s missing, about hockey, and he hates the feeling of being a half-step behind.

A fan recognises him at the mall. She briefly loses her mind screeching, which is flattering – Ilya offers to take a picture with her on her digital camera. After grinning for the picture, she tells him, “I’m such a huge fan! I mean, I totally thought Shane Hollander was gonna go first in the draft, but I’m glad it was you!”

Ilya scores fifty one goals in his rookie season. It puts him up there with a tiny number of people, some of the greatest hockey players of all time, for rookie scoring records – something he mentions gloatingly to his teammates plenty of times, getting a mixture of fond back-slaps and irritated curses.

Personally, Ilya's got no problem with his own ego. He's setting records, he's a world-renowned player and he's only just turning nineteen. He's talked about on TV every day. He's making stacks of cash off sponsorships from equipment brands and energy drinks. He's constantly being invited out to private clubs where beautiful women want to sleep with him. Is this not the best that life could possibly get?

Sometimes Ilya googles *Shane Hollander* to see what the asshole is up to. He emerged back from the dead six months after missing the draft – Ilya has no idea how he stayed out of the public eye that long. Hollander gave some vague press conference about a health issue that's now been resolved, and got right back to playing in the Major Junior league. No mention of the fact that people usually aren't allowed to pull out of the draft last minute — that lawyer-looking momager of his who always stands behind him during interviews must have pulled serious strings.

Ilya's watched some of his games this year, even though they're not up to his standards. Hollander is a bastard on the ice, fast as all hell with some of the best hands Ilya's ever seen. Ilya's sure he still would have beaten Hollander in the draft if they'd gone together, but maybe it would have been a close thing.

On the phone one night, in rapidfire Russian, Svetlana tells him, “You should be keeping an eye out for that Hollander. He will get drafted high this year. If a good team takes him, you're going to have a way harder time getting to the cup. He'll be coming into it with something to prove *and* he probably hates your guts for taking his spot last year.”

He only called her because he has nobody else to speak Russian with in fucking Boston. He'd been angling for phone sex, and instead he's getting a scathing review of his own career prospects and her opinion on the chances of every team in the league to win the cup this year, which is usually how it goes with her.

“I did not *take his spot*,” Ilya objects, irritated. Sveta's in LA at the moment, attending some lavish party with a Russian filmmaker she's been fucking, and he's laid back on the uncomfortable leather couch in his Boston apartment. He'd rented the place furnished, after two weeks of crashing in Marley's guest room when he first arrived had been enough to make him realise he hates living with hockey players. His apartment is in a building the team's player services recommend to their rookies because it's close to the rink and has private security – it's a sexy apartment and he likes it, but it's not the best place to relax and pout. Nothing here is comfortable. “I was always better than him. I beat him in the Junior cup, remember?”

“It was close,” she says. “They replayed that game on ESPN last week. The commenters were talking about everything Hollander did, ranking his prospects for getting drafted. A couple of times he intercepted shots of yours that nobody else would ever been able to catch.”

“Fucking ESPN,” Ilya mutters. “They are so far up Hollander’s ass.”

“Well, you’d know all about that. Heard from Sasha recently?”

Ilya pauses where he’s been tossing the TV remote over in his hand, a cool weight settling in his stomach.

“Fuck off. You know we don’t keep in touch.”

Svetlana makes a low noise, doesn’t respond for a minute. She’s ducked into another room at her fancy party, but he can still hear background noise coming from her end of the line. It’s dark outside his own expansive windows, and cold in his empty apartment; nothing but the light of the muted television blaring hockey stats stands out.

“You’re being careful, right?” she asks him, finally.

“If you mean in games, there’s no such thing as careful hockey. I already have one fake tooth.”

“You know what I’m talking about, don’t be a bitch,” she snaps. “If you’re fucking men, don’t let anyone find out. I don’t want you disowned and leaving me all alone back in Russia.”

“Shut up. I’m being careful.”

“Okay, fine.” A muffled voice calls out on her end of the line. “I have to go. Watch some of Hollander’s tape, okay? Never too early to start studying on how to beat him.”

She hangs up, and Ilya is left alone in the quiet of his apartment.

The day of the 2010 draft, Ilya orders an obscene stack of pizzas and invites some of the team over to watch it.

He’s made friends on the team pretty well, he thinks – some of the older guys hate him, but they’re clearly jealous. He’s the youngest on the team by a few years, but not the only dude who likes to party, and they’ve been helpful in taking him to places that ignore the stupid American drinking laws since he’s not yet 21, so that’s helped him make friends. Marleau gives him a lot of shit in the way Ilya respects. Connors is the next youngest dude on the team and while not the best player, he lives in the same building as Ilya and is always down to hang out, which makes him probably one of Ilya’s closest friends even though they’ve

never had a conversation not about women or hockey. For the most part, Ilya thinks his teammates are decent people, not overly assholeish and good players. But he's not sure they will ever know anything about him that's not on his Wikipedia page.

"Okay, I'm putting a hundred bucks on Hollander going first, who's in?" Marley says the moment he crashes down onto Ilya's couch.

"I'm not an idiot, I'm not betting against that," says Connors. He's got three six-packs of beer with him, which he dumps onto Ilya's table and immediately cracks into. "Have you seen the coverage on him lately? Kid is insane. He even broke Rozanov's junior scoring record, right Roz?"

Connors elbows him and Ilya shoves him back a little too hard, sending him tumbling into one of the other guys with a grunt. There'd been some talk about that record, but the Russian and Canadian Juniors are entirely different things. It feels like the media's trying to stir up shit over nothing, to Ilya, just to keep both their names out there with this stupid narrative of their 'rivalry' that is still pushed all over the place, even though they've been at different levels for a full year. Ilya would like to march into ESPN's offices someday, grab a mic and tell them that he has no reason to think of Shane Hollander ever, at any time, at all.

Still, it is likely Hollander might go first, no matter how much it pisses Ilya off. The order of teams to get their draft picks was decided by lottery a few weeks before. Boston has the second pick this year; Montreal has first. Hollander's huge in Canada, their golden boy, and it seems unlikely that a team so close to his own hometown wouldn't pick him if given the shot.

"I will take bet," Ilya decides, as he takes a beer and a seat. "Hollander will not go first, hundred bucks."

A couple of his teammates let out low *ooohs*. The TV's playing low in the background, a pair of announcers theorising about the exact same thing as the team currently are. Shane fucking Hollander's name can't stay out of anyone's mouth, apparently.

"Wait, do you really hate the guy?" Connors asks. "I mean, you've only met a couple times, right?"

"Hollander is boring nerd," Ilya says. He thinks of Hollander telling him *you can't smoke here* again. He thinks of that moment fairly often – Ilya had found it amusing, at the time, how awkwardly Hollander had tried to reprimand him, like he was asking permission to tell Ilya off. Those big, earnest brown eyes. How savage he'd seemed on the ice when they played later, what a startling contrast it was. "Easy to beat at hockey. I do not hate him, he is not even worth thinking about."

"Damn," Marley says, "Fighting words, Rozanov. If Montreal take him, they might kick our asses next year."

The Raiders played well this year – something plenty of people are attributing to Ilya's scoring record, which is a compliment he'll happily take and occasionally jerk off thinking about – but they're still in the middle of a rebuild, and a few late trades and injuries ended their attempt at playoffs early. Everyone's hoping to make it further next year, but if Montreal

calls up a decent goalie *and* grabs the first draft pick for a talented center forward, they could definitely be a challenge in Ilya's way.

"Then we will have to beat them, Jesus, Marley, don't be such downer," Ilya says. "More important question is who *we* take."

There's a few other exciting prospects in the draft lineup this year, but nobody with Hollander's record or reputation. One other Russian player looks decent, which Ilya has mixed feelings about – he'd like someone he could speak his own language with on his team, but he remembers playing against the guy in the Junior league and he was a bit of a foul-mouthed asshole. The next best option is probably the inoffensive Finnish prospect who's a great defenceman but keeps bringing up bird watching in all of his interviews.

"Gotta be Koskinen, right?" one of the guys says – the Finnish player. "Roz has forward covered, we need defence more than anything."

"I dunno, I heard management were talking about Richardson." Ilya recognises the name as an absolutely massive kid from Texas of all places. Ilya doesn't really think anyone should be allowed to play ice hockey if they didn't grow up somewhere that snows. "He's gotta be like, 6'6, right? Defence don't get much stronger than that."

"Harder to move on ice if you are that tall," Ilya says. "It will be Koskinen or Yakovlev. We have too many stupid Americans already – no offence."

Someone throws a bottle cap at him, and they fall into some good-natured teasing for a while. They're all a few beers in and arguing with the commentators on the screen when the time comes for the draft's first pick.

The commissioner takes the stage to applause from the audience, a dramatic show of colourful lights and music blaring. Ilya thinks the draft is the most dramatic event in the NHL every year, and it doesn't even matter that much. Half these people will never be called up from the AHL, why all the fuss?

He leans forward in his seat as the camera pans over the prospects, sat in the audience with their families or management teams. It lingers on Shane Hollander. He's blank-expressed, face a little shiny with sweat. Ilya's glad he has such a huge, expensive TV – he can see Hollander's freckles smattered across his tan skin, and the way his tongue darts out for a moment before he breaks into a painful, forced smile the second he spots the camera is on him.

The commissioner's voice sends a staticy, echoing squeak out of the microphone. "*With the first overall selection in the 2010 NHL draft, the Montreal Metros are proud to select...*"

Lights spin on the screen, music thumping. Ilya finds himself holding his breath, and has no idea why. This doesn't matter, but he wants the camera to pan back to Shane Hollander when his name is announced – see if that forced smile can turn into something more real.

"*JAAKKO KOSKINEN!*"

Ilya's jaw drops. A "*Blyat*" slips out of his mouth in disbelief.

The camera pans over to the Finnish prospect, a skinny dude shaking in his suit with huge wide eyes. The commentators start recounting his team stats and playing history as he hugs his parents and his manager, and Ilya doesn't look away from the screen. In the background he can see people in the crowd muttering, the confusion spreading like an impact fracture.

"--shocking the audience," one of the commentators is saying, "who were likely all expecting Canada's own Shane Hollander, the kid who's been breaking records in junior left and right, to be picked first."

"It may be the Metros know something we don't about the still vague reasons Hollander decided to pull out of last year's draft, Josh. Could it be that injury he cited is more serious than he's made the league aware?"

"I'd find that hard to believe with how well he's played in the Junior league this year, Chris, I mean we haven't seen the kid miss a single game since his break--"

In Ilya's apartment, it's silent enough to hear a pin drop. Ilya's won his hundred bucks – Hollander didn't go first.

He wasn't expecting it.

"So we take Yakovlev, and Hollander goes third?" Marley says, with a low whistle. "Damn, the kid must be pissed the fuck off."

The cameras zoom in on Hollander in the stands. He's caught in that same forced, close-mouthed smile, but he looks like he'd rather be anywhere else in the world. He won't be able to hear the commentators from his seat in the audience, but he has to know the kinds of things they're saying.

"He is not third pick kind of player," Ilya says, frowning.

"Well we're sure as fuck not gonna take him," Connors laughs. "Not with how much you've shit-talked him in the press this year."

"I barely talk about him, what the fuck?" Ilya says. He really never does bring up Hollander – the fucking reporters are the ones who've spent all year asking him *where's Hollander* or *did you hear about Hollander's scoring record* or *would you still have gone first if Hollander was in the draft?*

Ilya supposes they know the answer to that now. Shane Hollander is officially not a first pick.

"Still," Marley is saying, "There's no way we take him. He's not a defenceman, and everyone knows we fucking need defence."

Connors is the current starting right defenceman, so they're probably pissing him off by saying it, but it's true. More power at center never *hurts*, but the Raiders don't need Hollander when they already have Ilya on the line.

Ilya watches with disinterest as Koskinen walks down the stands hugging people, gets onto the stage to shake the commissioner's hand, takes off his suit jacket and puts on his new jersey. It's all a big performance, and Ilya remembers doing it himself the year before – the thrill of that is different in person. When he was called first, all those cameras and all that applause and everybody looking at him, he was flooded with adrenaline so sharp it turned him on. He jerked off in a bathroom on his way from the televised stage to the media room. He finds it harder to care when it's somebody else, but maybe that's because, although it's Koskinen's stats flashing up on the screen and his gametape highlights playing, the commentators won't stop talking about Hollander.

Maybe Ilya should send Koskinen a gift basket: in commiseration with the second person in two years to have their entire first draft moment made about Shane fucking Hollander.

When the performance is over, everyone resets for the second pick, pretending their little minds weren't just blown. Ilya watches his own coach and the Raiders' team owner in the stands on the television as their turn to pick is announced, idly chugging another beer.

“And now, with the second overall choice in this year's draft, the Boston Raiders officially select–”

Ilya could swear, he knows it's coming a moment before it happens. He pauses, a mouthful of beer and the bottle limp between his fingers, and his squabbling teammates' voices shut off in his mind just in time for the television to announce –

“SHANE HOLLANDER!”

And everyone loses their shit.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: shane 🥰

please leave a comment if you enjoyed it!! & you can also [reblog this fic on tumblr](#)

Chapter 2: if you think you're able.

Chapter Notes

boston players' names are random ones from the backs of the jerseys i could see in the show, but if the show expands on the boston team i might go back and adjust names later lmao

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

It takes a few seconds for Shane to remember to use his legs.

He's watched nearly every recorded NHL draft; watched them live each year since he was eight. He knows how people are supposed to react when their name is called, which is the only reason he knows what to do. First he reacts to the camera – gives a thumbs up which he knows he will think is dorky and unbearable when he watches it back later – then stands up and hugs his mom, his dad, his manager. His mom says, “*Good job, honey!*” and his dad says, “*So proud of you, kid.*” He knows his mom is thinking that he should have gone first and that she can't believe Boston took him – she'll unpack it all later when there's not cameras on them, no doubt.

Shane makes his way down the long, long set of steps to the stage. The lights are blinding when he's up there. Burning hot on his face. He feels so overwhelmed not being able to see the familiar faces of his family in the crowd that he has to dig his thumbnail into the meat of his palm inside a clenched fist to remind himself to breathe. Breathe. Shake hands with the commissioner. Take your new jersey, a startling contrast of black and gold. Like warning coloration on a snake.

He is officially a Boston Raider. It's not the team he wanted, but he still got drafted to the NHL – this has been Shane's dream since he was old enough to stand up in his first pair of kiddy skates. He's done it. He's so, so happy.

He's happy, right?

As soon as they let him off stage, Shane locks himself in a bathroom stall, puts his head between his knees, and tries to catch his breath.

The next day, when they're just back from the airport and he's unpacking his stuff into his room at his parents' house, he gets a text. Shane doesn't have a lot of people who text him, so

he's surprised when he sees it's from Hayden Pike, a Montreal player he met a few times at Canadian awards events and hockey functions.

Congrats on the draft, but damn, Boston? Whole team is bummed you didn't end up with us, we thought we had you in the bag!

Shane stares down at his phone for a while. He's never had a conversation with Pike that wasn't observed by at least eight other people. They only have each other's phone numbers saved because they sat at a youth hockey charity gala together in the spring.

He turns his Blackberry around in his hands a few times and eventually texts back, *Thanks. I'm excited for any chance I get to play at a high level, regardless of the team.*

Wow, you're gonna be a hit at the press table, Pike says. It feels kind of like a chirp, so Shane doesn't reply.

Shane wakes up at 5AM every day. He starts his days with a carefully balanced protein smoothie designed by his nutritionist, then follows it up with a six-mile run. When he's back from his run, he'll have another protein shake and go work out, either at a stadium or at home depending on whether it's hockey season or not. After that, he starts his day. Usually, his day means playing hockey.

Shane likes routine. There's no way to get stuck in decision paralysis or make the wrong choices if you know what you're doing every minute of the day in advance.

He always knew he'd be on an NHL team eventually, and that his days would look a little different when he was. He'd hoped that, at least, he would get onto a Canadian team. He's never wanted to live in America, and he doesn't now, even though he has nothing against Boston as a city. Well – almost nothing.

“How's the new apartment, you settling in?” Boston's assistant manager asks, as Shane's awkwardly settling into a chair in the conference room she's led him to.

“Uh, yeah, I mean, it's nice,” Shane says. He's lived in a few different places by now, stayed with couple different billet families during juniors, and he's spent the last few weeks sharing a rental with a couple other prospects at the development camp outside the city, but he'd been home with his parents for most of the past year.

The new apartment had been picked by his mom. It's in a building near the rink, with private security, and apparently a couple other players from the team live there. Part of the selling point was that it came fully furnished, so he'd finished development camp and turned up in Boston to a clinically clean, black-and-grey bachelor pad with marbled floors and leather couches. He likes it just fine, although it has none of the personality of his childhood home, where he can feel his mom's touch on everything.

“Great, that’s good to hear!” Angela smiles at him with a wide smile of perfectly white teeth. Shane can tell by her grin that she definitely never played hockey herself. “I recommended the building to your mom when she called, so I was glad to hear you ended up picking it. If you need any other suggestions or information to help you settle in around here, just ask me or any of the other team staff, we’re always happy to help. Player services can help you with anything you need to set up here — they’ll schedule some time with you in the next couple of days.”

“Right, thanks,” Shane says.

“We’re very excited to have you, Shane. You’re the only rookie we brought up from development camp right into the team, you know?” Shane knows. He gives her an awkward nod, and Angela’s wide smile doesn’t change. “So, here’s what your first day is going to look like.”

The first thing turns out to be signing stacks of paperwork until his hand cramps – he usually spends a lot more time holding hockey sticks than pens and finds himself sorely ill-used to it – and then a tour of the entire vast building given by Angela. She leads him through the management areas, shows him the offices and conference rooms, then the media center, press boxes and interview rooms. They cross halfway across the stadium to reach the training areas. The gym is absolutely vast; there are several different sports therapy rooms, a sauna, a hydrotherapy pool.

Shane nods his head over and over as Angela explains each facility to him, trying to look like he’s absorbing the information she’s cheerfully giving out. He desperately wishes he’d brought a notebook to write all this down.

“All right!” Angela finishes in the locker room, displaying his new stall of team gear to him with a level of pride Shane would find hard to muster for almost anything. “A lot of the team are still on break, but a few are back already and will be spending a lot of time at the rink even before we get into official training season. Feel free to spend as much prep time here as you want to – but I’m sure you have other things to do today, so I won’t keep you any longer.”

“Uh, I think I might work out for a while,” Shane says. “You know, get used to the space?”

“That kind of dedication is exactly why we’re so glad to have you on board, Shane,” Angela tells him. “I’ll leave you to it, but you know where my office is if you need anything.”

The locker room isn’t that different to any other locker room Shane has spent time in during all his years of hockey, except that, when he’s all alone in it, his brain just keeps screaming at him, *this is an NHL locker. You are an NHL player. You’ll be working out in an NHL gym.*

Shane stashes his gym bag, his jacket, his shower stuff and his meds in his brand new locker. He changes out into his sweats, grabs his brand new *Boston Raiders* water bottle, and heads back towards the gym. In Shane’s opinion, no workout beats time on the ice, but he still takes training very seriously, and working out has always helped him clear his head – he can sometimes run off that thumping anxiety that won’t leave him alone at times like today, as he looks around the massive, expensive stadium and tries not to feel fucking terrified to be here.

Shane walks into the gym, and finds himself face-to-face with nobody other than Ilya Rozanov. More specifically, the first thing he sees is Ilya Rozanov's extremely perfect ass, in a tight pair of gym shorts, mid-squat. He's facing a row of mirrors, and his eyes meet Shane's in their reflection.

"Rozanov," Shane says, as politely as he can. "Uh, hi. It's been a while."

Shane remembers their junior championship game well. He'd been sick with nerves the whole day. A while before the game, he'd had to go outside and pace around in the snow to calm down, breathing the cold air. He counted to one hundred in first English, then French, then made it to fifty in Japanese before getting stressed out again because he couldn't remember the rest and felt guilty about quitting Japanese school for hockey when he was nine. When he'd seen Rozanov smoking around the back of the building, he hadn't been able to resist introducing himself; it was a welcome distraction. The sad truth was, he was kind of a fan. Shane didn't really keep up with the KHL, but he'd heard enough talk about this Russian prodigy as his peer that he'd been curious. Rozanov's brutal, aggressive play style, his near unstoppable goals, had been incredible to watch when Shane was able to get his hands on footage of Rozanov's junior games back in Russia.

It showed on the ice that day when they played. Shane forgot all his nerves when they were actually in the rink – he'd felt the electric energy of Rozanov's playing and Shane wanted to *beat* him, throw him into the boards, snap his stick over Rozanov's head and take every goal he tried to score. After the game, as confident as Shane was in himself, he'd begun to wonder what would happen when he went up against Rozanov in the draft.

And then – well, that hadn't ended up mattering. So yeah, it's been a while.

"Not my fault," Rozanov says, as he rises out of his squat. He shelves the barbell and then gives a shrug of his broad shoulders before starting to stretch. "You are the one who skipped our big day."

It's been over a year; Shane desperately, badly wants people to just quit bringing it up.

"Hah," he says, not amused but trying to sound it. "Um. Anyway. Nice to see you again. Looking forward to playing with you, I guess?"

Rozanov's eyes flit down Shane's body, then back up, and he raises a cocky eyebrow. "I doubt we will play together much. We play same position, and I am better than you. You will not get much time on the ice."

Shane gapes at him for a moment.

"Wow, asshole," he says.

Rozanov grins. "I am not an asshole just because I say the truth."

"You don't know you're better than me. You haven't seen me play an NHL game yet," Shane says, feeling the heat rising in his cheeks and the frustration setting a knot in his stomach,

replacing the fluttering nerves he's been battling all day with something more indignantly aflame.

"Of course I am better. I beat you in Juniors," Rozanov reminds him.

"Your *team* beat my *team*. We had a bad goalie and we were down two players. I skated circles around you in the first half."

"And then got tired, or what?"

Shane scoffs, stamps his way over to the rowing machine and throws his water bottle down.

"Glad to know we're *not* gonna put all the bullshit press behind us and be good teammates," he snaps, as he sits down on the rower.

"No, don't worry," Rozanov says. "Everyone on team already thinks I hate you."

"You're an asshole," Shane tells him.

Rozanov asks, "Do you know any other swear words, or this is only one you've learned?"

Shane shoots him a withering look, only to feel something thick get caught in his throat when he looks over. Rozanov is leaning against the weights machine now, wiping his face with the hem of his tank top, which means he's lifted it up, which means he's bared his entire fucking thick, muscled, hairy chest to the room. Shane hears himself take a weird, shaky inhale before he can stop it.

When he went up for the draft this year, Shane told himself in no uncertain terms: he is *not* thinking about this. The deal he made himself was that he doesn't have to date women if he focuses hard enough on his hockey. Either way, he certainly is *not* thinking about men. He's not thinking about sweaty men in the gym, he's not thinking about mens' muscled bodies, he's not staring at the way Ilya fucking Rozanov's cross necklance dangles down between the meat of his round, biteable pecs—

Shane grabs his iPod and shoves his headphones into his ears, whipping his head to look solely at the rowing machine and nowhere else.

"Bye bye, Hollander," Rozanov calls out, as he leaves the gym. Shane doesn't look at him, doesn't react. He sets a punishing pace on the rowing machine and thinks about how fucking badly he wants to beat Rozanov on the ice in their first practice; lets the fury and frustration and competitive thrill keep him going until he's panting, and his legs have turned to jelly, and he's too tired to have any dangerous thoughts at all.

"And did your meal service box arrive?" Yuna Hollander asks, her strong voice tinny and muffled through the bad connection on Shane's phone.

“Yeah, it was here when I got back from the rink,” Shane tells her. He wedges his phone between his ear and his shoulder, staring into the large cardboard box with its carefully-packaged, vacuum-sealed pouches of portioned out, nutritionist-designed meals. He’s not sure how to arrange them in the fridge; he doesn’t have a system yet. By food type, or size?

His mom tells him, “Make sure you put the salmon straight in the freezer, okay? It needs to stay fresh.”

“Mom, I already did, as soon as I got in.” Shane rolls his eyes down the phone, kicking the freezer door closed behind himself. The freezer was easy to organise – all he had in there was salmon, chicken and breakable ice packs. “You can stop worrying, okay? I’m doing fine.”

He knows they’re useless words. Shane loves his mom to the moon and back, but she’s always been a force of nature, and she’s only been more overprotective of him the last year. He can practically hear her frown from the other side of the phone, overpowering the low muttering of ESPN in the background of her living room.

She sighs and says, “I still think I should have flown out with you. For the first couple of weeks, at least.”

“You don’t need to do that. I’m nineteen, Mom. I’m an adult.” He’s amused, half-torn between feeling smothered and also really, secretly wishing she was here. Shane wants to be an adult. In a lot of ways he feels decades older than everyone around him, and always has. On the other hand, he’s not sure how to call up to make his own doctor’s appointments, or how often to water the sad houseplant on his new dining table.

“Yeah, well, when you’re fifty I’m going to ask you how *grown up* you think a nineteen year old is, and we’ll see if you think I’m overreacting then, mister.”

She’s laughing even though she’s probably making a real note to do that in thirty years time, so Shane finds himself laughing, too. He puts her on speakerphone and rests his phone against the sink, taking out the first armful of sealed food bags. He’ll organise them by day of the week, since they’re already labelled.

All that’s in his fridge at the moment is ginger ale, water bottles and half a leftover portion of takeout sushi. He tosses the sushi in the trash and starts arranging the shiny new shelves of his shiny new fridge. It looks huge for one person’s meals; it’ll still be more than half empty when he’s done unpacking.

While he’s stacking bags of pre-portioned rice so all their labels are facing the same way, his mom says, “You do sound good, honey.”

“I feel good. I swear, mom, I’m really excited for Boston.”

It’s a not-lie and a lie; mostly true; *all* true, if you figure that being really excited doesn’t mean you can’t simultaneously be nervously dreading something.

“That’s great, that’s really great. So, have you met any of the rest of the team yet?”

“They’ve mostly all been on break, but I’m, uh, invited to a barbecue next week? One of the guys, Feller, he has this massive house and apparently he grills for the team a lot.” Shane carefully folds the now-empty cardboard box that his mealprep came in down the sides, then into equal quarters to fit it neatly into the recycling.

“Zack Feller – number 17. He’s been on the team a long time, Shane, it’s great that he’s invited you over.”

Shane never doubts his mom’s encyclopedic hockey knowledge, especially about any team he’s playing for or against, but he does sometimes find it mildly irritating he can’t even casually mention someone without getting their Wikipedia page rundown for him.

“Sure.” Shane chews on the edge of his lip for a moment as he closes the fridge. Then, he thinks *fuck it*, and tells her, “I did meet Ilya Rozanov.”

“Poor you,” his mom says, scathingly. “Is he as rude in person as he is on TV?”

Shane lets out a bark of laughter, leaning down to rest his arms on the counter.

“He’s definitely kind of an asshole,” he says. His brain suddenly decides to supply him a vivid, technicolour portrait of Rozanov’s golden cross hanging over his bare chest. He jolts, his elbows slipping back off the kitchen counter as he suddenly stands ramrod straight on his kitchen tiles.

“I’m not surprised! I saw this interview with him the other day where he was promising to score *more* goals this season than he did last season – I’m surprised the asshole’s head could fit in frame for the cameras!”

Shane looks down at his socks, shuffles his weight onto his left foot and balances for a moment. “I mean, he *did* score fifty one goals his rookie year. That’s pretty incredible hockey.”

“Being a good hockey player doesn’t have to make you a dick,” Yuna says.

“*Mom.*”

“What? I’m just saying. He should try being more like you, honey. Especially if he ever wants to keep any decent sponsors.”

“Sure, yeah, you’re right. Listen, mom, I have to go. I’ll call tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay, sweetie. Oh! Before you go, did you get the list I sent you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I saw the email.”

“Great. And remember, if it takes you a while to find a therapist you like in Boston, Josie’s happy to keep seeing you on Skype until you’re settled somewhere else.”

“Right. I’m sure I’ll find someone down here, it’ll be fine,” Shane says. “Love you, mom. Bye.”

He hangs up, and puts his phone down on the counter. It's only five PM, but maybe it's not too early to start making dinner.

Shane's mom tells him to bring a bottle of wine to the barbecue. He feels like that might be a mortifying choice, but he's also kind of terrified of showing up empty handed. He also can't legally purchase wine in America like he could in Canada, something that concerns him more than it concerns his mom. She gets three bottles delivered to his apartment when he mentions it, and Shane's so embarrassed by it that he does end up bringing one to Feller's just to get rid of it.

He looked at some old facebook posts to find other photos of team barbecues and figure out what kind of thing he was supposed to wear. He might have turned up in a suit if he wasn't sure – instead he's in jeans and his new *Boston Raiders* t-shirt, which is another choice he's now overthinking, like his teammates might decide he's trying to suck up, or he's not worthy of wearing the shirt when he hasn't even played his first game yet.

Oh, god.

"They're your teammates," Shane mutters to himself, hands gripping the steering wheel of his car as he sits in the driveway, stares up at the McMansion exterior of Feller's house, all beige brick and vaulted rooves. "They're going to be your teammates. They won't hate you. All you have to do is talk about hockey."

He takes two sharp breaths through his nose, lets out one long breath from his mouth. Does that a couple more times.

He sees another car start to pull up the road in his rearview. Shane quickly clambers out of the car before someone can see him sitting in the drive like a freak, and goes to ring the bell.

When he opens the door, Feller slaps an arm around Shane's shoulders, claps him hard on the chest, kind of shakes him so much Shane's skull rattles. Feller's a huge dude with a medium talent in hockey that he makes up for by being giant, quick, and rough on the ice. He seems much the same in person, though less angry than he is in a game.

"Yo, rookie, you made it! Come on, come around, it's this way, this way. Dude, you brought wine? Damn, you're a good kid, Izzy's gonna love you. We're all drinking beer, you want one?"

"I'm still underage," Shane says.

Feller blinks, uncomprehendingly, and then looks back at the bottle of wine Shane's holding out.

"Riiiiight. So, you want a beer?"

“Um, sure,” Shane says, figuring he’ll hold it and not drink it.

Feller leaves Shane’s wine in the kitchen and leads him out to the back yard, where a dozen or so people are already hanging out on the manicured lawn, basking in the sunny weather. It’s a decent 80 degrees today, not too humid, kind of perfect weather.

Of course, Ilya fucking Rozanov is already there. He greets Shane with a cheerful wave from across the yard, amusement tickling his smile when Shane just rolls his eyes and huffs back.

Marleau appears from the house and shouts out, “Yo, Roz, didn’t think you’d be here. When’d you get back from Russia, brother?”

“Last week,” Rozanov says, shrugging as he cracks the tab on a can of beer. “Why, you miss me, Marley?”

Shane takes a seat at the glass outdoor table, beneath a huge umbrella, next to a couple of women he has to assume are the guys’ wives and girlfriends. “Uh, hi, I’m Shane?” he says, immediately embarrassed that he says it like a question, kind of like he doesn’t know his own name.

“Oh my god, you’re such a cutie,” a very tall bleach-blonde woman says. “I’m Izzy – Zack’s wife. This is Kenna. You’re new, right?”

Shane abandons the beer Feller gave him on the table and twists his hands together in his lap.

“Uh, yeah, I just got drafted in the summer. Excited to go into my first season.”

She rubs his shoulder. “The guys give you any trouble, you just let us know, okay? They can be dicks, but they mean well.”

“Thanks? I mean, I’m sure I’ll be fine,” Shane says.

Kenna turns to Izzy and says, “He’s adorable,” like he isn’t there.

Shane feels like telling them *I play a violent contact sport for a living and I’m the same age as Rozanov*, but instead he just sort of smiles, and waits for them to get back to their conversation.

For the rest of the afternoon, Shane lets himself be passed around by different groups of loud, chatting hockey players. If someone calls his name or throws an arm around his shoulders and makes a joke, he goes and stands with them for a bit, holding a lemonade so he has something to do with his hands, laughing in the right places and reciting hockey stats when someone mentions something he knows about. Everyone’s friendly, even with plenty of chirping going on. The food’s good, even if Shane can’t eat most of it on his meal plan.

Whenever Ilya Rozanov joins a conversation, he makes a point of calling Shane *rookie*. The rest of them doing it doesn’t rub Shane the wrong way, but Rozanov is the same fucking age as him. He’s only been playing one season more than Shane. The way he says it, smirking or sending little winks Shane’s way, makes the guys laugh and pisses Shane the fuck off.

Around the pool table after they've all eaten, Rozanov sinks a ball and then looks up at Shane while he's still leaning down on the table, says, "Want to make bet on who scores more goals this season, Hollander?"

A couple of the guys laugh at them. Shane rolls his eyes.

"Why don't you watch me play a few games before you decide if you wanna take that bet, Rozanov."

Marleau lets out a low *oooooh*. Someone slaps Shane's back with their pool cue, which he takes as a sign of support, though it makes him wince.

"Nyet," Rozanov says. "I think I don't need to, I am happy to bet now. Why, you are not confident you can beat me?"

"How about you fuck all the way off," Shane suggests to him, and sinks a ball in the corner pocket.

"Are we gonna have a problem letting you two on the ice together?" Marleau asks. He sounds like he's joking, but Shane kind of isn't sure. The thought of being on the same ice as Rozanov excites him in a way he thinks might sound strange to admit; his blood heats up, his pulse races like he wants to punch something. The problem is that he wants to *beat* Rozanov. Playing on the same side as him is a variable they have yet to test.

"What, two best players in league? No. The problem will be for the other teams," Rozanov says.

The team dissolves into ribbing Rozanov about his big head. Shane stands there, blinking. He hadn't known Rozanov thought he was good.

Shane pulls into his parking space, turns off the engine, takes a few quiet breaths to himself. He thinks the day went well. Nobody seems to outright hate him, at least. The thing Shane has always liked about hockey is that on every team, at least half the players are as awkward and badly-socialised as him. As long as he can recite stats and talk shit about other teams, he doesn't feel like he gets too far off-script when hanging out with hockey players. At least, so long as they don't start talking about girls.

He thinks he likes the Boston team. Can probably be happy here. He took an anxiety pill before the party today, but only one, and he feels fine without another one.

The air of the private garage is cool when Shane exits the car, the shadowed concrete a nice reprieve from the heat outside. He feels calmer than he has since arriving in Boston, and stands there for a moment after locking up his car, checking his phone to see if his dad's

texted while he was out, and wonders what his pre-made meal service dinner for the evening will be, even though he's still kind of full from the food he'd picked around at the barbecue.

Then he turns around.

"What the *fuck*?" Shane says, as Ilya fucking Rozanov gets out of the ugly sports car across the parking garage. "Oh my god, are you actually stalking me now?"

"Wow, big head, Hollander? You think you are worth stalking?" Rozanov whistles as he locks his car, then saunters over towards Shane. His shirt has such a ridiculously deep v-neck that Shane can see the patch of hair smattered between his pecs. "I live here. So does Connors, do you think I stalk him too?"

The air Shane inhales feels suddenly ice-cold, a tingling, goosebumped feeling running through his throat and chest. He knew a couple other younger members of the team lived in the same building as him – Angela the assistant manager had made that sound like a selling point when she recommended the building. With everyone away for the summer, he just hadn't really thought about it. The building's been so quiet, and Shane's been so focused on training in the couple of weeks he's been here. He hasn't exactly been polling his neighbours.

Rozanov seems to notice that Shane has frozen by the side door of his jeep. He takes a couple steps closer, leans his hip against Shane's car. Shane can kind of smell Rozanov's woodsy cologne, undercut with the smell of sweat from a hot day – a deep, musky mix of a smell. Rozanov asks him, "What is your apartment number?"

Shane replies without really thinking about whether or not he actually wants Ilya fucking Rozanov to have that information, "402."

Rozanov grins. He's got a grin like a shark, wonky teeth in the bottom, kind of hypnotising the way his pink, bowed lips stretch over them.

"502. I am your upstairs neighbour."

Jesus fucking Christ. Shane's never gonna be able to sleep again. Any noises coming from upstairs he has to live with the knowledge that Ilya Rozanov is the one making them. Shane's already heard that Rozanov's kind of a womaniser – what if Shane can hear –

"I will bang on floor in morning to make sure you do not oversleep. Goodnight, Hollander," Rozanov says. He's still wearing that fucking grin. He leans kind of closer for a moment, closer than Shane thinks he would probably get to a teammate, close enough that all he can focus on is the moles on Rozanov's face and the way one of his dusty curls is falling away from the rest of his hair and hanging in his eyes. The smell of his sweat and cologne fills Shane's whole head.

"Fuck off," Shane says, and then, all of a sudden possessed by some strange urge, throws his body away from his car and sets off at a sprint towards the stairwell. A half-second after he starts running, he hears the squeak of sneakers on concrete, as Rozanov races to catch up.

Shane beats him to the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: away game 🚌

thank you so much for reading!! please leave a comment if you enjoyed 😊

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Chapter 3: shed some light on me please.

Chapter Notes

still riding out episode 4 so hard i feel like i did coke

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

Shane Hollander is a little distracting.

Ilya can admit it. When Hollander had been drafted, beyond the initial surprise of it and ensuing media circus, Ilya hadn't thought it would be a huge deal. Hollander seemed fun to bother and chirp, but that was about it. He's a good hockey player, and Ilya likes good hockey; if anything it was a little exciting, having a great draft pick for the second year in a row, imagining the kinds of places Boston might be able to go if they built a team around this. Ilya dreams of a Cup. He dreams of popping champagne in all his teammates' faces and telling his father *fuck you, I fucking did it, for mama*. If Shane Hollander is a vehicle to getting all that, it's fine by Ilya.

He hadn't been prepared for it to be like this.

Pre-season practice is supposed to be less competitive than a game, and yet somehow with Hollander on the ice, Ilya keeps forgetting that. Coach tells Ilya to show Hollander their standard drills, meant as a punishment because he caught Ilya smoking and disapproves. Instead of feeling like a punishment, Ilya finds himself delighting in chasing Hollander up and down the ice – lapping him, criticising his skate sprints, nudging the cones apart when he's practicing stick handling just so Hollander will tell him to fuck off.

“It's like you're a toddler and your family just got a new puppy,” Marleau complains one day, whipping Ilya with a wet towel in the locker room. “You're supposed to be playing together and instead you're torturing the kid.”

Ilya shrugs. “Is fun.” He throws a stray soccer ball at Marley's head. “I would never hurt a puppy. Just boring Canadian skaters.”

In the last week of September, in the midst of their run of exhibition games while the coaches are still settling the roster and positions, Assistant Coach Greggs brings out the shooting targets – covers that go over the goals and only allow a couple of small points of entry to score – and tells them they're having shootout practice.

Hollander's stretching on the ice when Ilya skates over to him. He's on his knees – his head's level about with Ilya's crotch. Ilya catches him with a spray of cut-up ice when he brakes right in front of him and Hollander's still spluttering when Ilya says, “I bet I make more goals than you. Hundred bucks?”

Brushing ice off his face, Hollander looks up with a pissed-off glare.

“You’re fucking on,” he says. Ilya’s heart beats with adrenaline – *pump, pump, pump*, he can feel it in his chest. He grins, winks at Hollander. Those big brown eyes narrow at him, not happy at all.

“Okay. We count shots on goal too, yes? Winner whoever scores most and misses least.”

“Fine. We’re sharing a net, though – you’ll fucking cheat if I turn my back.”

“Ah, ah, I do not need to cheat. I am just good,” Ilya says. Hollander hip-checks him and skates off – off-balance for a moment, Ilya’s a beat behind, but he catches up.

Hollander is really fucking good at scoring goals. Ilya knows this – he’s watched the tape, he’s played against him before. It’s still a marvel to see in person. It almost looks like math is happening inside his head when he lines it up, even in a split-second shot; he knows where the puck is going, how hard he needs to hit it at which exact angle, he calculates it all in his head before he sends it flying.

Ilya doesn’t play like that. Everything in hockey is instinct to him. He’s good because he pushes harder, fights further, doesn’t give up; he scores a lot of goals because he takes more shots than fucking anyone, that’s how it’s always been. Today, he tries to work Hollander’s way. They take in turns firing at the goal and before each one Ilya breathes, rotates his stick, lines up the tape just right. He tries to think about his best goals, how he’s made them before. He badly wants to win.

He scores. Hollander scores. Ilya scores. Hollander scores. Ilya scores. Hollander, a little faster this time, a harder slap of his stick, scores. They miss a couple. Ilya scores and cheers. Hollander misses two, then scores in the smallest target in the net, turns to Ilya with a shining, gleeful face and sticks his tongue out like a kid. Ilya shoves him. Misses. They score a few more and they start skating around each other, checking each other out of the way to get an extra turn in the game.

By the time they’ve rounded up the pucks five times and declared several different rematches, Ilya’s sweating, out of breath, his feet hurt in his skates. The adrenaline is rushing through him so hard that he almost feels drunk, certainly nearly horny. He can feel it, can feel that one more goal waiting in his stick, can feel the disappointed huff of Hollander’s breath when he gets it -

“Okay, kids, you fucking done yet? They need the zamboni in before five.”

Coach’s voice cuts through the fog of competition in the air. Ilya looks up, and only then does he realise the rest of the team is already off the ice. It’s just him and Hollander there, and their net full of pucks, coach watching them with raised eyebrows from the side of the rink.

“Oh, shit – uh, yeah, sorry, we’re done!” Hollander says, and immediately starts collecting pucks. “Sorry, coach!”

“Leave those for equipment team, idiot,” Ilya says to him. He skates up, and checks Hollander lightly into the boards. “I win. You owe me hundred bucks.”

Taking the lead by two goals is a high Ilya rides well into the next day. Hollander’s steaming, irritated face is an added bonus.

Ilya sits down at the rowing machine next to Hollander’s with a heavy thump, shoves his sneakers into the footplates, grabs the handle and rows at the exact same time as Hollander does.

“So,” Ilya says, over a heavy breath. He pushes down on the machine, then back up. “You enjoying Boston?”

Hollander looks startled for a moment that Ilya’s speaking to him. He glances Ilya’s way, then away again, not meeting his eyes. The rowing machine makes a creaking noise as Hollander pushes up. “Uh, sure, yeah. It’s a nice city.”

“You do anything fun yet, or just *hockey, hockey*.”

“I do fun stuff,” Hollander says, defensively. He picks up his pace on the machine; Ilya copies him. “When my parents visited last week we went to the botanical gardens. And I walked the Freedom Trail to see all the landmarks, that was cool.”

Ilya tries to keep it together, but he can’t help it – he laughs. When he glances over, Hollander has a furrowed line between his brows, which just makes Ilya more amused.

“Oh, Hollander, you are so boring,” Ilya tells him, pityingly. “You look at flowers and old bricks for fun?”

“It’s called culture,” Hollander grumbles, voice dark. His breaths are coming heavier now as he heaves up and down on the rowing machine. His thighs are huge – Ilya spares a glance at them in his tight shorts, then has to look away.

“What about actual fun? You go to clubs, go dancing?”

“I’m only nineteen. American drinking age is twenty-one.”

Hollander says this like it’s a dry, matter-of-fact statement. Ilya even pauses in his rowing for a moment to wonder: is this guy for real?

“Yes, I fucking know, Hollander, we are same age. This is not real problem when you are rich athlete, there are lots of cool clubs that do not care.”

Hollander's cheeks look pink when Ilya next glances over. He's rowing faster, like he's pushing all his frustration at Ilya's teasing out with his thighs. Ilya wonders how tight those legs of his can grip; if he's flexible too, if they can get over his head.

"Fuck off. I'm not into that kind of stuff, okay? I actually care about my career."

"Wow, you really are boring," Ilya tells him.

The whistle blows and Coach calls, "*switch!*" They slow to a halt, ready to move over to weights. Hollander looks down at the rowing machines, rep counts glowing on the screens, and then looks up – he finally meets Ilya's eyes, wipes some sweat off his forehead as he quirks up one side of his lips.

"I beat you by fifteen," he says. "Better luck next time."

Ilya's mouth opens a little. Hollander's already walking away. Ilya watches him; fights the hot sting of losing; puts his water bottle between his lips and sucks.

Elise is hot, and the sex is very good. Ilya takes her over the back of the couch and then gets a blowjob in the shower. Her boobs are enormous and she laughs a lot, which Ilya likes. Afterwards, she seems like she's hinting about staying the night, so Ilya drags on his sweatpants and slides, and walks her out the door. She's fun. He doesn't want to see her again.

To keep it from being awkward, Ilya presses the elevator button in the hallway and then presses her against the wall and kisses her. Ilya likes kissing with his whole body. He puts his thighs against her thighs, his belly against her belly, and squeezes one of her brilliant boobs one more time through her dress, putting his tongue as deep in her mouth as he can get it.

There's a *ding*.

The elevator doors open just as Ilya's eyes open, and he sees Shane Hollander staring out at them in horror.

"Oh my god, I'm sorry," Hollander says, reaching out to jab at the button frantically like he's hoping the doors will swallow him whole. "I was just hanging out with Connors upstairs, uh, we were watching the Drillers game, I didn't mean to – uh, I mean –"

"Calm down, is public elevator," Ilya says, rolling his eyes. Who's Hollander trying to fool, acting like he's all scandalised by some light groping? Acting like he's the one who walked in on them, when Ilya has no problem with making out in public? Hollander's the weird one for acting like it's a big deal. "She is just leaving. Goodbye."

He pats Elise's ass as she laughs and stumbles into the elevator with a red-faced Hollander, who's crossed his arms over his chest and is pressing himself into the back wall like he's

trying to disappear.

“Going down?” Elise asks Hollander, her voice pitching up at the end as she turns a long red curl between her fingers, like she did when she’d flirted with Ilya earlier. Ilya admires that kind of rebound time in a person. Unfortunately, it seems like Hollander doesn’t; he doesn’t even look at her, seems like he’s trying to make eye contact with the furthest corner of the elevator.

Ilya’s still not wearing a shirt. His hair is damp from the shower, dripping onto his shoulders. Hollander is all bundled up in his jeans and hoodie, like always, and for a moment, Ilya could swear he sees Shane Hollander’s eyes track down his bare chest.

Then the metal doors slide closed, and Ilya’s left alone in the hallway. He scratches his belly and shrugs. Time for bed.

Maybe part of the distraction is that Ilya hasn’t slept with a man since he left Russia. It’s not something that he recalls being bothered by before – Ilya’s equal-opportunity, and he doesn’t feel like he’s missing out on men when he sleeps with women, or vice-versa. It’s strange, though, that coming to a country that’s supposedly more accepting of queer people has made it a lot harder for Ilya to find them.

He’s heard of this new app called Grindr. Apparently gay men use it to find people to fuck. Ilya’s never had a problem finding people – at least, he’s certainly never had an issue finding women who want to sleep with him, especially when you’ve just won a hockey game and your face has been on television and you’re at an expensive bar putting everyone’s drinks on your tab. It’s a little harder meeting men when the only people you go out with are hockey players who can’t know that you sometimes suck dick. Bored one night, Ilya downloads Grindr, makes a profile that doesn’t show his face or too many distinguishing moles, and scrolls through a long chain of profiles, messaging anyone he likes the look of until he has an inbox full of dick pics to sort through.

He picks someone who’s sending hot enough messages and sexts him for the rest of the evening. It’s good, but it’s not the same as the real thing. When the guy asks if they can meet up, Ilya pulls a face, thinks about it, and deletes the app. Hot in theory, but a dangerous idea in practice when his face is plastered over half the city right now advertising the start of the hockey season; maybe he needs to get a little more desperate before it’s bad enough to take a risk like that.

The Raiders smash the start of the season.

They win their first five games in a row, and Ilya scores in each one. The ice feels even more electric than it did last year. Every new goal feels precious and thrilling; every slam into the boards gets his blood pumping; every time he's put in the penalty box he thinks of new and inventive Russian phrases to yell out while he waits his time. The hot sweat inside his pads and the cold chill of the ice outside fight over him – adrenaline, fighting, god, it's like fucking to him, sometimes even better. His muscles ache. Everything smells like cold air. The crowds cheer so loud their voices become one big wave in Ilya's ears, and this is only the start of the season.

Shane Hollander doesn't get put in the penalty box at all. Coach sends him onto the ice whenever Ilya's off it.

It's a good deal. Hollander gets more time on the ice than most rookies. Ilya's getting more time than he was last year, which was already a lot. The announcers keep talking about them; the Boston crowds go wild for every point scored; the other teams get pissy and bitter, which Ilya finds so fun every time.

Hollander scores his first goal of the season in his second ever NHL game. At the end of the week, the equipment manager comes into the locker room after a game and gives Hollander the puck from his first goal to keep, while the rest of the team whoop and jab and chirp him about it. Hollander goes all self-pleased and pink.

He's sat in front of his locker, half in his pads, bare-chested. Sweat plasters his hair off his forehead. He looks less dorky with his hair out of his eyes, a little older, and the proud look on his face kind of adds to it. Ilya sweeps his eyes down Hollander's tan, broad torso. His strong muscles. His pecs are huge but they look kind of soft, not all chiseled and roided out like some athletes.

Ilya thinks a lot of hockey players are very ugly, but the hot ones sure are hot.

"So, we going out tonight?" Connors asks, on the flight to New York for their first away game of the season. "Dubek has some private invite to a new club but he's being cagey as shit about whether we're going or not."

"New club? Of course we are going," Ilya mutters. He's got the window seat, but he leans over Connors, smushing his bicep into Connors's face, to yell across the aisle, "Dubek, fucking moron! Why you not taking us out with you?"

"Fuck off!" Dubek yells back. "Maybe I don't want to go out with you guys when you all smell like shit!"

Marley starts laughing his head off in the middle seat. "Dude, it's 'cus the invite's from his *girl*. You know, the chick he wouldn't shut up about during playoffs? He doesn't want anyone else stealing her before he seals the deal."

“She’s not – shut up, she’s not *my* girl, she’s a fucking friend!”

“Oh, so it’s your fucking fault,” Connors says to Ilya, shoving him off and down into his own seat. “If you didn’t make a game out of scoring the hottest chick in every fucking place we go, he wouldn’t be so paranoid.”

“We’re fucking going, whether Dubek likes it or not,” Marley says. “Hey, rookie, you’re in, right?”

Hollander doesn’t say anything for a moment. Ilya can only see the side of his face, sat in the middle a row ahead of them, but he cranes his neck between the seats to see the awkward look, like Hollander had been hoping they’d all forgotten he was there. Then, Hollander says, “I, uh, I’ll probably be tired after the game. And I don’t think we should be drinking during the season.”

Ilya puts his head back against the seat with a thunk. “I told you all he was boring,” he says. He can hear the other guys sharing looks with each other.

“No wonder you and Roz don’t get along,” Marley snorts. “Polar fucking opposites, man.”

Hollander sort of laughs, but it’s an awkward, weird little noise. Ilya blows a raspberry his way and then turns on an in-flight movie.

They win the game, though it’s a good enough fight. After they celebrate, shower and get bussed back to the hotel, coach stands in the lobby and hands them all their key cards.

“Okay, Connors and Feller, Cadyn, Marleau, Rozanov and Hollander–”

Ilya finds himself grinning. Sometimes there’s nothing more annoying than having a roommate on the road – and they’re almost always doubled up in hotel rooms, except the veteran players who have fancy contract clauses. Ilya doesn’t like sharing and he normally complains his ass off about it, the fact he can’t bring girls back to hook up, the fact he can’t walk around naked or smoke in bed without someone getting annoyed at him. Today he doesn’t feel so annoyed. He turns around to look at Hollander – still damp from his shower, clutching his gym bag across his chest like a shield.

“Ah, we are roomies now,” Ilya says, sidling over to him. “I think you snore. Are you going to keep me awake whole night?”

Hollander shoves him, says, “Shut *up*, ” marches off towards the elevators. Ilya follows.

In the room, Ilya dumps his bag onto the floor, unzips it and yanks out his phone charger, leaving a tangled knot of sweatpants hanging half-out the top. He throws himself down onto

his bed, ready to scroll on his phone until they decide to go find a club. Instead, he finds himself watching some kind of sociological marvel, as Shane Hollander carefully opens his bag and begins taking out his change of clothes, carefully folding them, and putting them in the fucking drawers of the hotel room dresser.

“We are here for one fucking night, Hollander,” Ilya says. “Unless you are moving in and not telling us?”

“They’ll get wrinkled if they’re in a bag all night,” Hollander says, looking over and Ilya’s stuff with a judgemental eyebrow. “It’s not like it’s hard to unpack two t-shirts.”

Ilya leans off the bed and kicks his bag over onto its side. Hollander gives him the middle finger.

When he’s done unpacking, Hollander stands awkwardly in the middle of the room for a minute. The hotel room’s nice enough, though it smells like cheap detergent, and Ilya can hear the sounds of construction down the street filtering through the half-cracked window. The cooler air from outside is nice, and Ilya tilts his face towards it where he’s sprawled on his bed. He has his phone up, idly texting – trying to pretend he’s not looking at Hollander. But he’s looking.

After a minute of hovering, Hollander gets a book out of his bag and lays down on the other bed. An honest-to-god *book*.

“Oh my god, every time I think you cannot be bigger nerd you prove me wrong,” Ilya says. He rolls onto his side, facing Hollander’s bed; props his head up on one hand, lets his legs sprawl. Hollander looks over at him for a second and then resolutely looks away, but Ilya can’t seem to resist the urge to bug him. “What is your boring book about, Hollander?”

Hollander makes a big performance of rolling his eyes before he says, “It’s a history book about the development of rules in European hockey.”

For a second Ilya thinks Hollander’s joking. Surely, truly nobody could actually be that boring. Then Ilya looks at the cover, squints out the English words and oh, god. It’s real.

“Oh my *god*, Hollander. This is getting sad. You really do not ever think about anything else, do you?”

“We are *professional hockey players*. It’s not that weird that I like books about hockey.”

“You are going to pass up chance to go to fancy celebrity club tonight and get laid by hot women so you can stay in dusty hotel room and read a book about sport you play every single day.”

Ilya likes hockey – at the very least he likes being good at hockey – but he also likes cars, he likes vodka, he likes parties, he likes music, he likes socialising, he likes fun. In the couple of months they have now known each other, Ilya has not been able to figure out one single thing Shane Hollander likes other than hockey.

It doesn't escape Ilya's notice that when he mentions women, Hollander shifts weirdly on his bed, rolls half onto his other side and buries his nose further into his book, like he's trying to pretend he didn't hear.

Ilya's interested.

He drops his phone and gets up, stands between the two beds and stretches his arms high, leaning this way and that as he works out the tight muscles in his sides. The full, pleasant ache that comes after playing a full game is still there, the tiredness deep in his bones, but Ilya finds that kind of tiredness comforting, like it forces him to relax. He eyes Hollander's form on the bed – shoulders scrunched up by his ears, knuckles rigid on the spine of his book. He doesn't look relaxed.

"You have been with women before, yes?" he asks. Maybe Hollander's tense, uncomfortable energy all the time is because he's still a virgin. Hollander's cheeks go pink.

"I *have* – shut up! I – I mean, I had a girlfriend before the draft, Jesus. That is also *none* of your business, by the way."

"Hmm." Ilya isn't sure if he believes it or not. He hovers there for a moment, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, before he shrugs. "Well, I get ready to go out now. You still have time to change your mind."

Ilya wanders into the bathroom. He already showered at the rink but there's a difference between showering off hockey sweat and showering nice enough to meet beautiful women in public, so he strips off and takes another one, singing to himself in Russian beneath the spray of the water. Then he stands in a towel at the mirror and flosses his teeth, runs some gel through his hair. Idly listens through the door to see if Hollander's doing anything interesting – it doesn't seem like it. After dousing himself in deodorant, Ilya wanders out of the bathroom and back towards his bed, dumping his gym bag of clothes out onto the duvet.

Hollander's eyes flick towards him. Ilya knows he's not imagining it. Even if it's just for a second, Hollander looks away from that dumb boring book and stares at Ilya's bare, dripping chest.

Ilya drops his towel.

He's never been shy about nudity – living in locker rooms would have killed that instinct long before now even if he'd ever had it, which Ilya really never has. But he's admittedly not always walking around fully buck naked in hotel rooms with other teammates. He lets his wet towel pool on the ground now and strolls nude around the bed to grab a fresh pair of underwear and jeans out of his tangled belongings on the bed, and he knows, he *knows* Hollander looks at his ass when he bends down to pick something up – can tell by the strangled intake of breath.

"What the hell are you doing?" Hollander hisses, his voice gone low and his words coming out quick and urgent. He sounds almost afraid. It's not a way Ilya's ever had anyone else react to him taking his clothes off.

“I am getting dressed. What, you scared of my dick? We shower together in gym all the time, what is the big deal?” Ilya asks casually.

“I’m – it’s not, it’s *different* – Jesus, it’s not like I care, I just don’t need to – to see all that, fuck off!”

With a scuffle of bedsheets, Hollander turns all the way over on his bed so his back is to Ilya, white t-shirt stretching awkwardly over his broad shoulders, and shoves his book up an inch away from his nose like a shield.

Ilya looks at his back, and then slides his eyes down, and looks at his ass. He was getting some kind of vibe before, but he’s sure of it now.

Shane Hollander finds him hot.

As soon as he gets home, Ilya dumps his bags on the ground, swaps his sneakers for slides, gets a coke out of the fridge, and immediately calls Svetlana.

“I have a problem,” Ilya admits. The slip back into speaking Russian after days with his stupid American teammates is always a comfort, yet in this moment Ilya doesn’t feel all that calmed by his mother tongue. He throws himself down onto his huge leather couch and presses a hand over his eyes, wedging his phone against his ear with the other hand.

“You?” Svetlana asks, laughing down the phone. “The great Ilya Rozanov? I thought your life was perfect, baby?”

“Yes, very funny. Listen, because I can’t talk to anyone else about this. There is - a man. I want to sleep with.”

Svetlana goes quiet for a moment. Ilya fiddles with the chain of his necklace, feels the cool metal bite against his skin.

“Jesus Christ, Ilya. And you’re telling me about this why, exactly? Do you really like this guy?”

“I don’t like him, no. He’s very annoying. We just have - chemistry. I can’t stop thinking about it, I need to get it out of my system I think.”

“Okay, so why the fuck are you calling me? I don’t recall you ever consulting me over someone you were planning to fuck before.”

“This is different,” Ilya grumbles. He rolls onto his side on the couch, reaches for the can of coke from the table, smells the syrupy sugar as he takes a loud gulp. “Weren’t you the one who told me to be safe? A lot of people recognise me in Boston now. I’m still a new player

and if I caused any bad PR, they'd probably cut me or trade me, no matter how good I am at hockey. And if someone leaks it, I know how bad it could be."

"For your career and for ever getting to go home again," Svetlana agrees. "A Russian public figure having a scandalous gay affair with an American man could be really, really bad."

Ilya sighs. She's quiet for a long minute – quieter than she ever usually is. She only gets this way when Ilya brings up sleeping with men. It's not that she has an issue with it, but that she gets worried about him.

Earlier this year, the entire European Court of Human Rights had sued Russia for their discrimination against queer people because of the ban on pride. Ilya hates politics, yet he'd read about it in the news and spat on the floor, slammed his laptop closed so hard that he'd cracked the plastic. He's not interested in hoisting a rainbow flag and he certainly doesn't want to go marching with one in Moscow, nor does he want to fucking talk to anyone about how he feels or defines himself, but the torn-up knot in his stomach doesn't find that knowledge comforting regardless. If there's one thing Ilya believes in, it's his right to get his dick wet wherever he wants. The frustration over having to hide part of his interests away builds and builds in him sometimes like pressure in a tank.

Svetlana had been the one who sent him a link to the article about the human rights ruling. She hadn't said anything when she sent the link and Ilya hadn't replied.

"I know, Sveta," he says. He takes another gulp of his coke, but it tastes cloying and over-sweet on his tongue. "Jesus, I know."

Another issue is that he can only bring himself to tell her half of the problem.

What he doesn't say is: Shane Hollander is also my teammate, and that makes this a thousand times worse. Ilya would probably take the chance on some random hot guy in a club who wanted to hook up, as long as he checked for cameras. But sleeping with a teammate could mess up the whole team. It could throw off their flow on the ice. It could make Hollander impossible to train with. It could leave him so embarrassed he never speaks to Ilya again and they can never win a Stanley Cup because Hollander won't even pass to him on the rink. It could make Hollander snap and threaten him with the secret afterwards. They work together and live in the same building and have the same limited social circle and have to play 82 games a year together.

There's a million reasons not to sleep with Shane Hollander.

"So, what are you going to do?" Svetlana asks.

Ilya says, "Oh, I'm going to sleep with him. I just wanted to say out-loud that I know it's a terrible decision."

next chapter: teamwork 🖋️

please do comment if you enjoyed reading i really appreciate hearing feedback 💚 this chap is also [rebloggable on tumblr](#) !

Chapter 4: sleepless long nights, what youth is for.

Chapter Notes

sneaking this in before ep 5 because i can't imagine i will still be alive and well this time tomorrow

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

The first month of the season goes by in a blur.

Shane's got a one-track mind at the best of times. Since he was ten years old, every step he's taken has been about hockey. Every breath he's breathed has been about hockey. He works out every day for hockey, eats a careful meal plan for hockey. Sleeps on a schedule designed to be healthy for hockey. Dresses for his hockey sponsorships and his reputation in the hockey world. Attends social events only with other hockey players or for hockey awards. Reads hockey books, watches hockey on his days off.

And still, nothing prepared him for the feeling of being in the NHL. He was playing plenty of hockey in Juniors before, but it's nothing like the schedule he finds himself thrown into in Boston. The press, the fans, the new sponsorships and events are one thing. The feeling of being on the ice in the adrenaline-thumping mess, with his muscles screaming and the spray of bitter-cold ice on his face and full-body shoves through his pads and deafening screams when the puck goes in the goal – that's something else. The fun part, the part that Shane's dedicated his entire life to, the part that makes all the extra shit bearable. Every time he climbs out over the boards Shane can't believe his luck.

October is a pretty fucking great month for the Boston Raiders. They only lose a handful of games, building up a strong lead in points ahead of most of the other teams in their division.

The younger guys in the team go out to party a lot in Boston. Shane gets a few invites, but he turns them down. Sticks to his meal plan. Goes to bed early. Jogs through Langone Park along the edge of the harbor on his days off. Takes his meds. Scores a lot of goals.

Everything's going better than he hoped for. Shane keeps waiting for something to pull it all down.

In the first week of November, they're training in the gym when Connors suddenly laughs out-loud and pulls his headphones out of his ears, turning backwards on the treadmill he's jogging on to wave across the room.

“Yo, Roz,” he calls over. Rozanov looks up from the shoulder press, huffing a bit at being interrupted, his sharp jaw working back and forth against nothing in that irritated way it sometimes does when he's really in the zone. Shane tries not to look at him. He doesn't need to look at Rozanov – he needs to focus on his own shit.

“What?” Rozanov calls back. “Why are you shouting across the gym like idiot?”

“Listening to the new Man in the Crease episode, dude,” Connors says. He’s got this wicked look on his face like he just *knows* he’s about to start shit. A couple other guys lean over to see what he’s talking about, and Connors grins when he says, “They’re really hyped the fuck up over something. Apparently, Hollander just beat you for most rookie goals in his first month playing. Did you know?”

Shane whips his head back down to stare at his weights. He wasn’t expecting the conversation to be about *him*. Chirping is one thing, but Shane never knows how to react when someone brings up the strange reputation of competition between him and Rozanov.

He knew he’d overtaken Rozanov, of course. This time last year he’d been stuck at home, bitter, with nothing better to do than track Rozanov’s season and fantasise about what he’d be doing if he’d gone first in the draft instead. He’d tried to let that bitterness go by the time he was back to playing in Juniors and certainly by the time he was drafted this past summer, but Shane’s got the kind of head that remembers numbers – any hockey stat he’s ever been told is rattling around up there somewhere. It’s not like it’s an important record, but he clocked it.

“Shut the fuck up, Connors,” Rozanov says. His voice always sounds kind of harsh; he spits out his vowels, swallows his R’s with a rumble. It’s hard to tell if he’s playfully pissed or actually pissed as he balls up a towel and launches it at Connors’s head. “Why do I care about some stupid first-month record? Start of season games are easy. Talk to me after Stanley Cup.”

“Someone’s touchy,” Marleau jokes, going over and flinging one of his huge arms around Rozanov. Rozanov shoves him away; they scuffle for a moment until Korev comes and thumps Marleau on the back of the head. “Ow! Hey, Hollander – what do you think? You coming for Roz’s spot?”

Shane looks up, and finds half the team staring at him. He eases the weights down, grabs his water bottle for something to do with his hands while he shrugs.

“I really don’t care about competing with anyone,” he says. “I’m just trying to play good hockey.”

Half the room rolls their eyes. “You do know there’s not a press table in here, yeah, Hollander?” Marleau asks, but he sounds kind of good-natured about it, at least to Shane’s limited ability to judge these things. Shane tries to laugh along with them. He knows he has a bit of a reputation for sounding like a robot – most of the scripts he has in his head for social interactions aren’t casual ones, they’re designed for giving good answers to coaches, journalists, fans.

It doesn’t escape Shane’s notice, when he looks up, that Rozanov’s staring at him too – one hand running his golden cross up and down its chain, an unconscious habit. God. Shane hopes Rozanov doesn’t completely fucking hate him.

Next practice, coach says, “Okay, Hollander, we’re gonna try shaking things up. I want you playing right wing on the first line today. Rozanov’ll stay at centre.”

Shane blinks for a moment, more startled than he expected. He knows it’s a compliment. First line is made up of the best offensive players on the team; they’ll score the most points, get the most minutes on the ice. But he usually plays centre, so he’d figured he was never going to get a chance to play on the first line until he beat out Rozanov.

“Uh, sure, coach,” Shane agrees, since it wasn’t exactly a question. “Thank you.”

When he glances over to the side of the ice, Rozanov’s chewing on his mouthguard, the clear rubber hanging half out of his ruddy-pink lips. He never wears the fucking thing properly. Right now, he looks like he couldn’t care less about having Shane on his line; leaning on his stick at the edge of the ice, bored expression on his face, chewing that fucking mouthguard.

There’s a weird, deep thrum in Shane’s stomach as he watches Rozanov’s mouth. He’s weirdly really, really excited to play hockey together.

At the start of December, they play Detroit. The Detroit team are pretty good – they’d made it to early playoffs last year, have a pretty stable roster, a coach who’s been there a long time and no recent trades. Solid. Established.

Coach plays their new first line – Shane as the right winger, Rozanov in the centre. From his spot on the ice, Shane watches as Rozanov stares down Detroit’s captain for the faceoff.

The whistle’s barely given out for a millisecond before Rozanov has slapped the puck out from under Detroit’s nose.

Shane throws himself across the ice. He loses himself in the skate. Stay low, push with your thighs, control your heaving breaths. White-knuckling his stick. The deafening noises of skates on ice and yelling players and the raucous crowd outside the rink all turns echoey and indistinct in his ears; the thrum of bodies pushes past him, every direction at once; Shane dodges, turns on a sharp point, pants out his breaths, *one, two, three*; checks a Detroit defenceman into the boards. The puck whizzes across the ice like it’s flying, so fast it blurs in the edges of his vision, and Shane snags it, passes it in a whip-fast crack of his stick.

Ilya Rozanov skates past Shane so fast that it displaces the air. He feels the fluttering impact of Rozanov’s pads barely pressing into his as they thunder across the ice and Shane somehow just knows, something about the split-second glance he gets of Rozanov’s skates turning or the tilt of his body as he comes shoving past, he knows where Rozanov is going, down to the millimetre on the ice.

Shane passes. Rozanov's already raising his stick before the puck's off Shane's – the Detroit centre tries to check him out the way, doesn't make it – Rozanov slams the puck –

The goal buzzer sounds, and the stands explode with wild screeching and chanting. A goal in the first fucking minute of the game. The team rally around Rozanov to celly, knocking his helmet and shaking his shoulders, and Shane, without really meaning to, finds himself in the pile as well, giddy with the excitement of a goal, and his first assist playing on the first line.

Rozanov reaches out and grabs the back of Shane's jersey through his gloves, rubs up and down his back. It's only a split second, but Shane finds himself flushing from head to toe.

Boston wins with seven goals. It's the highest scoring game of the season so far. Rozanov gets two; Shane gets his first ever hat-trick in the NHL, turning pink and laughing when fans begin throwing their toques and Raiders caps down onto the ice around him.

"I'm liking this new lineup," Coach says in the locker room, after everyone's done hollering and people have begun to hit the showers. Rozanov's stood at his locker texting someone; he's half naked and Shane's not looking at him while thinking very hard about not looking at him, so Coach coming over is a welcome distraction. Coach claps Shane on his sore shoulders with a clipboard, so hard it hurts, but in a way that makes Shane kind of pleased. "Keep it up, kids. This is the kind of play we could win a cup with."

The next week they play Florida and win 5-1. The victory doesn't feel quite as hard-earned; Florida are a mess right now, their captain out with a major injury as well as their best goalie, and the rest of the team listless and confused on the ice. Still, a win is a win, and Shane takes wins – takes them close to his chest and holds them there tight like little pieces of his own self-worth he can shove inside himself and hang onto.

Most of the team pile into the showers while Shane's still taking off his gear. He likes to do that slow – likes to be the last one in the showers rather than being surrounded by all his teammates joking, slapping each other, making dick jokes while they scrub off. He doesn't think about his teammates like – *that*, god, of course not – yet the fear of it is still enough to raise his heartrate. All his years in hockey and Shane's still not yet figured out a good way to be stand casually in a shower with a team full of naked men without looking too awkward, too hard like he's trying to avoid catching anyone's eye.

Hanging back means he notices when someone else is lingering. Tonight, it's Rozanov, who's shucked off the top half of his gear and is standing there, shirtless and sweaty, leaning on his locker and texting someone with a half-bored look on his face.

Shane has to walk past him to get to the gear bin. He hovers awkwardly for a moment, but something in him is still running from the game – on the ice, it's not weird to approach Rozanov. On the ice, Shane feels kind of magnetised to him, aware of his every move. So he can tell himself it's not too weird that his eyes keep mapping the moles on Rozanov's back, the careful angle he's holding his phone at, that he's hyper-aware of the little huffed-breath noises Rozanov lets out when his phone buzzes. His noncommittal noises sound more Russian than English in a way Shane can't quite put his finger on; more guttural, lower. His curls are plastered down with sweat, but he looks more relaxed than Shane's ever felt in his life.

So Shane walks past and asks, "Who are you texting?"

"A beautiful woman who is impressed when I win hockey game," Rozanov says. The words come out bulky and slow through his accent. He leans towards Shane and raises a judgemental eyebrow; he smells like fresh sweat and the familiar stink of the locker room. "You ever try that, Hollander?"

"Obviously I've texted women before," Shane mutters, slamming his gear down in the pile for the equipment team and getting out of Rozanov's radius. He regrets asking. He wonders if Rozanov has a girlfriend. Shane's heard plenty of legend of him hooking up with girls in every city they get a night off in – God, he'd seen that girl coming out of Rozanov's apartment last month, and Shane nearly melts with stomach-clenching embarrassment when he remembers it. But it's not like he'd be the first famous athlete to play fast and loose with monogamy. Maybe Rozanov has someone waiting at home for him, wearing his jersey, proudly keeping track of his points.

It sounds nice.

Coach appears in the doorway, hails Shane down with his clipboard. "Good, Hollander, you're here. Need you for press, got a few in the hallway – give them a couple good quotes, alright? Then hit the showers so we can get the fuck out of here."

Coach had done a lot of complaining on the way down about how much he hates Florida. Shane doesn't mind it here, but he's fine with the idea of leaving. Not that going back to Boston feels like going *home*. Honestly, he misses Canada so bad it's like a toothache, ever-present and irritating to the rest of his system. They're playing in Montreal soon and he can't wait.

Shane nods awkwardly and goes out to speak to the press. He hates the feeling of having ten strangers crowding around him and competing to see who can shove their microphone closer to his face, and he knows he has to look uncomfortable – he can't bring himself to make eye-contact with any of them, looking past the cameras towards the vague direction of the ground. Still, he can talk about hockey in his sleep, so he knows why Coach likes putting him out for press. He lets them ask all the generic question and is always happy to parrot out the replies they expect to get, the kinds of things that'll get played on ESPN talk-shows for the rest of the week without upsetting anyone.

"Yeah, you know," Shane says into the nearest mic, "It was a tough first period but we played through it, we're really proud of how everyone on the team is clicking. Our new lines seem to

be working well for us, so we're hoping to keep riding that and pick up some more points before the end of the year."

Another flurry of voices as soon as he stops talking – Shane finds it overwhelming when people speak on top of each other, struggles to distinguish the voices. He waits until one particularly pushy reporter gets everyone else to shut up and asks, "Everyone's talking about you and Rozanov playing on the same line – how's it been to go from being his biggest rival in juniors to working together now?"

The same old question that everyone keeps asking him in a different fucking hat. Shane can feel his voice turning a little more clipped as he replies, "Yeah, I don't know about the whole 'rivalry' thing, to be honest. Me and Rozanov have very different play styles, but I respect Rozanov's talent and we work well together on the ice. It's not really any more deep than that."

The next reporter asks about their power play strategy, which Shane's much more comfortable responding to. He gives a few more generic spiels about their teamwork and determination before they're out of time, and he gets to gratefully retreat back to the locker room to finish changing out.

Except when he gets back down the corridor, Rozanov's waiting in the doorway, half-naked as he so often seems to be, dripping from the shower. He's wearing slides and a towel, and that's about it. And he's giving Shane the cocky little half-grin, raised-eyebrows look that he gives reporters when they ask about his goal records or ambitions for the future.

"You are so nice about me," Rozanov says. "You call me *talented*."

"I was talking about your hockey, not you as a person. You can be talented *and* an asshole," Shane says. "They're not mutually exclusive."

He sees Rozanov taking a second longer to respond, and for a moment Shane's surprised – in the several months they've known each other, Shane's never once felt like he won one of their bickering matches, always feeling left on the back foot by Rozanov's endless confidence and cockiness. Surely his clunky insult can't have been enough to shut Rozanov up this time. Did he say something super offensive by mistake? Shane starts backtracking the conversation in his head, trying to figure out if he missed a cue somewhere.

"What does that mean?" Rozanov asks, after a second.

The realisation that Rozanov didn't pause because of Shane's chirp but because he didn't understand the phrase is briefly staggering to him. He just – hadn't expected it. Shane kind of forgets about English being Rozanov's second language. Not *actually* forgets, because obviously he's got a thick accent and distinctive grammar issues – but forgets, because Rozanov is so confident, takes every room he's in by storm, and never lets on that he doesn't understand something, if that ever happens. If Rozanov doesn't want to answer a question, he usually just doesn't. Shane hasn't really thought about the fact that some of Rozanov's petty silences over complicated questions could be because nobody's told him what half of it means. His world tilts a little; he scrambles in his own mind to put it back.

“Mutually exclusive?” Shane moves towards his locker and starts grabbing his shower stuff. “Mutual means, like, experiencing the same thing together. And exclusive means without anything else. So the phrase means, uh, that both things can be true at once.”

“Ah. Okay, I get now.”

Shane doesn't look over his shoulder, but there's an odd tone to Rozanov's voice. It sounds more genuine than Shane's ever heard him be – almost boyish in the way he said it, like a kid learning a new thing. He wonders if maybe he shouldn't have answered seriously; nobody else in the team ever corrects Rozanov's English without it being a chirp. Then again, he's never heard Rozanov ask for the definition of anything before, either.

Instead of saying anything else, Rozanov starts getting dressed, and Shane flees to the showers.

The next game, Marleau undoes all Shane's public diplomacy work by telling the press, “Whatever Hollander told you about not being rivals with Rozanov, that's a total lie. They're the most competitive dudes on the planet. You can't even get through a practice without one of them challenging the other one to a one-legged ice-race or some shit.”

Shane knows he should be grateful for having two nights off in a row – an 82 game season is a fucking insane schedule and he's already sore, nursing a pulled muscle in his leg and a nasty, mauve-mottled bruise across half his ribcage in a way that means his body could probably desperately do with the rest. Unfortunately his brain is never on the same page. When Shane's not playing hockey, he desperately misses the purpose it gives him.

By dinnertime on their free Friday he's already sick of wafting around his apartment, feeling aimless and irritated.

They're deep into December now, and the Christmas break – short as it is – will be coming up soon. The air outside is frigid and blustering with snowflakes which cut sharp across your face when you step onto the street. Ice clings around the edges of Shane's apartment windows outside, and the city, when he looks out, looks strangely flipped – light on the ground from the snow, dark in the sky from the oppressive evening clouds.

Snowy weather has always been normal to Shane, and he associates it in his mind with some of his favourite things, like pond hockey, family vacations, his grandparents house. It's stranger to experience in a new city, but he feels more at home now than he did in the summer here, like the numbing cold outside has the same effect on his nerves.

While the cold rages outside, Shane's pulled up game tape on his television and is sat on the floor with his back to the couch, idly stretching out his pulled muscles by spreading his legs to either side along the floor. In one hand he has a ginger ale to sip; in the other he has the television remote, to rewind every few seconds and play back his own footwork. The volume on the television is low, just a murmur of voices. In fact, it's so low that he can't hear it at all over the sudden sound when his phone begins to ring.

Shane jolts, nearly spilling his ginger ale all over himself. Thankfully he's got good enough reflexes to steady it before he reaches over to grab his phone. Rarely anyone ever calls Shane except his parents and his managers; he expects it to be his mom's name on the screen, finalising their plans for Christmas. He's startled when he sees the caller ID reads *Cliff Marleau*. He's not sure Marleau has called him a single time in the several months they've now played together.

"Uh, hello?" Shane says, picking up the phone and hoping there hasn't been some kind of terrible accident. Instead, he's met with the blare of background noise, thumping electronic music and a throng of voices turning into one ceaseless low hum through the line. Over it all, Marleau's booming voice shouts into the phone, vowels slipping together like he's already had a few.

"Yo, rook! Listen, nearly the entire fucking team is out right now, you gotta come down here, you got me? This club is sick as hell and we want the whole Raiders *fucking* squad together, so get your ass over, we ain't taking no for an answer this time!"

"Oh. Uh, listen, I'm not sure—"

"What did I say about taking no for an answer, dude? What, you got something better going on? This place is sick, and drinks are on me, no excuses."

Shane swallows. "Well, I don't really drink. I mean, not during the season."

"God, dude, you're something else. Hey, who gives a shit, alright? Come anyway. You can drive Rozanov and Connors back to rookie HQ at the end of the night if you're still sober, they'll owe you."

The idea of being called in as the designated driver for the other teammates who live in his building is sort of embarrassing but also, honestly, makes Shane feel better about going out and not drinking – if he takes his car instead of calling an Uber, at least he'll have a good excuse to turn down all the shots they're probably forcing on everyone who so much as glances the team's way. Would it really be so awful, to go hang out for a bit? Last-minute changes of plan always make him feel a little nauseous, but it's not like he has something better to do.

Shane looks out the window at the frost-crusted city. It's not the most appealing weather to head out in. On the other hand, he really does want to be closer with his team, and he knows he's not good at bonding on his own. If someone's trying to force a fucking olive branch on him when he has nothing else to do, he should probably take it.

“Okay,” Shane says. He hears a few whoops on the other end of the line, drunken slurring over the music saying, *he’s coming?* “I guess I’ll be there in a bit. Uh, text me the address?”

“Hell yes, kid! We’ll make a Raider out of you yet, I’m fucking telling you—”

Marleau hangs up halfway through his sentence, which could be an accident or not – Shane has no idea.

Shane pulls himself off the floor awkwardly, wincing at his twinging muscles, and turns off the television. He goes to his bedroom to trade his sweatpants for nice jeans and spray himself with cologne. After staring in the mirror and feeling his stomach swirl uncomfortably for a few minutes, he puts a suit jacket over his hoodie, which is Shane’s only idea of how people might dress at a club.

Before he can chicken out, he grabs his keys and heads out into the unforgiving winter.

By the time he’s into the club – a handwave from the bouncer as soon as Shane mentioned Marleau’s name, nobody checking his ID, nobody looking twice at him as he awkwardly slips through the crowds – Shane’s feeling more awkward than he ever has in his life. Everybody there’s wearing a lot less clothes than him and looks far nicer. He’s never been in a real club before; bars and stuff, sure, but an expensive, exclusive club with dark lights and ear-splitting music and overflowing drinks being passed in every direction is a brand new environment, so far out of his comfort zone that he finds himself wishing he’d studied for it. Thankfully it doesn’t take too long of awkwardly squeezing through the crowd and saying *sorry, sorry*, to everyone he passes before he spots his team, commandeering two huge round tables in velvet-seated booths at the edge of the dancefloor.

“HOLLANDEEEER,” Dubek cheers, raising a glass when he spots Shane and immediately sloshing beer all over himself. A few of the other guys let out caterwauling shouts, but they all seem too drunk to care all that much as Shane awkwardly approaches and takes a seat at the edge of the booth. The conversation doesn’t dip too much, which he’s glad of. He can see a couple of the guys have their girlfriends with them; spots Feller doing shots with his wife Izzy, who gives Shane a bubbly wave; a few others are entertaining women he doesn’t recognise but assumes they’ve met in the club tonight. Shane’s probably the least of anyone’s worries, which is how he likes it.

“Hey, guys. Uh, thanks for inviting me,” he says to the few teammates who seem to be paying attention. As if on cue, Marleau leans over the back of the other booth with a laugh.

“You actually fucking made it, Rozanov owes me twenty bucks,” Marleau jokes, slinging an arm around Shane’s shoulder hard enough to make his bruised side ache.

“He’s betting on me now? Great. Where is he, anyway?” Shane cranes his neck around the table. He figured if anyone would be at the centre of the party, it would be Rozanov.

“It’s Rozanov, where do you think?” Marleau laughs. He sloshes half his shot of whiskey onto the table as he gestures out towards the dancefloor, then mumbles a curse and dips away to down the rest of it. Shane follows his gesture, squinting through the darkness and

intermittent flashing neon lights of the club, until he spots a familiar head of wild curls across the room.

Of course, Rozanov's on the dancefloor, wrapped around one of the most beautiful women Shane's ever seen. He's dancing, too – like really dancing, not just pogo-stick bobbing up and down like Shane does, and most hockey players probably do when presented with a club dancefloor. Rozanov's got his arms wrapped around the woman from behind and he's grinning, laughing, talking, rolling his hips into hers in circles. She certainly seems to be enjoying it.

Shane looks away. Even the thought of trying to move like that is mortifying to him. Shane has spent his entire life training his body to move in exactly one way – hockey – and he's not really interested in branching out.

He's not sure why he came. The music's too loud in here, the rolling drumbeat of the song rattling Shane's stomach every time it drops; it's hot, under the lights and between the crush of bodies, hot enough that he starts to feel sweaty under his layers. Watching game tape alone in his apartment would have been lonelier, but more comfortable.

"I'm gonna go get a drink," Shane says, to nobody in particular. He goes to the bar and asks for ginger ale – they don't have it, so he accepts a seltzer. Goes back to the team, sits there and sips his drink, laughs at the right times in their loud, drunken conversation, gives a few chirps when a moment occurs. He doesn't think he's doing a horrible job at socialising. He enjoys talking to them when they're ragging on other teams and shit-talking players in the worst scoring slumps in the league; doesn't find himself with much to say the rest of the time.

He surprises himself by staying for a couple of hours, going back to the bar for another seltzer and even standing at the edge of the dancefloor and bobbing up and down to a couple of songs for a bit. It's not necessarily that he's enjoying being at the club, but he likes being around the rest of the team, even when he's awkward and uncomfortable. It makes him feel like a real NHL player; reminds him that he really is one of them, even if sometimes he feels like an alien who just crash-landed on earth. Still, he's just about reaching his limit when Connors comes over, slaps Shane on the back and leans around him, gets close to yell in his ear.

"Dude, that chick at the bar *totally* knows who you are," Connors says, grinning beneath his awful moustache. "Go talk to her, man, I swear you're fucking in there."

Shane looks over, and immediately spots who Connors is talking about. There's a woman stood leaning against the bar in a tiny pink dress, looking over her shoulder right at Shane. When they make eye-contact, she smiles and looks down, then back up, biting her lip. She's really cute. Long, dark hair that she twists around one finger. Shane tries really hard, for a moment, to dig down inside himself and find some kind of desire to go over there, talk to her, buy her a drink, make out with her on the dancefloor where everyone can see.

"Uh, I'm good," he says. "I think I'm heading out soon, actually. Hey, you need a ride home?"

"Fuck no," Connors says. "I'm going home with Melissa. Suit yourself, man."

Connors slaps him on the back again and pushes back off through the crowds towards the girl he'd been dancing with earlier. Shane takes a breath, finding the air too warm and thick with the scent of alcohol and sweating bodies to really be calming. His excuse of being designated driver doesn't feel like it's worth much, and he really is at his limit of socialising and loud music and strangers. He thinks the team won't miss him if he slips out without saying goodbye.

On his way through the crowd towards the door – *sorry, sorry, thanks, sorry* – Shane spots Rozanov at the bar. He's leaning up against the edge of it with a shot glass in hand, but he doesn't have anyone hanging off his arm like he has most of the night. Figuring he shouldn't be rude, Shane steps towards him, nudges his side into Rozanov's a little among the jostle of bodies.

He has to get close to be heard over the music; leans in towards Rozanov's ear, smelling his heady cologne and the vodka on his breath. "Hey, uh, just if you need a ride, I'm heading out now."

He's expecting a *fuck no*. Shane can't imagine that Ilya Rozanov goes out to bars and doesn't end up going home with a girl very often.

So Shane finds himself surprised when Rozanov leans in to him, abandoning his empty shot glass on the bar, and flicks his sharp eyes up and down Shane's face for a moment.

"Yes, would be good. I am done for the night," Rozanov decides. Shane blinks at him for a moment. They're stood very close, pressed shoulder-to-shoulder; Shane's wearing his hoodie and his jacket still, but Rozanov just has on a flowy black shirt that's unbuttoned halfway down his chest. Shane can feel the shape of his muscles through it where their arms touch.

He says, "Oh. Uh, alright. Well, I'm parked down the street. You need to grab anything?"

"My coat is at door," Rozanov says. "Well? Let's go."

Shane leads the way out. Rozanov collects his jacket from the coatcheck and pulls it on, but doesn't button it – his chest is still out as they step into the cold winter air, boots crunching on the thin layer of snow on the ground. Rozanov takes a deep breath of the cold air, then pulls a cigarette out of his pocket and lights it, taking a couple quick puffs. Shane watches disapprovingly. Rozanov's cheeks hollow when he drags from the cigarette, turning his sharp cheekbones even more lethal, and he mutters something in Russian that Shane has no hope of catching.

"You definitely shouldn't be smoking," Shane tells him.

"Says who?" Rozanov asks. He mumbles something else low in Russian, then says, a bit slower than usual, "Ugh, English and drinking do not mix. Is a stupid language."

"Stop changing the subject. You know that cigarettes are bad for you," Shane huffs. He takes a couple steps away from Rozanov to dodge the smoke and starts walking, resisting the urge to rattle off every Canadian anti-smoking special he grew up hearing.

“Yes, well, many things are bad for you.” Rozanov catches up with him in a couple of long strides and breathes out a long stream of smoke into the air. They’re the same height – Shane thinks he might even be a *fraction* taller, but isn’t about to go measuring to prove it – but Rozanov seems to walk faster than him, like he’s making his legs longer with sheer determination. “Would have no fun in life if you did not do any of them.”

Shane doesn’t do anything that’s bad for him. Not unless you count the injuries from hockey. Unfortunately, he can’t really use it as an argument – most people would definitely say that he doesn’t have much fun.

“My car’s this way, asshole,” Shane huffs, and walks away.

As soon as they’re in the car Shane cranks the heater, already feeling chilled from the short walk between the overheated club and the car. He doesn’t look over at how Rozanov has sprawled drunkenly in the other seat, stretching his arms above his head and rolling his shoulders around, legs spread as wide as they can go in the footwell.

“You have a very boring car,” Rozanov tells him when he’s done making himself comfortable. Shane rolls his eyes as he starts the engine.

“You think everything I do is boring.” It seems to be Rozanov’s favourite English word; at least when he’s talking to Shane.

“Yes, that is true. But you came to club tonight! You are growing, maybe?”

“I do join in *sometimes*, asshole. Marleau told me you bet that I wouldn’t come. Kind of a dick move when you barely even know me.”

“I know a lot about you, Shane Hollander,” Rozanov says. He goes extra slow on Shane’s name, rolling it in his mouth – *Shaayne Hollllundur*. “We are rivals, remember? I have to keep up with competition.”

Shane rolls his eyes. “We’re not rivals, we’re teammates. You’re starting to sound like one of those fucking reporters.”

The inside of Shane’s car smells like cigarettes and vodka by the time they’ve been driving a few minutes. He doesn’t find himself as bothered by the smell as he usually is; maybe it’s weakened by the hot air blasting out of the car heaters. He feels kind of heady and warm inside, not as overstimulated and off-balance as he was in the club, though he can’t tell when the change happened. His breaths slow a little as he drives through the dark streets.

Rozanov says, “You are one who always want to race me. ‘Oh, Rozanov, see who can shoot more pucks, see who can do fastest lap, see who can lift more weights’. You love it.”

“No way. You start *way* more than half of those.” Honestly, thinking about it now, Shane guesses they’re probably fifty-fifty on who initiates the dumb competitions they keep getting into at practice, at the gym, in the locker room. There’s something unfortunately addictive about competing with Ilya Rozanov. “Anyway, we’re playing on the same line now – we should be focusing on our teamwork.”

“Mm, yes.” In the gap between speaking, the only sound in the car is the rustle of their coats, heavy breaths, the distant noises of nighttime traffic outside. “I do not mind working together with you.”

His voice is low, almost sleepy. Drunk, obviously, though he doesn’t seem too out of it. Shane swallows, finding something thick and obstructive feeling in his throat.

“Well, that’s good to know, I guess,” he mumbles.

“You are very good hockey player, Shane Hollander. I like to watch you on the ice.”

They’re at a stoplight. Shane glances to the right before he can help it, and has to abruptly look away again before he gets too distracted by the sight of Ilya Rozanov slouched down in his car with his legs spread, fiddling with the cross over his exposed chest, looking right at Shane with half-lidded eyes.

“Uh,” says Shane. “We’re almost back.”

They spend the rest of the drive in silence, until Shane pulls into the private parking lot beneath their apartment building. He takes a moment clearing his throat, turning off the car, fiddling with his keys doesn’t move until Rozanov has already climbed out of the car. Shane follows, and is surprised to see Rozanov waiting for him behind the car.

They walk together to the stairwell and inside the building, past the security guy who’s half-asleep at his desk. Shane gives an awkward wave and Ilya says, “Marco, you are up late for us, *spasiba* my friend.” Shane doesn’t know the names of anyone who works in their building, which he feels abruptly guilty about.

They take the elevator up together, and Shane gets off at the floor before Rozanov. “Well, goodnight,” he says, stepping into the hallway and turning back around to give an awkward half-wave.

“Hmm, goodnight, Hollander,” Rozanov says. Then he wedges his foot against the elevator door so that it can’t close, and leans against the wall with a frustrating amount of casualness. “Connors did not need a ride home, by the way?”

“Uh, no. He was going home with some girl.” *Why didn’t you?* Shane doesn’t ask, but mortifyingly finds himself wanting to.

“Ah, of course. Sounds like him. You did not meet anybody you liked look of, tonight?”

“Oh. No. That’s not really my scene, uh, you know, the whole – casual thing.”

“I see. Hollander likes *relationship*,” Rozanov says, nodding tipsily, like he has a clue what he’s talking about. Shane bristles, irritation and embarrassment warring under his skin.

“Usually, I find someone to bring home. Can you ever hear me fucking from your apartment? Is right downstairs.”

Shane’s cheeks go bright red. He takes a step back in the corridor without meaning to, his body screaming at him to put some kind of distance between them as he says, “Jesus! Fuck,

no, don't be gross. I – god, I wouldn't be listening even if I *could* hear. Which I can't. This building has, like, thick walls.”

“Okay. Was just asking. Sometimes I am loud.” Rozanov winks, and finally takes his foot out of the elevator doors. They start to close and Shane just stands there, like an idiot, his stomach churning, the smell of Rozanov's cigarette clinging to his clothes. “Goodnight, Hollander.”

“Fuck off, Rozanov,” Shane says, but the elevator's already closed.

Alone in the quiet of the hallway, he takes a long, deep breath through his nose, lets it out through his mouth. Then Shane turns around and finally retreats back to his apartment.

He showers the smell of the club off himself, tosses everything he was wearing into the hamper. Puts on clean sweatpants and dries his hair so it doesn't stick to his pillow and drinks a glass of water and then, finally, gets into bed. His glasses and his book are on the bedside table, ready for his usual nighttime reading. Shane looks at them.

“Ugh, fuck him,” Shane mumbles, and he buries himself deep beneath the duvet before he finally shoves his hands into his pants.

God. He's already warm and just touching his dick spikes his heartrate. He palms himself for a minute, embarrassed by the low noise that works its way out of his throat, the needy twitch of his hips as he rolls into his own hand. Shane stares up at the dark ceiling, and gets hard way too quick. He feels keyed up for no reason, like he's been riding the edge of being aroused for ages even though he hasn't, he could swear he hasn't.

There's so much space, brick and mortar between them, yet all Shane can think of is the fact that Ilya Rozanov is directly above him right now. One floor removed. Their apartments have the same layout – they came pre-furnished, their beds are probably in the same spot too. If Shane had x-ray vision right now, he could see right into Rozanov's bed.

He wonders how Rozanov sleeps. Probably naked, or just in his underwear – he just seems like the type. Would he jerk off in bed to get to sleep? Maybe he likes to take his time, really stretch out in his own sheets and have fun with it. Or maybe in the shower beforehand, one hand braced against the wall, turned on by the hot water beating down on him? The few times they've shared hotel rooms on the road, Shane's noticed that Rozanov showers a lot, always showers before bed even if they just did after an evening game. He's never considered before that maybe Rozanov was jerking off in those hotel room showers while Shane was laying in the next room with his book and his headphones listening to hockey stats, but –

Shane tries to shove Ilya Rozanov out of his mind, fails, and jacks off furiously beneath his covers, squirming and huffing and playing with the tip of his dick and making a mess in just a few minutes. He's burning warm in the cheeks and full of a low, hollow guilt in his stomach as he cleans up with a tissue.

The one rule that Shane, his parents, his doctors all had for this year was not to add any additional stress onto his life while he was a rookie. Everyone was worried about his anxiety, the pressure, adjusting to a new routine, being away from home. Shane hasn't told any of

them that there's this one other thing he's desperately trying to shove down which makes it all worse, all the time. Jerking off thinking about one of his new teammates is the absolute worst thing he could be doing this year. He knows it.

Shane sleeps horribly that night, tosses in his bed so much that he wakes up in the morning to find his blankets kicked to the floor, his stomach clenched, and his mind full of smoky, half-obscured images of the bulging muscles of Rozanov's biceps, the honey-brown curls flicking above his ears, the drunken way he looked at Shane and said *fuck*.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: all-stars ★

tysm for reading !! please comment if you enjoyed the read they make me v happy (also rebloggable on [tumblr](#))

Chapter 5: if it wasn't for winter (part one)

Chapter Notes

i decided to split this chapter in half because it was getting waaaay too long; part 2 coming soon

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

The December break is a little redundant to Ilya. Russian Christmas isn't until January, so while everyone else on the team is complaining about only having three days to visit their families and do all their boring American traditions, Ilya is mostly thinking about how lazy he can be over three whole days to himself, a rare treat. He plans to watch movies, order takeout from wherever is open, and jerk off in his living room; all things he likes. The only really irritating part is that everyone else will be gone – the younger team members travelling to their parents' houses, the older ones with families and kids mostly hosting celebrations themselves – and Ilya finds too much time on his own both frustratingly boring and a little too depressing.

American Christmas is very different to Russian Christmas. It's been blaring into every one of his senses for more than a month already; this shiny, commercialised, plastic, pop-musiced explosion that leaves him a little fried and irritated whenever someone brings it up. Although he spent last year in America too, it's still not something Ilya's used to. The soviet-era ban on religious holidays in Russia was still felt in the traditions and events he'd grown up with – he's used to celebrating New Year's with fervour and ignoring most of the rest of it, and that was certainly true after his mother had passed, who'd been the only truly religious one in the family.

Ilya runs his fingers over the cross hanging at his throat, and startles when he hears his phone ring. He's ready to hang up on whoever it is, but then sees the caller name flashing from the top of his Blackberry. *Sveta*.

"What do you want?" he asks, in Russian, as soon as he raises the phone to his ear and mutes the television where it's playing the boring American action movie he's using to practice his English.

Svetlana's been using her father's wealth to travel as much as she likes, connecting with rich film people in LA and fashion people in Paris and only going back to Russia when it suits her. Now she has an apartment in New York, a conveniently short trip away compared to an international flight. She's visited him in Boston several times since she moved there, but he's still not expecting it when she says, "I've decided I will come to you to celebrate the New Year."

“You’ll be wasting your time. I have an early game the next day, I can’t go out,” Ilya tells her. “Stupid America gives us a break for the wrong holiday.”

“So we just make selyodka pod shuboy and stay in. I’ve already booked a flight, you shouldn’t bother arguing.”

He rolls over on his couch and picks at the edge of one of the cushions, lets himself smile. “Fine, but don’t expect me to entertain you. And I’m not fucking cooking.”

“God, no, me neither. We’ll order in – there has to be *some* good Russian food in Boston, right?”

Ilya has found a couple of little authentic Russian restaurants since he moved here. He doesn’t exactly get homesick – the thought of going back to Moscow fills him, most times he thinks about it, with a cold and unpleasant dread in the pit of his stomach that makes it feel like he’s breathing through tar. But there are little things. The food, the drink, the landscape – those things he gets sick for, stuck here in this foreign and still unfamiliar place, sometimes. Things that taste familiar, like when he was a child. The sounds of the language he thinks in.

Something tender and painful breaks open in his chest as he thinks about the last time he had a truly good New Year. It would have been when his mother was still alive. Ilya quickly shoves it down, clears his throat, takes a sip of the acrid-tasting beer going warm in his hands.

“You figure out where you want food from before then, I’m fucking busy,” he tells Svetlana, though he knows she can hear in his voice that he’s teasing – she always can, the only person who always sees beneath his mercurial moods.

“Oh, don’t be so lazy. Anyway, I don’t care what we do to celebrate, but the next day I want to watch the Winter Classic. Such a shame you’re not in it this year, I could have had free tickets.”

Provided they don’t tank the season, Ilya guesses the Raiders will probably be booked for the Winter Classic next year – they weren’t this time, but there have been plenty of fans complaining about that. The league uses the event to showcase the best teams, the best players, get the most attention possible on the season, since it’s so popular. And lately, since Ilya and Hollander have begun playing on the same line, it feels like they’re all anyone’s talking about.

Of course Svetlana wants to watch the game, talk about it, probably analyse every moment even though it’s just a novelty event. Ilya rolls his eyes. She’s so predictable. “I see how it is, you’re only coming for my hockey connections.”

“Of course, did I make you think anything else?” But she laughs, and Ilya laughs too.

The American Christmas day passes quietly and without much fanfare; Ilya enjoys watching three *The Fast and the Furious* movies with Russian subtitles. He learns the English words for *drifting* and *heist*, which he can't imagine he'll have much reason to use but does find funny. He gets Chinese food because it's the only place that's open. It's strange how a day that would pass with no fanfare whatsoever in Russia can still feel kind of empty just because he knows everyone else around him is off doing something he doesn't care about and isn't invited to, but it's fine.

They have a game on the 28th. On the 27th, Ilya is down in the apartment lobby collecting his mail – junk, junk, bill, junk – and listening to the howling snowstorm outside when a bundled-up, pink-cheeked figure blusters through the doors.

Shane Hollander looks very cute in his black beanie and hoodie and padded winter coat, like a matryoshka that Ilya would like to take out of his layers one at a time.

“Hollander,” Ilya says, giving him a two-fingered wave. “You are all dressed up like you go to do a heist.” Hollander glances over and blinks a couple times, like he wasn't expecting to see Ilya, despite the fact that they live in the same building. He's got a suitcase trailing behind him and his gym bag over his shoulder. Ilya assumes, “Just got back from your parents?”

“Uh, yeah. Managed to get a flight out before the snow grounded anything, thankfully, but it's really coming down out there now. You're, um, you're back too?”

“Back where? I did not go anywhere,” Ilya shrugs. He shoves his mail into the pocket of his Raiders hoodie and walks over to the elevator, hearing the brief pause before a couple hurried steps and the *screek* of rolling luggage on tiled floor as Hollander follows him. Ilya presses the button to go up.

“Oh. I guess it's a long way to fly back to Russia for a couple of days. Did you have people over here instead?”

Ilya glances at him. Hollander's looking half at Ilya in that way he seems to do; like he doesn't want to make proper eye contact but wants to show you his huge, sparkling brown eyes anyway, in case you were feeling like he wasn't cute enough for a damn second.

“No, just me. Russians do not have Christmas on same day, 25th is just normal day.”

“Oh.” Hollander blinks a couple times. The elevator *dings* and the doors open in front of them. “I didn't know that. Um, hopefully it wasn't too boring, us all being gone, then.”

“Is boring when you're all here,” Ilya tells him, as they bundle into the elevator together. Ilya presses the buttons for both of their floors, then leans back against the railing, watching Hollander in front of him and also the reflections of Hollander in the mirrored walls, stretching out around him into infinity. “No different. You had good time, though?”

“Oh, yeah, of course. Christmas is always great with my parents – I mean, I think they've kind of run out of ideas for presents to buy me so now I have a coffee machine when I don't

even really drink coffee, but you know, we do the whole thing, decorating, cooking together. Uh, yeah, it was nice.”

He’s still red-cheeked from the cold, which makes it hard to tell if he’s blushing or not. Ilya looks him up and down again. He’s wearing track pants and snow boots – such an awful combination. Hollander’s lucky he’s pretty, because he can’t dress for shit.

“Sounds very –” Ilya searches for the word *wholesome* in English but can’t remember it, so settles on, “Canadian.”

“I mean, I guess? My mom’s Japanese so Christmas wasn’t a huge thing for her before she married my dad. We don’t do all the usual traditions, but we like spending the day together.”

The idea of Hollander’s boring little family all crowded around cooking together, exchanging boring gifts and playing games like charades or fucking *monopoly* is so insane to Ilya – so far outside his own experience of any family event in his life – that it feels like a movie. He can picture it in HD with gentle music playing in the background and commercial breaks, not like a real house where people have to sneeze and pee and sleep in-between scenes.

“Ah,” he says. The elevator reaches Hollander’s floor. Possessed by a sudden and chaotic impulse, Ilya stops the doors from closing behind him and says, “Hollander, I am so bored. Nobody has been here for three whole days. You should come to my apartment tonight and hang out. Watch Drillers game. I will order food. Please, save me, or I die from being so bored.”

Hollander’s mouth kind of opens a little bit and then doesn’t go anywhere, and Ilya delights inside in knowing that he’s surprised Hollander – done something he wasn’t expecting. He looks delightfully awkward as he stands there holding his luggage with his arms rigid at his sides.

“Um,” Hollander says. “I mean, I don’t know, I have to unpack and stuff.”

“Come in two hours,” Ilya decides. “Game does not start until then anyway. You like to watch hockey, right, Hollander?”

He *knows* Hollander would be watching the Drillers vs. Admirals game if he was home alone tonight anyway. Ilya doesn’t particularly care, but he can happily devote his evening to watching a game between two mediocre teams if it means setting a trap for Shane Hollander to come over to his apartment. Ilya can picture already how awkward and odd he’ll be, trying to fit into Ilya’s space; it delights the part of him that wants to pick Hollander apart and press all the sensitive bits that make him most uncomfortable.

“Well, I can’t eat takeout,” Hollander says. “I’m on a special diet.”

“Then bring your own food, Hollander, fuck. We live in same building, is not that hard. Connors is not back yet, or I would invite him, too. I will see you in two hours, yes?”

“Um. Okay, yes, I guess.”

Ilya grins, waves, and finally lets the elevator doors close. Now he feels cheered up.

Back in his apartment, he tosses his junk mail and the leftover takeout containers in his kitchen, but doesn't tidy up the abandoned clothes tossed in a couple spots around the living space or the messy pile of DVDs on the floor beneath the entertainment unit. Ilya usually has someone who comes to clean twice a week, but she's been away for Christmas and he's not bothered by his own untidiness. He has a feeling Hollander will be bothered by it, which is why Ilya doesn't clean. He whistles cheerfully to himself as he places an order for Thai food and finds the right TV channel for the game.

The doorbell rings on the dot of 7PM. Ilya wonders if Hollander had been waiting outside until it was the exact time to arrive; how long he's been there, if he had. It's such a delightful thought that he waits a minute before he opens the door, just so he gets to see that slightly mortified, flustered expression as Hollander stands in front of him, wearing gym clothes and holding a tupperware in front of himself like a shield.

"Thank god you came, I have been so bored all by myself," Ilya tells him, pouting exaggeratedly as he ushers Hollander inside. Hollander rolls his eyes, but lets himself be dragged in, blinking around at the room. "I am just getting my food. Go sit on couch, it is over there."

"I know where your couch is. Our apartments are exactly the same."

"No, no, that cannot be true. Mine is much cooler," Ilya says.

"Hah, hah." Hollander doesn't sound like he thinks it's particularly funny, but he doesn't look grumpy, either. It's so strange having him here, in Ilya's space, and being close to him away from the rest of the team – Ilya's oddly delighted and a little unsure even quite what he wants to do. Ilya is never unsure. "Uh, I brought my dinner. Are we eating while we watch the game?"

Hollander doesn't look like the sort of person who eats on the couch a lot. Ilya basically only does. He says, "Yes. Sit down. I would offer you beer but you will not drink it, right?"

"You shouldn't be drinking during the season, either," Hollander tells him, a little defensive.

Ilya cracks a beer for himself. "I am Russian, we do not believe in not drinking."

"I'm pretty sure that's an offensive stereotype."

"How can it be offensive, is true about me." God, teasing Hollander is fun. Ilya watches Hollander roll his eyes again, pressing his rosy lips together tight like he's holding in another rebuttal. "Sit down, eat your fucking rabbit food. You need fork?"

Hollander has what seems to be plain salmon and rice in his neat little tupperware, probably freshly microwaved out of his freezer. He sits ramrod straight on Ilya's couch as he eats it, like he's terrified of spilling a single grain of rice. Ilya sprawls on the other side of the long leather couch and scoffs down his Thai food straight from the takeout box, sweet, spicy flavours exploding on his tongue. The game starts, and Ilya turns up the volume.

The Admirals are in a bit of a slump this season, certainly not on their way to playoffs. It's a frustrating game to watch for Ilya, which he imagines means it's double so for Hollander, who cares so passionately about good hockey and seems to take it as a personal offence when people play badly.

"It's like they're not even trying to connect," Hollander grouches, after yet another missed pass that the commentators won't shut up about.

"Perhaps they play with blindfold on under their helmets," Ilya suggests, shrugging. He's finished his food by the end of the first period, and abandons the empty box on the coffee table, exchanging it for his beer, which he dangles between two fingers as he leans back into the couch. "Would explain missing a pass that clean."

"Right? I mean, are they even paying attention? Anyone who watches a couple Drillers games knows that Purnell always comes up the right side for defence and gets as close to the crease as possible. If they just passed back to the other side they'd have scored. Ugh."

Hollander gets so, so worked up about hockey. It's fascinating to watch. Ilya loves playing, loves being the best, loves winning and working shit out on the rink – but he has no idea what it must be like to live in Hollander's brain, to live, eat and breathe it like he does. Hollander runs a hand through his hair in irritation and leaves it sticking up at the back of his head, kind of messy, like he could have just rolled out of bed. The reflection of the television is making his big, dark eyes even shinier than usual.

"We would never miss that goal," Ilya says, idly. Slides his gaze sideways to meet Hollander's eyes from across the couch, raises his eyebrows a bit, a little challenge.

"Obviously not," Hollander says. "You're an asshole but at least you know how to fucking score."

Ilya is a second away from making a joke about other kinds of scoring when his phone lights up where he'd tossed it onto the couch earlier. He glances over; a text from Svetlana, confirming her flight in for New Year's Eve. It's not worth replying to in the moment, so he leaves it for now, but then spots Hollander's gaze awkwardly tracking to the screen between them as well.

"Oh, sorry," Hollander says, when Ilya catches him looking. He quickly averts his eyes back to the screen. "I, uh, didn't mean to be nosy."

Ilya lets out a snort of laughter. Hollander's probably one of the nosiest people ever; you don't get that worked up about everything in your own life without getting into other people's problems, too. "Yes, you did," he says. "Is okay. Just my friend, Svetlana. She is coming to visit for New Year – is a big holiday in Russia, so we will celebrate."

"Oh. That sounds nice," Hollander says. He's got a bottle of water in his hands now and he turns it around a few times, the label crinkling beneath his palms. "Is she the one you're always texting?"

"I text a lot of people, I am very popular. But probably yes, if you mean after games."

Not looking Ilya's way, Hollander asks, "So is she, like, your girlfriend?"

It's not an uncommon question. Marleau had asked it last year when Svetlana flew in to help Ilya move in, his first week in Boston. People they knew back home as teenagers all just assumed. Still, to Ilya it's always so laughable, so far away from what he feels for Svetlana – a deeply platonic feeling that is more profound in its lack of romance, in his mind – that it confuses him sometimes to be asked.

"No, no, nothing like that. She is childhood best friend," he says. "And she is obsessed with hockey. Nearly as bad as you. Her father was famous goalie back in Russia. So she likes to visit, and keep up with my games."

"Oh, that's – good," Hollander says. "I mean, uh, having someone to keep up with like that? Especially when you're so far from home, I guess. Is she coming over from Russia?"

"No, she lives in New York right now. Not so far. Is easier to visit."

"That's great. It sucks being far away from the people you love." Hollander pauses a long moment, then asks, without looking Ilya's way, "So, would you normally be celebrating with your family, on New Year's?"

Too curious for his own good. Something sours in Ilya's stomach but he ignores it, turns his gaze back to the television and the blaring advertisements between periods. "Usually we would attend some big party. Lots of important people. Me and Svetlana would hide in bathroom when it got too boring."

He thinks about telling Hollander that they amused themselves as teenagers by sneaking off and finding the strangest place they could to fuck, but if he wants to convince Hollander that Svetlana isn't his girlfriend, it's probably not the best place to start.

Instead, he asks, "Why, what do you normally do?"

"Oh, nothing big. I'm, uh, not a huge party person. Before my hockey schedule got crazy I'd usually just watch the countdown with my parents, maybe my grandma – you can always see the fireworks from her house in Ottawa. One year we did the polar plunge, that was fucking intense. I probably won't stay up 'til midnight this year, though, since we have a game."

"Wow," Ilya says. "You really are boring."

It's true, but he mostly says it so he can watch Hollander's face. Instead of shuttering up like he's been insulted, the chirp makes Hollander grin with exasperation, a funny smile that shows off all his perfectly straight teeth and dimples the freckles on his cheeks. He laughs a bit and then grabs one of the pillows off Ilya's couch, tosses it at his head. Ilya dodges and pretends to be wounded, which makes Hollander laugh again.

"Hey. Shut up. We can't all be wild European party animals, okay?"

"Yes, you are right, world would be much too fun in that case."

“You’re not as interesting as you think you are,” Hollander says, with a little huff as he buries himself down into the other side of the couch. He looks less rigid than he had before; one of his feet is still bouncing restlessly, but at least he’s let himself lean back. He looks nice pressed into the couch. Ilya pictures him pressed into a mattress instead.

“Now, Hollander, no need to lie. You think I am very interesting.”

On the television, the second period starts, and Hollander reaches for the remote to turn up the volume, ignoring Ilya again. Ilya doesn’t mind. He stretches his legs out on the couch and drains the rest of his beer, content to imagine the feel of Hollander’s body a foot away from him, listen to his little irritated comments about the low game score, sit in the heat of the apartment together and ignore the snowstorm outside.

On New Year’s, Ilya and Svetlana eat caviar toast together on his couch and talk shit about the Winter Classic game. They toast with expensive champagne, exchange gifts – she gives him good Russian vodka, he gives her a lingerie set that makes her smack him. In the middle of the night they play the game they were raised playing, where you eat as many grapes as you can as soon as the clock strikes midnight, and make a wish on every grape. Ilya finds himself not sure what to wish for as he watches Sveta cram her face like a hamster.

The big things feel too silly to wish for. He’s embarrassed, even in the privacy of his own mind, to think something like, *I wish my father is proud of me this year* or *I wish to feel less of this deep dark pit of dread inside of me sometimes*.

Instead, he wishes to beat Shane Hollander in the scoring race this season, and to see Shane Hollander’s cock before the year is over. Nice, respectable wishes. Nothing too desperate. He wants this year to be fun.

January 7th is Russian Christmas day. They’ve played three games since the New Year and won both of them; Ilya is still leading the league in goals for the season.

He drinks a full glass of vodka before he calls his father to wish him *s rozhdestvom*. The call lasts ten minutes and afterwards, Ilya throws his phone into the empty sink and pours another glass of vodka. God. He is so fucking happy NHL hockey season doesn’t break for their Christmas; that he has his career and money to blame for not coming back to Russia and reliving the misery of these holidays in his father’s home; smothered by the golden drapery, choking on cigar smoke, weathering the needled jabs and biting criticisms between drinks. He misses his mother so badly it feels like he’s been cut open. Remembers holding her hand

in church on Christmas morning; the soft, rose-oil smell of her when she crushed him into her chest.

It's Ilya's least favourite time of the year. Worse even than being home in Moscow for the summer, when at least there are no specific events tying him to his memories.

They lose their game that night. Ilya plays like shit and he knows it, snapping his stick over his knee when he's sent to the penalty box for a dirty hit, throwing his gloves into the walls when they're back in the locker room.

"Hey, uh, merry Christmas, Rozanov," says Shane fucking Hollander once they're changing out after the game. Of course he's the only person who knows the date for Christmas, because Ilya fucking told him, because he's a fucking idiot.

"Yes, merry fucking Christmas," Ilya snaps, rubbing the towel over his own damp hair so hard it hurts. "What a way to celebrate, hey?"

"We can't win every time," Hollander says, because he's oh-so diplomatic and Canadian. Then, suddenly bringing back the bitchy-hockey-analyst voice he gets when he's really annoyed about a game, he says, "We still played better than that last Admirals game."

Of all the fucking things, it's polite little Shane Hollander shit-talking New York that makes Ilya crack his first stupid smile all day.

"Oh," Hollander says, "Hey."

He looks all surprised to see Ilya, like they're not in the lobby of their shared apartment building. The coincidence would be stronger if Ilya didn't know the exact time Hollander went running every day, always the same. He's stretching, one heel pulled up to his ass, dressed up in his winter running gear; leggings which don't hide an inch of his thick, strong thighs, all those muscles that make him so very good at hockey. Ilya watches his muscles flex as he comes out of his stretch, the ripple of his body adjusting.

"Hey, Hollander. You look cosy. Nice beanie." He points to the *Raiders* hat on Hollander's head, smushing down his shiny dark hair and keeping it out of his eyes for once.

"It's not a *beanie*, it's a *toque*," Hollander says, sounding irritated. Ilya is always trying to improve his English and hates getting words wrong; he furrows his brows.

"What is the difference?" he asks, genuine.

"One's a stupid word that Americans use, one's a *correct* word that Canadians use," Hollander tells him.

"Ah. So I am not wrong, you are just bitter."

“No, you’re definitely wrong.”

Ilya laughs as he pulls his own hat down. It’s the same one with the team logo; they match.

“Okay, Hollander, how about this. We run together, and whoever finish fastest is right about stupid word for hat.”

Hollander looks at him. Ilya’s dressed for a run in the cold, too, but he’s used to running in Moscow, so Boston in January isn’t too bad. He’s got a thermal shirt but nothing over the top of it. He knows it’s tight, and he knows he looks good. What he doesn’t miss is the way Hollander’s eyes flit all over him – his arms, his chest, down lower, and then back up in an abrupt, embarrassed little movement that makes Hollander press his lips together.

You want me, Ilya thinks, confident in it. It’s cold outside the doors, but as he takes a couple steps closer to Hollander, all he can feel is heat, flickering between their bodies like static. Electric current beginning to build somewhere between his stomach and his dick. The urge to get closer to Hollander is nearly magnetic; Ilya can hear the little huffs of breath coming out of his mouth and imagines how warm they’d feel against his skin. He can smell Hollander’s clean linen-scented deodorant and bland laundry powder. He smells good enough to eat.

Hollander says, “You’re on. You know I can run farther than you.”

In the gym, Hollander’s usually better on cardio and Ilya always wins on the bench press. Right now, he couldn’t give two shits about precedent. He just wants Hollander to run around Boston with him and hear him get out of breath, sweaty, rumpled out of his usual uptight perfection.

“Prove it, then,” Ilya says. He stays that close to Hollander in the quiet space of the lobby as he stretches out; he pulls his arm out to the side and bumps into Hollander’s shoulder, accidentally-on-purpose, just for an excuse to brush against him and feel the way Hollander takes in a breath when Ilya’s hand touches near the side of his neck.

“Ready?” Hollander asks. “Come on, already, let’s go.”

“Ah, ah, stretching is important. Are you not the one who is always saying that?”

Hollander talks a lot about it. He’s mentioned that he does yoga, which isn’t exactly anything to do with hockey, but apparently keeps him limber enough to prevent injuries or something – Ilya doesn’t care and hasn’t seen him doing it, but he can imagine how Hollander would look bent over in some of those strange positions and he thinks he’s in favour.

“Just fucking run,” Hollander says. He rolls his eyes and makes for the door, breaking into a light jog as soon as he’s out onto the street. Ilya dashes for a moment to catch up and then falls into step beside him, shivering a moment at the cold winter air, though he knows he’ll keep up soon. Hollander says, “I don’t care if *you* pull a muscle. I already stretched.”

“Ah, I see how it is. You are wanting to play centre, you think you will get me out of the way,” Ilya says, glancing sideways at Hollander’s blank, disciplined jogging-face. They

round the corner of the block; the sidewalk is narrow enough that they have to stick close together, shoulders bumping every few steps, just a little – just enough to feel bodyheat.

“You caught me, my nefarious plan. Take you out for all of twenty minutes with a pulled calf muscle or something.”

“What is this word?” Ilya asks. His shoes slap against the sidewalk in time with Hollander’s – they’re keeping perfect pace. The city smells like car exhaust and cigarettes, but the quiet of the winter is still somehow lingering. “Nefarious?”

“It means, like, evil or bad.” Hollander huffs out a laugh, looks at Ilya just for a second before turning his eyes back to where he’s running. “Definitely a word you should know.”

“Mmm, yes, because I am so evil,” Ilya agrees. “Big, evil Russian man you are so scared of.”

They splash through a puddle of half-melted snow outside a coffee shop. “You’re not that big. I think I’m taller than you.”

Ilya would like to dispute that – they’ve got to be basically the same height, surely – but he has much more fun saying, “Who says I meant big height? There are lots of places to be *big*, Hollander.”

It takes two seconds and then Hollander’s face goes embarrassed and pink and Ilya is delighted. “Oh my god, *shut* up. Don’t be gross.”

“Feel free to look in locker room, any time you want to find out for yourself.”

“I’ll *pass*, thanks,” Hollander says, and shoves Ilya, hard, in towards the wall of the store they’re passing, so that he can race off ahead, turning the corner while Ilya still catches his balance.

“Is not fucking ice Hollander, watch out!” Ilya yells, and sprints to catch up with him.

By the time they make it back to their building they’re both red-faced and puffing, sweaty, sore; Ilya gasps as he slows to a halt, just a few seconds behind Hollander, outside the lobby doors. Hollander braces his hands on his knees and bends down to catch his breath, but he’s grinning. Ilya watches the shape of his ass as he bends; strong glutes folding and flexing. God, the sport of hockey is a blessing to asses.

“You cheated,” Ilya complains, as he stands a little too close to Hollander and raises his arms in the air to work out the stitch in his side. “Dirty check. I give you two minutes for roughing.”

“We never set any rules,” Hollander gloats. He straightens up, panting with exertion; his chest rising and falling rapidly, the movement hypnotic to Ilya for a moment. “Now you have to call it a *toque*. Come on, tell me, what’s this?”

Hollander pulls the beanie off his head, leaving his hair a wild mess, eyes gleaming. Ilya glares at him. Steps a little closer; he can feel the heat coming off Hollander’s body, smell the scent of his sweat beneath his clothes.

Ilya leans a little closer. He sees Hollander's eyes flit down to his mouth and then back up and feels the way Hollander goes stiff and awkward, all of a sudden, as Ilya gets even closer, and pitches his voice low, and says, right into his ear: "I am not using your boring Canadian word, Hollander."

Chapter End Notes

next time, for real: all stars ★

i fear this chapter may be a little bit 'the author's barely disguised difficult relationship with family christmas' but then ilya was also going through it so bad in the show this week could i really write him too happy??

pls comment if you enjoyed i really enjoy reading them !! you can also reblog this fic on [tumblr](#) 💚

Chapter 6: if it wasn't for winter (part two).

Chapter Notes



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

On the last weekend of January, it's time for All-Stars.

Ilya and Hollander are the only two players chosen from the Raiders this year. It's sort of a compliment, but also everyone else on the team says *thank fuck* and looks forward to a long weekend break, and Ilya has to go and do more work, so he's taking it with a grain of salt. Hollander, of course, keeps telling everyone it's an honour to be invited.

"Next year I sprain my ankle in last game of January," Ilya decides, watching Cadyn and Marleau make barbecue plans for the weekend in the locker room while he's packing his lucky tape into his bag.

"That's the spirit, brother," Marley says to him. "Just make sure you get a note from the doc, or they'll bench the shit out of you for skipping."

"Stupid fucking All-Stars," Ilya says. "I am star all the time, why do I need special weekend for it?"

"Oh, yeah, it must be so hard being the best player in the whole league who everyone wants to watch play constantly," Connors chirps him, chucking a towel at Ilya's head. Ilya balls it up and throws it right back.

"You have no idea," Ilya pretends to cry. "I am just so good, it is constant struggle. And also so handsome. My dick is huge, too."

Marleau gets Ilya in a headlock and drags him across the room. "Rozanov's being an asshole again, boys!"

"Isn't he always?" asks Shane Hollander's voice, wryly.

Ilya looks up and sees Hollander coming out of the showers – towel around his waist, miles of smooth tan skin on display. It's been a few good weeks for them. They've been winning games, connecting on the ice, the whole team's in good spirits, and even Hollander seems more relaxed than he had been the first couple months of the season. There's no denying that winning makes them all feel good. It's also no secret that Ilya and Hollander are the ones doing most of the work, which has some of the older guys a bit bitter and snappish, and gets them a lot of chirping off the ice. Ilya couldn't care less, as long as they keep winning.

“Hollander is jealous because he is All-Star too but not as handsome as me, so nobody cares,” Ilya says, wrestling out of Marleau’s grip and shoving him back towards his own locker.

“Tell that to his million advertising deals and all the teenage girls who scream at our games,” Dubek says, snorting with laughter. Some of the guys jump in on teasing him, but when Ilya looks over to see Hollander at his locker changing out, he notices Hollander looks stiff and embarrassed all of a sudden – nothing like he’d looked when he’d been teasing Ilya.

He wonders if Hollander knows how pretty he really is. Maybe Ilya will have to tell him, sometime.

A car takes them from their apartment building to the airport together for their flight to Toronto. They have seats next to each other on the plane – it just makes sense, since they’re going to and from the same place. Ilya claims the window seat immediately and sprawls out in it, spreading his knees wide and then glancing up at Hollander with an eyebrow raised when Hollander dithers about putting his stuff in the overheads.

“You are not nervous flyer, no?” Ilya checks. They’ve travelled plenty together by this point in the season, but they don’t usually sit together, and Ilya’s not exactly checking in with him all the time.

Hollander snorts. “God, no. With the amount of flying we do, that’d be hell.”

“Thank god. I will not hold your hand if the plane bumps.”

“It’s called turbulence,” Hollander tells him, finally settling down into the seat next to Ilya. At least in first class the seats are only two in a row, so Hollander’s not crammed in the middle seat. “When the flight gets rocky in the air, I mean.”

“*Turr*-bulence.” Ilya tries out the word. It’s a good one to know. When he was first learning English, he just learned hockey words and cusses. Then, when he actually moved to America, he learned the words he needed to know to get alcohol and sex. At some point he strung together more of the filler-words needed to actually make himself understood in this stupid language, and with the amount of flights they take during the season, vocabulary related to flying isn’t bad to have. “Okay. Well, I will also kick you out of seats if you throw up.”

“Jesus, I’m not gonna throw up.” Hollander rolls his eyes, then sets about getting a bunch of shit out of his carry-on – water, his headphones, a book, a neck pillow.

“Hollander,” Ilya says, “Is a two hour flight.”

“What? It doesn’t hurt to be prepared.”

“It might hurt when you pull muscle from carrying all that shit,” Ilya points out. Hollander elbows him in the ribs, and Ilya dramatically falls into the window. “Ouch! I see, you are trying to fuck with me now, stop me from winning the game? Maybe is a good thing we do not compete against each other all the time after all, if you play this dirty.”

“Says the guy who spent half of last game in the penalty box.”

“It was not *half*.” Though the five-minute one did still sting. “Not my fault Florida are a bunch of assholes.”

Hollander lets out this huffy little noise that Ilya finds irritatingly charming. The announcements come on, the flight attendants do the whole seatbelt demonstration that Ilya could repeat in his sleep, and the plane finally takes off. Ilya keeps a sideways eye on Hollander for signs of nerves or vomit, but he really does look okay – not a nervous flyer, then. Ilya wonders what has him so worked up. Not that he’s not always worked up, pulled as tight as an elastic band around a watermelon, but something about the jostling of his leg and way he’s turning his phone over and over in his hands feels more external than usual.

“You are nervous about something,” Ilya decides, ten minutes into the flight when he decides he can’t take it anymore. “What is it? Tell me before I have to chop your leg off to stop you bouncing.”

Hollander abruptly stills his knee, but keeps turning his phone over.

“Oh – nothing. It’s stupid,” he says. Ilya raises an eyebrow, waits. Like Hollander’s never said anything stupid before? “I just get a bit of nerves before new types of games. And, uh, my parents are coming to watch.”

Ah. That’s an interesting one. Ilya’s seen plenty of interviews with Hollander where the woman he knows to be his mom is hovering in the background; he’s heard Hollander have long, detailed conversations with his parents on the phone in the practice rink, before games. He’s never met Hollander’s parents, but it sounds like he’s close with them, from how often he mentions them. Yet for Ilya, the mention of family is enough to put him on edge. He doesn’t know how Hollander’s experiences relate to his own, but it’s enough, to Ilya, to justify bouncing your fucking leg. It would be enough to justify jumping out of the fucking plane.

“I see,” Ilya says. “They are difficult?”

“No! No, not really, not like that. I mean, I love them. I just – it’s dumb. I get kind of nervous when they’re watching me. I don’t think it affects my game, but it can get in my head a bit. Like, I dunno. I’m scared to disappoint them.”

He doesn’t look at Ilya while he’s speaking, keeps his eyes trained down on his tray. Sets down his phone and unscrews the cap of his water.

Ilya sighs, leans into the window. The landscape beneath them is so small it looks like puzzle-pieces fitting together; tiny squares of green, white, grey. He feels so far away from all the little people down there.

“I understand,” he says. “My father only ever watches my games to be disappointed in them.”

Hollander turns to him slightly like a reflex; Ilya watches out of the corner of his eye, still trying to focus on the view.

“Oh. I’m sorry, that sounds rough. Is he – not nice?”

It’s kind of the funniest thing Ilya’s ever heard. Is his dad *nice*. Is his laceratingly cruel old-fashioned soviet homophobic corrupt police-officer father *nice*. Is he not the razor-wire tied around Ilya’s life, keeping his wounds fresh whenever he dares shake himself out of the shape he’s expected to be in for a goddamn moment. Is he not the anvil over Ilya’s head. Is he not the enforcer and the cell and the gun all at the same time.

“You are so Canadian, Hollander,” Ilya says, with a snort of laughter. He smacks him on the shoulder like it’s a joke, and Hollander doesn’t ask again.

Toronto in January isn’t exactly Ilya’s first choice of vacation spot, but the energy of the weekend is more fun than he had expected it to be. Part of that is how they’ve split the teams this year; Ilya is competing with other Europeans, which is a breath of fresh air after the disproportionately American team back in Boston. Part of it is that the whole thing is an excuse to show off, which Ilya also enjoys.

For the first real time in months, he finds himself jostling shoulders with some other Russians, getting to speak his native language to someone other than Svetlana. Even if he’s not sure he’d want to hang out with most of the other guys on a daily basis, at least they can talk shit in a better language, and commiserate together over struggling to communicate with a bunch of Swedes and Finns.

The skills competition on Friday is a breeze. Ilya breaks Scott Hunter’s standing record for shot accuracy by more than a second. People cheer and Ilya winks at the crowd and everyone’s talking about him, which is a great feeling. Even Hollander raises his eyebrows at him from the other bench.

“And, listeners, have we talked yet about how our All-Stars teams this year are team Europe vs. team North America? Interesting choice, in my opinion. I think we can all agree that everyone in the league has been curious what kind of competitive edge Hollander and Rozanov might have brought if they hadn’t ended up on the same team.”

“Curious is probably an understatement. We can tell from the amount of coverage they get that basically the whole hockey world has its eye on these two, and there’s still a lot of talk over which of them is the better player. Rozanov’s leading the scoring race for the season, but Hollander’s still a first-year rookie and he’s already smashing records – including Rozanov’s records from just last year.”

“Well, it seems from the roster that they’re both playing centre today. Maybe we’ll finally get our questions answered over who really deserved that first pick in the 2009 draft.”

They stand at centre ice with their sticks out while they wait for the announcements to finish and the ref to blow the whistle, and their heads are close together, staring through the thick plastic of their visors, and Ilya can see Hollander’s perfect teeth through his mouthguard when he smiles, like they’re about to have some fucking fun.

“I’ve, uh, been wondering what it would be like to play against each other instead of together,” Hollander admits, voice low. The chants and screams of the arena seem so small from the centre of the ice – Ilya feels the world narrow, the cameras and fans disappear, the universe become the ice and his stick. And Hollander, too. “It’s been a while.”

Ilya remembers. Seventeen years old in Saskatchewan. The biting cold, the feeling of being away from Russia for the first time, some polite little Canadian boy coming up to him and saying *I don’t think you’re allowed to smoke here*. Ilya had found it amusing even though he barely understood what he was saying, barely spoke English at all back then, except hockey terms and swear words: puck, fuck, stick, cock. Win.

Russia had beaten Canada and Ilya had said *see you at the draft* and found himself looking forward to it. Of course, it had ended up being more than another year until they did see each other again.

“Guess we will finally get that rematch for Juniors,” Ilya says, darting his eyebrows up as he looks Hollander up and down.

“Yeah, get ready to get fucking destroyed,” Hollander tells him.

The whistle blows; the puck drops; Ilya snaps his stick forward with every instinct he has and all the force in his arms and a heave of breath so loud he knows it touches Hollander’s skin as he lunges.

Hollander beats him by a fraction of a second.

And they’re off.

A bunch of guys get drinks in the bar that night – the Europeans to celebrate, the Americans to commiserate. There's a degree of unusual camaraderie in the air over the fact that the All-Stars match doesn't really matter and this is more of a publicity event, like everyone's a bit less furious and testosterone-fuelled than usual, more willing to play around with each other before they go home and go back to cursing each other's mothers in the race for playoffs. Ilya joins, because what else is there to do? It's fun enough, especially reliving his goals in the game earlier, pointing out the moments everyone else fucked up.

He's not thinking much of Shane Hollander until Ilya looks up from the booth, midway through the night, and sees a familiar head of dark hair passing through the lobby outside.

Of course, Hollander's just walking past the hotel bar; he doesn't look like he's planning to stop in. Ilya glances around. Nobody else has noticed him, but everyone's on the edge of tipsy and raucous and wanting to joke around already, and he knows what will happen if he draws attention by shouting – “Hey, Hollander!”

Several heads snap towards the door and then a gaggle of hockey players are all over there in a flash, throwing their arms around Hollander and dragging him in, shoving him towards the booth where most of the guys from the Atlantic division have gathered to talk shit about each other's teams.

Hollander's clearly trying to very politely refuse, even as Medina's shouting right into his ear, “Yo, dude, we were fucking looking for you! Lemme get you a drink.”

“Oh, uh, I'm good. I just had dinner with my parents, so I was gonna head to bed–”

“Come *on*, man, one drink. Celebrate being back in Canada where you're over the legal drinking age, at fucking least,” says Booker, another Canadian player who Ilya thrashed today in the match. Ilya, sprawled at the edge of the booth with a tall glass of beer balanced between his fingertips, looks at Hollander around the side of Booker's huge frame. Hollander meets Ilya's eyes, just for a moment; Ilya flashes his eyebrows up.

“I guess I could stay for one drink,” Hollander says, and he's dragged down to the table.

More drinks appear from nowhere, shoved into everyone's hands by the barstaff who clearly know they have an open tab written from someone who earns over a million dollars a year. Hollander sits right opposite Ilya, at the edge of the booth, and folds his hands in his lap. His shoulders are hunched over a little, like he's trying to make himself smaller, which Ilya thinks is absurd at a table full of giant athletes who are all manspreading all over the place. Why should Hollander take up less space than the rest of these fuckers? He wonders if Hollander felt those nerves he'd talked about, today, if there's still a residue of them left behind, or if he's just being his usual awkward self.

“Still pouting about losing?” Ilya asks, to be a dick. “No hard feelings just because Europeans are better, yes?”

A couple other dudes from his team whoop and cheer; someone throws a balled-up napkin; Booker gets Nikitin in a headlock that turns into a scuffle that spills a drink in someone else's lap. And Hollander sits at the edge of it, takes one sip of the beer he was forced into, rolls his eyes.

He looks right at Ilya and ignores all the other chirping idiots as he says, "Asshole. You beat us by one fucking goal."

"Mm, yes, but was very good goal." Ilya leans back in his seat, resting an elbow on the back of the booth. He tilts his head to the ceiling, reminiscing. "You did not even see me skate behind you for pass."

"I scored more goals than you did," Hollander says. Ilya got a hat-trick; Hollander went and fucking got four, like he took it as a personal challenge.

"Good centre should help his whole team score goals. You were being very greedy."

Medina, one of the Philly players who was a rookie the year before Ilya, says, "Fuck you, Rozanov. You're such a cocksucker, you *know* Hollander skated circles around you on that ice."

Cocksucker. It's one of Ilya's favourite English words, so fun to say, that one-two-three punch of syllables and those hard consonants, but nobody ever uses it in the way he likes. They say it like an insult, when Ilya would like to be called it lasciviously, while he's on his knees. He'd like to say *cocksucker* to Hollander in a dark room and see what he does.

"I am the one who sees him in practice every fucking day, Medina," Ilya says. "I know how Hollander skates. I beat him in a race just last week."

"You beat me in *one* obstacle skate, I beat you in the last three rink laps *and* when we went jogging!"

"And I beat you in shootout practice," Ilya points out, tilting his beer towards Hollander with a long look. "And I fucking destroyed you at hallway basketball."

O'Donnell says, "Jesus. I've been wondering what the hell it'd be like being on a team with the both of you, but I think I'm getting a picture."

"Just as competitive as everyone says, eh." Booker nudges Hollander. "Shame you two didn't draft in the same year. I'd have loved to see which one of you fuckers went first."

One of the big Americans who Ilya refuses to learn the name of drapes himself over the back of the booth and scruffs Hollander's head with his fist. "I dunno, I think it's better they didn't, fuck, can you imagine if they were on two different teams? It's all we'd ever fucking hear about. Let the rest of us get some air-time!"

"Hey, Hollander," O'Donnell says, "I've always wanted to ask – why the hell did you drop out that year, anyway?"

Ilya sees the moment Hollander's face shutters. His eyes flutter down, his fingers tighten around his drink until his knuckles turn pale. He takes a sip of beer but it doesn't really look like he drinks anything, more like he's buying himself a moment as he clears his throat.

"Uh, it was an injury thing," Hollander says. "I ended up having to go to the hospital the night before the draft, it was just bad fucking timing."

It's the first time Ilya's heard him talk about it in person, not in an interview or carefully-worded press release. But somehow it still sounds like he's at one – he doesn't really look up, the words sound like he's said them a hundred times. Ilya doesn't necessarily think he's *lying*. He knows hockey players are cagey as fuck about injuries – he played through a wrist sprain for a month last year without mentioning it to anyone, and that wasn't even in playoffs. It might not be a lie, but it sounds so deeply like Hollander doesn't want to talk about it, which is what makes Ilya so curious.

"Damn, dude, that sucks. Arm, leg, or ribs?"

They're all crammed together at the table. Ilya stretches, and one of his legs pushes out until he finds Hollander's foot beneath the other side of the table. He taps it with his own shoe. Leaves his foot there, their ankles brushing.

Hollander looks up, at Ilya for just a fluttering fraction of a second, and then clears his throat and glares back at Booker instead, says, "Like I'm gonna tell you – I'm not giving you a target when you want me out of playoffs!"

Everyone laughs, and O'Donnell says, "Fuck, the kid's smart. We better take him out at the ankles just to be safe."

Beneath the table, Ilya feels Hollander's foot tap back.

Everyone falls into chatting for a bit, and Ilya mostly stays quiet except when someone mentions the game score or Nikitin shouts something in Russian. Ilya's English has improved a lot since last year, but it's still hard to keep track of multiple threads of conversation at once when everyone's talking over each other, especially half-drunk hockey players with myriad different accents and histories of multiple concussion. Hollander keeps quiet, too; he laughs along, keeps a half-smile on his face, sips his beer really slow.

Ilya glances at him a lot. Hollander doesn't look his way.

They're halfway through a conversation about O'Donnell's recent engagement when one of the guys asks, "So, Hollander, you got anyone with you this weekend?"

They all seem interested in Hollander, his hockey genius and strange robotic conversation skills. It's like he's their little pet rookie, even though none of them are on a real team with him and they all seem happy to curse him out on the ice during the regular season, when he's skating circles around them all.

"Oh. Uh, yeah, my parents came? They were happy it's in Canada."

The guys look at him for a moment. It's very clearly not what they were asking, but Hollander doesn't seem to notice.

"He means like a girlfriend," Ilya supplies, helpfully, just to watch Hollander go all stiff.

"Oh. Uh, no, not – I don't have a girlfriend right now, so, no."

"Free agent, dude. Damn right, you're young, keep your options open." Christensen, who's nearing retirement and has about seventeen kids from Ilya's memory, claps Hollander on the shoulder like he might be enjoying the idea of trying to live vicariously through him. The thought of anyone who knows Hollander even a tiny bit saying that is laughable; Ilya stifles his amusement in his drink.

One of the other guys says, "You want us to hook you up, dude? Those chicks at the bar are totally into it. What's your type, we'll get you fucking set with one of 'em."

Ilya turns his head to see where O'Donnell is pointing. Sure enough, there are a few women at the hotel bar who don't look like they're here with anyone, giggling together and taking in turns to look around the room. They're very beautiful. Another time, Ilya would probably go up and offer to buy them all drinks.

But he glances at Hollander, and the awkward way Hollander's gaze glides off to the side, not quite looking at anyone; the stiff way he holds his mouth closed like he's not sure what will come out if he speaks.

Ilya takes pity on him. "Give up, O'Donnell. Just because you cannot score any women except puck bunnies, does not mean Hollander is as desperate as you."

O'Donnell flips him off and someone else says, "You are such an asshole, Rozzy," and Ilya decides to tease them all about their terrible taste and the fact they still smell like hockey rink and gym socks until nobody is looking at Hollander anymore.

They drink for a while more, dissecting the games from the day, ragging on each other about the regular season – who's beat who most times, who's got no chance of making it to playoffs – and shitting on the guys who developed mysterious injuries right before All-Stars to go be boring at home with their families for a long weekend. It's the fun kind of shit-talking where they're all just slightly drunk and nobody really cares who they're talking about or what they're saying. It's hockey. The ruder you can be the better. Ilya makes it most of the way through another beer before Hollander finally finishes his first.

Then Hollander awkwardly clears his throat, lining his empty glass neatly up on its coaster.

"I think I'm gonna head upstairs now, guys. Thanks for the drink," Hollander says, extricating himself from O'Donnell's grasp. Some people make token objections to him leaving, but everyone's kind of drunk and nobody really cares that much, so he's let go before too long, pulling himself out of the booth and straightening his shirt – he's dressed like he's going to the gym, and usual, which Ilya finds irritatingly charming.

“You know, I think I am done for the night too,” Ilya decides. He stands abruptly, shoving back from the table, even though there’s still an inch left of his beer and it’s earlier than he ever goes to sleep. “It is tiring, winning entire game. I will walk with you.”

Hollander’s eyes go wide and unblinking for a moment, but then he nods, this little reflexive nod he does sometimes like his body thinks he needs to agree with something without his brain really catching up.

“Don’t kill each other on the way,” Mitchey hollers behind them. “If one of you falls down the stairs, we know who did it!”

Ilya flips him off, and leads Hollander out of the bar.

They take the elevator up to the tenth floor in silence. Their rooms are opposite each other; Ilya had noticed when they were checking in. Having private hotel rooms instead of sharing is another bonus of All-Stars, a luxury they don’t get on the road during the regular season, and the hotel’s nice. Big beds, good water pressure, tiny vodka bottles in the mini-fridge. It’s not a chore to go back to his nice, fancy hotel room a bit early and relax.

Except, when they’re standing outside their doors, Ilya doesn’t make a move to go inside.

“Uh, listen, thanks for getting everyone to – you know, lay off me, back there,” Hollander says, awkward as ever, rubbing his lip with his thumb and not meeting Ilya’s eyes. Ilya nudges their shoulders together; inhales when he feels the warmth of Hollander’s body.

“No problem,” he says. “You look so awkward, I have to save you.”

“Shut up,” Hollander mutters, but he doesn’t really sound like he means it. “I just – uh, that’s not really my thing, is all.”

Ilya looks around. The hallway is completely empty. There are doors separating it from the next stretch of hallway, stopping the sound of even a quiet conversation from drifting. They’re stood outside their own empty rooms, so it’s not like somebody inside could overhear them; even if anyone cared, everyone they know is still down at the bar or already crashing with their wives and kids. It’s as secret a moment as they’d ever get in a hotel full of NHL players.

Ilya says, “What isn’t. Girls?”

Hollander’s face goes rigid, pallid. He swallows, his throat bobbing in a way that looks uncomfortable. Ilya wishes he had a more delicate way of phrasing the question, in retrospect, but he’s already said it, and he can’t think of another way he really could have asked without scaring the shit out of Hollander. *Cocksucker*. He remembers the word and realises he forgot to look at Hollander when the guys were throwing it around downstairs; would he have pulled this face then, too? Would something in his eyes have given him away? Did the word irritate him the way it did Ilya, or scare him, or did he not react at all?

“What?” Hollander says. “I – I mean, what do you mean by that, why would you say that?”

“Calm down, Hollander, do not have panic attack. Sorry. I am not judging. I just wondered.” Ilya looks him up and down. Hollander’s eyes flit frantically around the quiet, dim-lit hallway, like he’s expecting a ghost to jump out of the wall and accuse him of something. Ilya takes a half-step closer to him, close enough to be in his personal space, to feel the air around his body displace, but no closer than that. “You do not seem interested in them. Are you?”

“Of course I am! I like girls a lot, I – I’m just really focused on hockey right now, that’s all.”

“Oh.” Ilya pauses for a second. There’s plenty of space for Hollander to move away from him. He hasn’t. He hasn’t moved a muscle since Ilya got close enough to touch. “Okay. I was just asking.”

“Well *don’t*.” Hollander’s nearly vibrating with anxiety; his eyes are fixed rigid on a point just over Ilya’s shoulder, like he can’t meet his eyes but doesn’t want to risk looking anywhere else. “And don’t – fuck, don’t say that kind of thing in front of anyone else, okay? The last thing I need is anyone giving me shit about dating on top of the rest of it. I’m a private person.”

Ilya takes nearly the biggest risk of his stupid, self-destructive life, and says, “I would not do that. None of them know about me, either.”

He can see the time it takes for the sentence to pass through Hollander’s head, be filtered for context, be analysed for what Ilya could possibly mean. A sick nervous feeling that Ilya doesn’t usually like to admit to breaks out in his own chest like a cold flood of water. He never talks about these things aloud; even with the tiny, tiny handful of men he’s ever acted on it with, he doesn’t *talk* about it. Even with Svetlana, the one conversation they had about Hollander was the most he’s ever brought it up.

The secret hangs in the air like a physical object in the scant space between their bodies. Hollander’s breath shudders. His jaw goes loose, and he finally, finally meets Ilya’s eyes – something scared and vulnerable shining through from inside of him.

“You’re – but you’re not –”

Shrugging one shoulder far more casually than he possibly feels, Ilya says, “I like both. Is secret, okay?”

“Okay,” Hollander says, voice tiny, like he doesn’t even realise he’s saying it.

He doesn’t say anything else. The air’s so heavy around them that it feels like being in the middle of a scrum, the weight and heat of all those bodies pressing down on you. Danger always feels like hockey; it’s the most dangerous thing Ilya knows, except for this. Everything dangerous in his life involves men’s bodies and just how close he can get to them. Closer than he probably should.

Fuck it. Ilya reaches out, and brushes the backs of his fingers oh-so-gently against Shane Hollander’s mouth. His skin is as soft as Ilya expected. Silky and addictive. His lips are damp at the middle and his bottom lip – plush, wet – drags against Ilya’s thumb as he pulls his hand away. God. This is so fucking stupid. Dangerous.

In the quietest breath he's ever heard, Hollander says, "Not here."

"Okay," Ilya agrees, voice low. It feels like a loaded gun is balancing on the tightrope of their silence; if they speak too much something will snap and break. He mutters, "You should invite me into your room."

Hollander thinks about it for three aching, throbbing seconds; Ilya's pulse marches from the top of his head to the soles of his feet.

Then Hollander moves over, and opens his door. He steps inside the dark room. Doesn't turn on the lights. Ilya follows. Closes the door, and suddenly, they're all alone. Just them, the darkness, the sound of their breath coming heavy.

He steps closer to Hollander. Hollander backs up, into the wall. But at the same time, Hollander's hand raises – he reaches out first, knots his fist in the fabric of Ilya's shirt, right over his stomach.

"We shouldn't do this," Hollander breathes. A streetlamp flickers outside, dim orange warning lights flashing through the gauzy curtains.

Ilya presses him against the wall with his entire body, feeling the warmth of him, the solid force of his strong muscles, smelling the heady scent of his cologne against his neck, savoring Hollander's hot breath against his face as he tries to get himself under control.

Hollander kisses him first.

Chapter End Notes

next time: firsts 🍷

please leave a comment if you enjoyed and also reblog this chapter [on tumblr](#) if you want to make me feel validated lmao !!

Chapter 7: have i crossed the line.

Chapter Notes

happy almost christmas means it wasn't christmas to all who celebrate

(pls peep the rating before reading this chapter)

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

He knows it's a bad idea even as he does it, but it's just that everything goes dark in his brain when Rozanov is pressed that close to him. Like, literally dark – for Shane, who never gets two seconds without his mind racing down some anxious spiral or worrying he's doing or saying something wrong, the blankness is bliss. His thoughts turn to white-noise and that lets him focus on his body, and oh, god, Rozanov has him pushed into the wall, his chest heaving against Shane's, his breath close enough to spread cool air against Shane's cheek. He smells a little like beer and a lot like man. His thighs are pressed against Shane's thighs.

It's probably the stupidest, most impulsive thing he's ever done, but in that moment Shane doesn't care. He falls forwards and crushes their lips together. Not just a peck but a *kiss*, pressing into the plush space between Rozanov's lips, dragging against them, pressing his tongue into the seam of his mouth and coming up to grab at handfuls of Rozanov's hair – oh, god, those soft curls. Rozanov makes a noise, a muffled half-groan, and then his hands are sliding into Shane's jacket, holding his waist, strong hands against the sides of his ribs.

Shane pulls back for half a second before Rozanov's using one thumb to open Shane's jaw, sliding his tongue inside Shane's mouth; the wet noise of their kiss is obscene in the quiet, dark hotel room, sloppy in a way that sends a shiver down Shane's back and has him crushing their bodies closer together, working his way up onto his toes just so he can get a different angle, *god*, it's so good –

The floodgates have opened. Shane walks around with this tension held in every inch of every one of his muscles, all day, every day. He ties himself up in it. Lives in his head. The only thing that ever gets him to feel his body is hockey. Hockey, and now this; the two things that strip away Shane's anxious mind and leave him flooded with hot adrenaline, a headrush-feeling of dizzy possibility and a prickling under the first layer of his skin.

"Fuck, Rozanov," Shane mumbles into his lips, kissing the top one, sucking the bottom one, pressing an off-centre kiss to the edge of his mouth, all in a frantic rush to get *more, more, more* of him. He's throbbing between his legs, hard so quick that it's hurting. When they break apart for a moment to the soundtrack of panting breaths, Shane tucks his head into the crook of Rozanov's neck, inhales the smell of him, deep. "Oh, god."

“You have done this before?” Rozanov asks, in the scant space between them; phrased like a statement, said like a question. He seems to think the answer is *no*, based on the way he pulls back a little and his gaze slides up and down Shane’s body like he’s inspecting it for fingerprints. Shane swallows. “With a man, I mean.”

“Uh, sort of,” Shane says. “Not really – just fooled around, like, a tiny bit, one time.”

The details are all long gone in Shane’s memory by now – it was nearly two years ago, god, back in that spring when all anyone could talk about was the draft, and being dragged to a party by a friend from his Juniors team, but the party wasn’t a *hockey* party, nobody there knew who they were. People were drinking and smoking, and out in the backyard was an old couch, and Shane had found himself sat on it, at one point, when the yard was quiet and there was nobody but him and this other guy – whose name he doesn’t remember, and who he hopes doesn’t remember his – and they’d talked a bit. The other guy was also Japanese-Canadian, Shane remembers that. He’d tried to speak Japanese and Shane had been kind of embarrassed to reveal he didn’t know much of the language. He’d felt this hot, liquid flood of shame go through him with nearly everything he’d said in their short conversation, like something awful and raw about him had become suddenly visible. And he hadn’t initiated the kiss, but god, he’d wanted it, so bad his cock was swollen before the other guy even tried to put a hand down his pants – and shit, the clumsy, frantic handjob just under his clothes had been good. And so, so fast, and Shane had run away after and puked in the bathroom and everyone thought he was drunk but he’d only had ginger ale. And he never went to another party with that friend. And he never kissed another guy.

Until now.

“Really?” Rozanov asks. “You are wound so tight, I did not expect that. Was a very long time ago? He leave you with blue balls?”

“Oh, shut up. Have – have you?” Shane asks. Rozanov’s hand reaches between Shane’s legs and squeezes, through his pants, crushing the fabric into the boiling heat of his dick. “Ah – been with a guy, I mean?”

He shudders up a little bit, grabs Rozanov’s shoulders – those hard muscles flexing beneath his hands – tilts his head back into the wall.

Rozanov says, “Mm. A few times. With my coach’s son, back in Russia.”

“Geez,” Shane mutters. “You really do swing big, don’t you.”

Rozanov removes his hand from Shane’s crotch, which makes it marginally easier to think, although then he’s leaning back and pulling his shirt over his head to throw it on the ground. Miles of skin appear in front of Shane’s mouth, dotted with dark moles on his pale chest like a reverse of the night sky; making shapes that Shane could turn into his own mythology. An embarrassing noise works its way out of his throat as he tries to figure out where he can touch, and can’t decide.

Rozanov makes the choice for him by pushing Shane’s arms off and tugging Shane’s shirt over his head, too, while he says, “What is the point of wanting something that could not get

you in trouble? That is fun part.”

Shane disagrees, of course. Everything he’s spent his whole life working towards is an absence of trouble – is keeping his head down, not standing out, not tempting anyone into thinking badly of him. Being a role model. Making his parents happy. Playing good hockey; good enough for his whole country. Shane wants to be the best and sometimes for a little while he feels like he could be, except when it occurs to him, in his most secret moments, just how badly he wants to try sucking a man’s cock.

He doesn’t remember the details of that party, but he finds it hard to imagine he’ll ever be able to forget *this*. Ilya Rozanov parades around practically naked on a regular basis in the locker room, in hotels, but nothing about his body has ever looked this fucking good. He’s bulging with muscles, like every inch of him is a fat rounded handful just begging for Shane to grab it and squeeze. He looks sumptuous. Shane doubts Rozanov’s ever heard that word in English, but certainly doesn’t want to be the one to teach it to him. His mouth is flooded with saliva and he can feel Rozanov’s hot, hot breath on his neck, dampening his skin at the sensitive part where the tendons of his throat meet the hollow of his collarbone.

“This is such a bad idea,” Shane breathes, but Rozanov is locking his lips around the hinge of Shane’s jaw and kissing it, open-mouth, pressing his tongue into the skin and working it in a tight little circle, and Shane’s dick is so hard he feels like he’s gonna bust a seam in his pants. “You should – you should get on the bed.”

Rozanov pulls back, looks at Shane, that little smirk coming through in the tiny furrow of his eyebrows. He drags one finger down the bare skin of Shane’s side; into the ticklish dip of his waist, then back up to the hollow of his armpit, scratching into the hair.

“Why should I do that?” Rozanov asks. “Do you have plans for me, Hollander?”

“Will you just shut the fuck up and do it?”

Shane rolls his eyes and pushes Rozanov until he tumbles onto the crisp sheets of the hotel bed. It’s perfectly made, the whole room nearly clinical in its hotel-blandness, its antiseptic cleanliness. Shane feels insane when he thinks about getting it dirty. He doesn’t know what he wants to do on this bed but he knows his desire is so big it can’t be contained to something *neat*.

Rozanov’s staring at him while he strips the rest of his clothes. Shane bends down and pulls off his pants, folds them and lays them on the chair like he always does when he gets undressed, puts his underwear on top of them. He’s going to take off his socks next but he glimpses up and suddenly he can see Ilya Rozanov’s cock, standing up rigid and flushed-red from his lap, where he’s sprawled on the edge of Shane’s bed. Shane’s whole universe narrows down to staring at it, and he forgets about everything else.

He doesn’t realise he’s getting on his knees until he feels the carpet scrape.

“Fuck, Hollander,” Rozanov says, as Shane lays his hands across Rozanov’s thighs, spreads them up and down, feeling the staticy prickle of his leg hair, the wide spread of his muscles. He leans down, close, close enough that he’s breathing on Rozanov’s dick. He’s never really

stared at one this close before. Even when Shane jerks off he likes to do it without looking too much, usually beneath the sheets in bed. Now he can look at where the base of Rozanov's cock joins to his balls, tight and sensitive. He reaches out and presses the spot there with his thumb, and hears the rapid, guttural intake of breath above him; can smell the sweat and arousal right in the centre of Rozanov's thighs.

There's saliva pooling in the corners of his mouth and his heart is racing so fast he feels like he drank a litre of 5-Hour Energy. Shane doesn't ever drink energy drinks, but he knows this has to be how it feels – this sick, jittery feeling, halfway between elation and passing out.

He opens his mouth and puts it on the head of Rozanov's cock, lips catching on the soft stretch of his foreskin. Some of Shane's spit slides out of his open mouth and runs down the red-hot length of Rozanov, who says something in Russian that could be a curseword or could be literally anything else, Shane doesn't know. He just knows it sounds hot and he works his tongue over the salty tip of Rozanov's cock to hear it again. Fitting his mouth around the whole thing is hard and kind of uncomfortable on his jaw, but holy shit, he tastes so good – the bitter, dirty taste Shane can only think to describe as *sex* – it makes Shane's spine break out in cold prickles of sweat against his searing hot skin.

“Fuck, Hollander, give me your hand,” Rozanov groans above him. Shane immediately obeys, lifting one hand and letting Rozanov grab hold of him, rough, by the wrist, his calloused fingers on the delicate spot against Shane's veins. Rozanov wraps Shane's hand around the base of his dick and starts jerking it, his hand on top of Shane's, while Shane keeps sucking and getting spit everywhere and wondering if he's doing an absolutely horrible job or not. He's so hard it feels like he's carrying a weight between his own legs, or the wild ache of a bruise.

Sometimes really bad hockey bruises, after you've been checked into the boards or sent tumbling over your ass onto the ice, spread really deep in your skin. By the time they turn sickly green around the edges, pressing into them hurts in such a dull, spread-out way that it almost feels good, the way it throbs all over and sends the ripples of flickering nerve-endings into the core of your body. As he kneels on the scratchy hotel carpet wearing nothing but his gym socks and sucks down the bitter taste of Ilya Rozanov's cock, that's how Shane feels. A good hurt.

Rozanov suddenly grabs Shane by the back of the head, his fingers knotting into Shane's hair *hard* and pulling him off, and he says, “Hollander, Hollander, *blyat*,” and Shane flickers his eyes open just in time to watch the milky spurt of cum spill over the flushed-purple head of his cock.

“Oh my god,” Shane says. He's still got his hand wrapped around Rozanov, jerking him while the last trickle of cum works its way out, and he feels fucking insane, he feels out of his mind, he feels like nothing has ever mattered in his whole life – the ragged panting of Rozanov's breaths, the way he pushes Shane's hand away and then wipes his own hand over his dick, scooping up his cum, fucking rubs it into Shane's cheek and Shane feels it still hot and sticky and all over the side of his face and between Rozanov's fingers, god –

Then Rozanov's hands dig into Shane's armpits and haul him off the floor, drag him onto the bed.

“You are fucking hot,” Rozanov tells him, as he rolls onto his side and shoves a hand between Shane’s legs, begins frantically rubbing him off with the sticky residue of his own cum on his hand. “Who taught you how to fucking do that, Hollander?”

“Nobody,” Shane gasps, hearing the needy, rough edge of his own voice and not even recognising it. He feels like a volcano’s about to erupt inside him, the prickling edges of an orgasm already stabbing where it hurts. “I just – fuck – oh, god – I just wanted to do it.”

“You are a fucking natural,” Rozanov tells him. He leans over, chest still heaving, leans right over Shane – has him on his back, pinned down – and his curls hang over his eyes as he works Shane’s cock and says, “A very good cocksucker.” Then he leans down and puts his tongue in Shane’s mouth, rubs the pointed tip of it against the inside of Shane’s cheek; against the raw, sensitive skin.

God. Shane comes before he even knows what’s happening, stuffed full of Rozanov’s tongue, twitching into his big, rough palm, sweaty and prickling all over, and he doesn’t even know if he’s making noises or moving or anything, he doesn’t know anything in the whole world except the white-hot weight of his cock where everything happens.

It might be a second or a minute later that Shane opens his eyes again and remembers how to breathe.

The quiet of the room suddenly seems insane, broken only by their rapid breaths, just out of sync. Rozanov rolls off him and lays on the other side of the bed, letting his dirty hand fall to the neutral zone of the mattress. Shane’s ears are ringing and he stares at the dark ceiling of the hotel and suddenly pictures the bed like a hockey rink. Each of them on their side, retreating after a face-off in the middle. Two goals scored, he supposes.

He’s kind of dizzy. Not sure he could sit up if he tried.

Across from him, Rozanov says, “Well, that did not take long.”

Shane, who lost all concept of time the second Rozanov’s tongue entered his mouth but has a feeling he lasted about three seconds and Rozanov probably quite a bit longer, turns red. “Oh my god, shut up,” he says. “You’re welcome for the blowjob, by the way.”

“Thank you for the blowjob,” Rozanov says, though he’s definitely chirping, his voice gone all exaggerated at the edges. “Was not too bad, for your first time.”

“You were being a lot more complimentary when your dick was in my mouth, asshole.”

“Mm. That is usually how that works,” Rozanov says.

Suddenly, a muffled shout of voices from outside in the hallway permeates into the room. It’s only the barest edges of noise, a couple of drunken guests making their way back to their own room, probably. There’s no way they heard anything through the walls, and yet Shane feels his entire body flood cold.

They're at an *NHL event*. Everybody who could ruin Shane's entire life, the career he's worked for since he was old enough to stand up on ice, is downstairs, or one floor over asleep in a room just like this one. His fucking parents are here, on the other side of this same hotel. Shane could lose everything in the span of a second if the wrong person walked past this room, or if Rozanov decided to open his mouth at the wrong time.

He sits up in one swift, dizzying motion and turns to face the window, bracing his palms on the edge of the bed, feeling the cool, smooth sheets twist under his grip.

He has done this in the worst possible place with the worst possible person, and Shane told himself, when he went back to be drafted last summer, that he was not thinking about this. He was not going to act on anything. He wasn't going to poke at this bear inside his own head; not, at least, until he had proven himself, become team captain, and won a Stanley Cup. Until he was so established in the league that they couldn't rip him out of it and until he was absolutely, one hundred percent sure he couldn't ignore it.

He should have ignored this.

"Oh, god," Shane mumbles. His breaths are coming too quick, his head rattling inside like a fairground ride. "This was such a fucking bad idea."

He hears Rozanov roll over behind him, feels the mattress creak and shift beneath him, but Shane doesn't look back.

"Why? Felt like very good idea to me," Rozanov says. There's a pause, while Shane tries to catch his breath, and then the sound of Rozanov stretching. "Fuck, I need a cigarette."

"You should go," Shane tells him. He barely even thinks to remind Rozanov he shouldn't be smoking – what does it matter, at this point? Shane just made a life decision way worse than a cigarette. Who is he to judge.

"Aww, you do not want to cuddle?" Rozanov mocks, a laugh in his voice. Shane doesn't reply. The moment stretches out, long and awful, and then he hears Rozanov sit up, finally, lean towards Shane's back. He tries to put a hand on his bare shoulder, and Shane flinches away. "Hollander, you panic for no reason. Deep breaths, okay?"

"It's not no fucking reason," Shane says, his voice an awful combination of snappish and trembling. "This could ruin my fucking life, Rozanov. Do you get that?"

He still doesn't look back, but somehow Shane can feel the room get colder; something in Rozanov's presence behind him, a tenseness, an inhale that wasn't there before. "Wow, I fucking wonder if I get it," Rozanov says. "Do you know anything about Russia, Hollander? Think it is super chill place to fuck men?"

Shame floods through Shane's body, leaving him jittery and chilled. Of course he's making it about himself; he hates his own tendency to do that, to be so easily blinded. He can't take it anymore, being sat on the bed where he'd felt so good a few minutes ago. He stands up and puts his underwear back on instead, hurrying so he doesn't have to stand there, exposed, for too long. He really doesn't know that much about Russia, if he's honest. He knows it has a

reputation for being pretty homophobic, but it's not like he sits around reading up on what countries in the world are the best places to be gay. Shane never reads anything that involves the word *gay*; he doesn't even let himself think it.

"Sorry, I know you get it, I just –" but he can't find the words. Shane finishes pulling his jeans on and takes one tiny, fluttering little glance back at Rozanov. He's sprawled out amongst the rumpled sheets, still naked, propped up on his hands and staring at Shane with his bowed mouth half-open, his brows furrowed unhappily. "We can't tell anyone about this, ever, okay?"

"Who the fuck would I tell?" Rozanov asks. He stands up too, starts grabbing his own clothes. He moves so comfortably in his naked body, even in the middle of an argument, swinging his hips and keeping his shoulders squared back. He's like an alien species to Shane. How the hell does he do it? "We have same secret, Hollander. Is safe with me."

The worst part is that Shane knows that. Rozanov might be an asshole, a competitive idiot, and his biggest rival for his building reputation in the league – but Shane trusts him.

"Okay," he says, voice low. His shirt is on the floor across the room, where Rozanov pulled it off him. He doesn't want to cross past Rozanov to grab it so he folds his arms across his chest, shudders out a breath as he tries to stop feeling so horribly exposed. "I won't tell anyone, either. But listen – we can't do this again. It's too risky."

Rozanov finishes tugging his shirt over his head and turns back to Shane, raises an eyebrow. He doesn't look like he believes him.

"Okay, Hollander," he mocks. "You tell yourself that. We will see how long you last before you are begging for it again. I did not even blow you yet."

Before Shane can say anything else, Rozanov leaves, the door closing too hard behind him, a loud noise that makes Shane jolt. For a minute he just stands there, half undressed in his dark hotel room, in front of the ruined bed.

Then he strips the crumpled top sheet off, balls it in the corner of the room to put out for laundry with the towels tomorrow before he leaves, and goes to the bathroom. He completes his nighttime routine in the same order as always: washes his face, brushes his teeth, pees, takes a shower. In the shower, Shane tells himself, very resolutely: when I wake up, all I will care about is hockey. That's the one thing he can be sure is safe.

Chapter End Notes

next time: awards 🏆

sorry that shane made it sad !! i intended for the initial giddiness to last a bit longer but he's got an anxiety disorder so he said no to that :/ we'll get him back on board in no time tho don't worry guys (said by author with no control over the story)

tysm for reading and please do comment if you enjoyedddd / reblog this chapter [on tumblr](#)

Chapter 8: like a time bomb in a storm.

Chapter Notes

we are skipping a lil time in this one folks ! i feel bad when i timeskip but also it's a heated rivalry au what can we expect,, and if i'm being fully honest i just so badly don't want to be writing about teenagers lmao it is better for all of us if i drag them into their twenties

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

The morning after the All-Stars game, Booker, the huge Canadian from the bar the night before, grins and gets an arm around him in the hotel lobby while Ilya's just trying to find a fucking coffee.

"Yo, bud! You have a fucking *glow* about you this morning, my guy. Who'd you wheel last night?"

Ilya doesn't think he has a glow, but he's not exactly sure how he'd dispute that. He's also not sure when he'd have had time to go wheeling some girl last night given that they all saw him leave the bar with Hollander; maybe they thought he had someone already locked down, or maybe they were just too drunk by then to remember when Ilya left the bar. He'd like to be able to say, *I wheeled the best fucking rookie in the league, had him on his knees for me after his four-goal game.* Obviously, he can't.

"Don't kiss and tell, Booker, this is rule number one, fuck off," Ilya says instead, thumping him away with a grin.

He's glad he didn't skip All-Stars, in the end. He's even down to come next year, too, no matter what a big game he talked to Marley about faking an injury. This has been fun. Different. All the usual rules felt fake and useless on the ice, a game with no defense or fighting, and it felt like that in the evening, too. Unguarded.

Hollander doesn't emerge all morning, until the car is there to take them back to the airport, when he finally appears in the lobby with all his stuff, not making eye contact with anyone.

"Hello, sleeping beauty," Ilya says, low enough that nobody else can hear, grinning so it looks like he's just chirping Hollander. It sends a little thrill through him, the thought of having even a suggestion of a secret conversation out in public like this. "You look tired. Something keep you up at night?"

But, unlike every other time Ilya's ever teased him - Hollander doesn't say anything back. He dodges out of Ilya's space and silently loads his suitcase into the car. He puts his headphones in as soon as they're in the backseat, and looks out the window.

On the plane, Hollander pretends to sleep. It's a two hour flight. He's obviously faking it. Ilya doesn't know how to call him out, so he doesn't; just sits there, stewing in irritation, feeling the heat of Hollander's body next to him and remembering how it felt between his legs the night before.

Then, life goes: hockey, hockey, party, hockey, women, hockey, hockey, vodka, women, hockey.

These are the parts Ilya lets himself think about, at least. He can narrow his world down to the simple nouns and ignore the rest of it, the parts that don't fit into one-word answers; phonecalls from his father that end in criticisms and yelling; phonecalls from his father that end in confusing, muddled requests Ilya doesn't know how to respond to but realises are coming increasingly often; bills from his brother; scary articles about gay rights in Russia; Shane Hollander on the ice with him every game playing like a fucking hurricane but refusing to look at him afterwards.

It's simple if he keeps life to hockey and women. He's good at both those things.

The months pass faster than he realises, and his mood declines with them. He could have sworn he was lighter at the start of the season, but he's snappish and irritated half the time by April. In the spring they get knocked out in the first round of playoffs. Ilya thinks they could have gone further, if things had worked out, but between a couple of team injuries, a bad goalie trade and their coaches not having the lines finalised in a way they're happy with, the team gives out to the Blades in the final game of the seven. At least they don't lose on home ice.

Ilya doesn't even get the chance to grow a playoff beard, since they're out in a week. He gets maybe a couple millimetres of itchy stubble and that's it. Shane Hollander's face is still smooth as a peach – a tan, freckled, cute little peach – by the time they're piling onto the plane home in grouchy disappointment.

It's not a fun feeling, losing, but Ilya tries not to dwell on it. They're one of the best teams in the league, and he knows he and Hollander are the most talked-about players right now. This is only his second season; he's got plenty of time for a cup.

His bigger problem is that once the season's over, he has to go home to his father.

Ilya turns twenty years old on June 15th, in Las Vegas, on the day of the NHL awards show.

The awards were a good reason to delay going home, but the timing was even better for this; not having to sit through a stilted, uncomfortable birthday dinner with his family, being needled by his father, extorted by his brother, feeling trapped and miserable every time he looks at his father's wife and remembers who should have been sat in her place instead. Ilya hates his birthday. He hasn't enjoyed one since he was twelve years old.

He doesn't mention the day to anyone as they fly in, get settled into their rooms at the hotel and get ready. He's just glad not to be in Russia for it.

"Yo, Roz, let's grab a drink before the ceremony, man," Marley says, knuckle tapping him before they separate in the hallway. "Put your fuckin' tux on and meet me at the bar."

"Yes. Give me an hour," Ilya agrees.

"Damn, pretty boy, it takes you that long to put on a tux? What, you gotta do your makeup too?" Marley laughs, as he's shoving his bag into his own room. He closes the door before Ilya can snap something back.

Feller and Marleau are both at the show, though nobody else from the team's showed up – except, of course, for Shane Hollander. Who Ilya hasn't seen since the second they stepped into the hotel lobby, when he immediately disappeared to his room on his own.

Something turns over in Ilya's stomach. He enters the hotel room, and for a second, doesn't turn on the lights. It's early in the afternoon, but the blinds are down, casting the space in dim shadow. He remembers another dark hotel room and has to take a breath, curling his hands into fists.

It's been five months since he touched Shane Hollander off the ice. Ilya had thought, when he first came onto Hollander in that hallway, that fucking once might get it out of his system. It's not like he's lacking for partners, and he hasn't been abstaining in any way since hooking up with Hollander – so why the hell does he still feel so pent-up when he thinks about it?

In the time-honoured tradition of hotel rooms, Ilya lays on the bed and jerks off before he even thinks about unpacking his bags. He pulls his pants down his thighs and palms his dick and thinks about Shane fucking Hollander, who's checking into a room somewhere in this same hotel right now – he wonders if Hollander's doing this exact thing right now. How he looks. He probably does it in the dark, probably doesn't let himself make any noise. He was noisy with Ilya. Remembering those little frantic moans is what makes Ilya come into his own palm.

"S dnem rozhdeniya," he mutters to himself. *Happy birthday.*

God, jerking off barely took five minutes. He doesn't let himself savour the afterglow; forces himself to get up, shower, get ready for the ceremony. This had seemed more exciting last year, when Ilya was brand new to the league and a shoo-in for rookie of the year. His first time at a big event with all the most influential players in the league. Right now, he's finding it hard to feel the same excitement he had a year ago. He runs his hand through his curls a few times before giving up on them, pulling a face at himself in the mirror, and heading down to the bar.

Marley buys him a glass of nice vodka and they find a few straggling NHL players dotted around the bar to drink with until it's time for the ceremony itself, by which point Ilya is lightly tipsy and feeling kind of over the whole thing. They're shown into a banquet hall at the hotel, all dressed up with lighting rigs and television cameras at the front near the stage, and given seats at a table with the other players on their team. Ilya sits down first; Hollander arrives a few minutes later, and takes the seat farthest away at the table.

"Boring fucking show," Ilya grumbles, before it even begins, and cracks into the glasses of champagne at the table.

The awards pass in a slog of boring, boring, boring. Nobody he cares about wins anything. He's close to getting the Art Ross for the most points of the season, but misses out by a few points to a veteran player from Colorado. If Ilya hadn't sat out a couple games for unsportsmanlike conduct this season, he'd probably have won.

"No way you didn't get that, man," Marley says, leaning across the cramped table they're sat at – a cliché, these round tables with the fucking white table cloths and bouquets of fake flowers in the centre.

"Next season, I obliterate him," Ilya promises. He's honestly not that cut up over particular awards, but this hunger inside him to *win* still hurts, stings like a raw cut on his insides. The awards don't matter, but winning does. That knowledge of being good, being the best, having everyone else see it and tell you in definite and uncertain terms.

"It's only your second season," says Shane Hollander, of all people. He hasn't spoken to Ilya off the ice in months, yet now he leans across the table, awkwardly in the way of Fellers and nearly knocking over a glass of champagne. "You've got plenty of time to win awards."

Ilya can't even find a response, he's so surprised that Hollander's speaking to him. He just sits there with his mouth open for a moment, looking at him – those earnest, smooth brown eyes that he feels like he's barely seen since February.

Marley's the one who snorts and says, "Says the kid who's definitely about to win the Calder. It's alright if you're good, man."

Hollander turned twenty a few weeks ago, just ahead of Ilya. It had been on a game day and his parents had had a sheet cake the size of a dining table delivered to the team. The jumbotron had called him out and shown some of his baby pictures, a tiny, round-faced, spiky-haired Hollander on the ice in kiddy skates when he couldn't have been more than three years old. Skating sooner than he could fucking walk. Hollander had been all pink and awkward about the attention, but he'd seemed happy, smiling, going off with his parents, who were visiting for the occasion, after the game.

Ilya checks his phone beneath the table. Sveta had called him earlier in the day. He has no new messages.

They announce the Calder, and Hollander wins. Rookie of the year, officially. Nobody seems surprised, like they hadn't been when Ilya won it last year; some things are just how the world works.

After the ceremony's all said and done, Ilya drifts around the reception for a while, finding other players to talk shit about and annoy. He makes Marley buy him a couple more drinks – “I have broken heart over the Ross, you owe me, you make me feel better.” – but then makes himself stop drinking. He's got a high tolerance, but more than a few glasses of vodka since the afternoon is a little much, and Ilya doesn't want to be drunk. Not here, with all these people and cameras. Not where he can make a mess and say things he's not supposed to say.

Out of the corner of his eye, all evening, he watches Shane Hollander. Everyone wants to talk to Hollander. Their shiny golden rookie is all flustered under the lights, sipping ginger ale from a glass, nodding awkwardly as people speak at him. Ilya doesn't get close enough to hear what he's saying, but he can imagine it. Hollander's awkward at smalltalk, terrible in a group. He's probably reciting hockey stats and press releases every time he's asked about anything. Boring everyone to death.

When even Marley and Feller go over to throw their arms around Hollander and ask him about his shiny new trophy, Ilya lets himself get one more drink. It's his fucking birthday, after all. He throws it back at the bar without talking to anyone, raising one unimpressed eyebrow at the bartender when she tries to strike up conversation.

Another hour passes until Ilya glances over and notices Shane Hollander leaving through the side-door of the party.

Ilya's mid-conversation with a couple guys from the Admirals, talking shit about their terrible record in the second half of the season, but he immediately sets down his glass and says, “Bathroom.”

It's an unceremonious way to leave, but either they think his English is worse than it is or they just think he's an asshole, because neither of them question it when he just turns and walks away. Ilya follows Hollander's footsteps quickly, out the door into a dark hallway with signs to other event rooms down the hall. Hollander's just disappearing into a door at the other end of the hallway when Ilya spots him.

He glances over his shoulder to make sure nobody has seen him leave, and then follows. When Ilya pushes through the same door, he finds himself in a bathroom, dimly lit and tiled all in a dark, oppressive green.

There's a lock underneath the door-handle.

Ilya turns it, and then leans back against the door, watching Hollander startle out of his wits at the noise of someone following him in. He's headed to the sinks but wheels around, then meets Ilya's eyes and lets out a quick, hard breath.

“Jesus, Rozanov,” he says, pressing a hand against his chest for a second. “Would you warn a guy if you're about to stalk him? You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“I think that defeats the purpose of stalking, no?” Ilya asks.

“Right. Listen, I just needed to get away for a minute, okay? I don’t love big events like this. Could you leave me the fuck alone?”

“No,” Ilya says. He takes a step away from the locked door, towards Hollander. His shoes ring out on the tiled floor. Only one of the lights overhead is on; this bathroom is connected to a different events hall, one that doesn’t seem to be in use tonight. Probably nobody’s been in here all day. “I don’t want to leave you alone.”

Hollander asks him, “Why are you even here, Rozanov?”

Now that he’s in here, he actually can’t quite remember why. Why he followed Hollander out here at all. It was kind of like his feet just moved on instinct – this strange, relentless urge to needle him reignited by Hollander speaking to him over the table today, the reminder that he’s still in Ilya’s world. Ilya’s been following his fucking silent-treatment cold war since All-Stars, bending to his avoidance, trying not to push it, trying to respect that Hollander’s clearly having a long and extended panic attack. But there’s nobody else around here for Ilya to bother the way he wants to bother. He’s all pent-up and frustrated under his skin, looking to start a fight, maybe, or do something else with this restless, mindless energy.

“Maybe I want to congratulate you,” Ilya says. He smiles, but he can feel that it comes out wrong – he’s mad, somewhere underneath it all, can’t make the smile fit right on his face. It feels more like he’s just showing his teeth. “Big night, and all.”

“Yeah. I guess we’re officially even on our rookie seasons.”

It’s true in a way. They’ve both won the trophy. Plenty of people are comparing their rookie year stats – Ilya got more goals in his, but Hollander’s had more points including assists. It’s hard to separate their skills in the year they’ve played together, because half their time on the ice has been shared. The way the media still try and compare the two of them feels antithetical, to Ilya, to how most of hockey is done – it’s always the team first, the team central, individual players encouraged to stand out as little as possible. He’s never personally felt much in line with that attitude. Ilya likes standing out. But everyone else usually makes a big deal out of it.

“Next year, we should win a fucking cup,” Ilya tells him. “Then we can stop giving a shit about who has more points in boring seasons.”

Hollander’s eyes flit up and down him. The bathroom smells like cleaning supplies, and the flickering of the ceiling light above them is distracting, kind of hurts his head. But Shane Hollander in a suit, standing against a wall of green tile, giving Ilya his full and undivided attention, isn’t something easy to turn up. Ilya makes no move to leave the room. For a minute, he just stares at Hollander, and Hollander looks back.

Then, Hollander says, “You seem kind of sad today.” His big eyes are on Ilya, shiny and attentive. Hollander seems to avoid eye contact with everyone around him ninety percent of the time, and then the other ten he’s giving you the most intense, unblinking stares you’ve

ever seen in your life – it bores into Ilya’s soul and shifts something uncomfortably loose inside of him. “Is something going on?”

Fucking hell. What’s going on? Nothing. Nobody else has noticed anything, even if Ilya’s drinking with a sourer look than usual, snapping at his teammates, making rude comments where cameras might be able to hear. He knows he’s being a dick. He doesn’t care. Isn’t it what everyone expects from him? Isn’t he just being Rozanov?

Ilya’s turned twenty years old, and his phone is silent, and he didn’t win any awards because he just wasn’t good enough this year.

“I am not fucking sad. Russians do not get sad.”

“Okay. I mean, you don’t have to tell me what’s going on. Just – you know – offering, in case you need to talk, or whatever.”

“Jesus, Hollander. What do you fucking care? You want to look at me now, pretend you know my life? We have not had one conversation since you sucked my dick.”

Hollander’s eyes flicker down; he swallows so hard Ilya can see the motion of it in his throat. They’re stood too close.

“I’m sorry about that,” Hollander says. Rubs at his lip with his thumb, looks up at Ilya through his eyelashes. “I wasn’t trying to be an asshole, it just – it’s safer this way. Not to get involved.”

“Who the fuck said I wanted to get involved?” Ilya snaps. He takes a step closer, gesturing broadly with his hands. “It was one fucking blowjob. Should not be a big deal. Does not mean you cannot talk to fucking teammate in the gym.”

“It’s a big deal to me,” Hollander breathes. His voice is wavering, low, like he’s clinging to an unstable life-raft inside his own head. “If anyone found out –”

“So don’t let them find out. How would they know, if you don’t tell them?”

Hollander raises his head, meets Ilya’s eyes properly again. Like this, they’re so level – the same height, even footing, staring at each other straight on. He knows if they pressed against each other’s hands as hard as they could, they would probably be exactly as strong as each other. Something strange and obstructive swells in Ilya’s throat. He takes another step closer – not much space left between them, now, and he doesn’t know why it’s such a flooding relief that Hollander is looking at him; that he can smell the fresh scent of Hollander’s fancy cologne. The sudden, rapid expedition of Ilya’s pent-up tension releases so suddenly that it hurts, something clenching in his ribcage.

He reaches out, and slides his hands into Hollander’s jacket, gripping at the sides of his waist.

“You think too much. I locked door behind us in here. So it is safe, no?”

With a shaky inhale, Hollander glances around the room, and then looks back at Ilya. Doesn’t push away his hands. Sways towards him, breathes into the air between their spaces, “God,

no. We're literally at the NHL awards right now."

"But nobody comes to this part of the hotel, it is not open," Ilya points out. "You worry about wrong things."

"You make me worry," Hollander tells him, swaying closer into Ilya's space. One of his hands comes up to the side of Ilya's face, fingers sliding along his jaw, gripping below his ear. "You're dangerous."

"I think you like dangerous," Ilya says, and kisses him.

The second their lips touch, Ilya feels like he bursts into flames. He's had plenty of sex since January but none of it's felt quite like this – the way Hollander makes a needy, open-mouthed noise against him immediately, melts into Ilya's body, shoves both his hands into Ilya's curls and grips so tight and close to his scalp that it hurts. None of his other sex has felt this *desperate*. Ilya wraps his arms around Hollander's waist so tight that their bodies are crushed together and kisses him, open and wet, pushes his tongue into Hollander's mouth and feels the mess of his saliva and the heat of his breath. Hot, burning hot, tasting like ginger ale, his mouth moving quick under Ilya's, his body squirming and needy. Ilya's hard nearly immediately. So turned on it hurts. He grinds his dick into Hollander and thinks, *why the fuck are you this hot?*

Because he shouldn't be. This irritating dork who hates fun, hates everything Ilya likes, who's been avoiding him for months. But the shape and weight of his body feels so amazing that Ilya suddenly doesn't care. He brackets himself around one of Hollander's broad, strong thighs, and brings one hand down to squeeze his ass, the thick muscle of it.

"Oh, god," Hollander mutters frantically into Ilya's mouth. "Jesus, we shouldn't, we really shouldn't–"

Ilya sucks on his neck and then pinches his nipples through his nice dress shirt and then gets down on his knees on the cold, uncomfortable tile, doesn't think fucking twice about the knee injury he's still healing up from the season. He wrenches Hollander's pants down and sucks his hot, hard dick frantically for all of the three minutes it takes Hollander to come in his mouth. Ilya shows Hollander the come on his tongue, and then closes his mouth, swallows. It tastes so dirty and good.

"Fuck," Hollander pants, wild-eyed and completely out of breath and an absolute mess up above him. "Oh, holy shit. Rozanov. Why are you so good at that?"

It's a better birthday present than the sad jerking off in his hotel room.

The next day, Ilya gets on the plane home to Moscow, and doesn't text anyone in America for the rest of the summer.

next time: trades 🧑

tysm for reading as always !! pls leave a comment here and/or on the [tumblr post](#) 💚

Chapter 9: i guess there's just no getting through.

Chapter Notes

you may notice we now have a chapter count ! i finally went through and mapped out the rest of this fic for myself so we're working on a solid plan that i think should wrap up in 25 chapters (i am notorious for getting too long for my own good but we will TRY to keep it to this at least lmao)

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

“And how are you feeling about the pressure, now that your first season is over?”

Shane shuffles on the plush couch in Daniel’s office. He knows the furniture in here is supposed to be comfortable and inviting, make you relax so you open up, but Shane kind of finds it too comfortable; he doesn’t like the way he sinks down into the cushions and how it makes it hard to keep his posture straight. The natural light streaming through the window is bright, kind of getting in his eyes; the room smells like artificial air freshener in a way that reminds him of the corporate buildings he has sponsorship meetings in. Holding onto the edge of one of the little velvet cushions dotted around the couch, he shrugs.

“Um, yeah, better? Well, I’ve stopped listening to Sports Centre, like you said, so I’m not focusing so much on what people are saying about my game. I guess I’m still a bit anxious, but I think I’m handling it better. More focused.”

Daniel writes something down. “That’s really good news, Shane. Obviously last year was a huge year for you, but I think in the next few months we can focus more on getting you comfortable with long-term routine.”

“Right,” Shane agrees, although he doesn’t really understand what that means, since long-term routine is pretty much all he has.

“And have you needed your meds recently? I know last time we spoke it had been a few weeks since you’d felt like you were close enough to a panic attack.”

Shane’s only seeing Daniel once a month. Back in that first summer in 2009 he’d had to see a therapist three times a week; then, for the rest of his final Juniors season, he’d had meetings with Josie weekly, no exceptions, even when he was travelling for games and had to do it over Skype. Since moving down to Boston and going through a couple new therapists before he found one that he liked, he’s been able to cut back even further without anyone feeling like he’s about to fall to pieces. It’s nice. Shane’s never enjoyed therapy – talking about himself doesn’t come naturally even when it’s literally the objective of these appointments.

Everyone wants him to be in therapy, but Shane still doesn't think he really does it right. He avoids topics, lies about how stressed he is, plays things down and waits out the clock in

every appointment. Just getting it over with so they'll tell him he's allowed to get back on the ice.

"Yeah, only once this month," he says. "There was a big team event, and I kind of freaked out before that. But everything else, I've been fine – training, press, photoshoots, those have all been fine."

Not a lie, in that he hadn't taken any meds. Sort of a lie, in that he'd panicked plenty for all of those things.

"Great," Daniel says. He writes something else down. Shane twists the tasseled edge of the cushion around his finger. "Well, Shane, is there anything else you want to talk about? Any other pressures you're feeling going into this season, maybe?"

Ilya Rozanov's face flashes on the inside of Shane's eyeballs. The sight of him on his knees in a dark bathroom; the way Shane hasn't jerked off thinking about anyone else since June; how Rozanov left for Russia without saying anything and they now haven't seen each other in weeks. How Connors keeps asking Shane if he has a girlfriend in Boston yet and trying to set up him with models. The discreet beige package stuffed underneath his bed that Shane ordered on an incognito tab under a fake name and then hasn't had the guts to open since it arrived.

"No," Shane says. "There's nothing else. Are we done?"

When pre-season starts, Shane's honestly just relieved the break is over. It was nice to be back in Canada for a couple of weeks with his parents, but he misses hockey like an amputated limb when he's away from the rink. Summer strength training and injury prevention isn't the same, even if it's essential to getting back to the season in good shape – Shane just wants to be on the ice.

He's early to the practice rink, because of course he is, and spends a while just walking around the facility and enjoying being back after a few weeks away before he heads into the locker room. When he makes it in, a few of the guys are already playing sewer in the hallway – Marleau, Connors, Dubek. They seem to enjoy wrestling each other away from the soccer ball more than actually kicking it, but at least they're having fun, and the sounds of a team chirping the shit out of each other are like calming white noise to Shane at this point.

"Yo, Hollzy!" Marley calls over. He's the only one trying to get a nickname for Shane going with any serious effort; half the team still seem to view him with wary kid-gloves on or act like they're not sure how to talk to him, which is Shane's usual experience in locker rooms. "Get over here, man. How was your summer?"

He offers Shane a fist bump, which Shane returns, feeling awkward when he doesn't retract his hand quite at the same time as Marleau does and ends up standing there for a moment too

long. “Uh, yeah, it was good. I was just with my parents back in Canada. How about you?”

“Yeah, it was sick. Took my girl to the Bahamas, two solid weeks of swimming in the sea and wearing *no* fucking clothes, man.”

The other guys jostle him a bit, laughing. Cadyn starts lamenting his own summer with a newborn baby, which is apparently a lot less relaxing and sexy than Marley’s naked beach vacation, and someone sends the soccer ball whizzing over Shane’s head.

“I’m, uh, gonna head in,” Shane says, to nobody in particular, and ducks into the locker room before he can get hit in the face and kept off the ice for even longer. Nobody seems to really notice him ducking off, like they usually don’t; Shane’s still an odd appendage on the team, not really sure how to talk to most of them, and he tends to keep to himself. He doesn’t think anyone hates him, but he hasn’t quite figured out how to gel with them, either.

Of course, there’s one person who it’s a lot more complex with than that. Immediately upon entering the locker room, Shane comes face-to-face with Rozanov.

He’s slouched on the bench in front of his locker, wearing really tight workout shorts and stretching his legs out in front of him. Shane’s brain goes, *thigh muscles*, and then makes an error noise and doesn’t say much else.

“Oh,” Shane says dumbly. “Hi.”

Rozanov looks up at him, his steely eyes flicking over Shane’s body. It’s weird looking down on him from above. Shane thinks of the last time he saw Rozanov’s head halfway down his body and feels his face heat up.

“Hi,” Rozanov repeats back, maybe mocking him, maybe not.

“I, uh, didn’t know when you got back from Russia,” he says. Obviously he didn’t, because they haven’t spoken, so how would he know? Shane had been idly wondering if he’d somehow miraculously sense when Rozanov got back to their apartment building, but that clearly didn’t work. He took maybe a few more trips to the mailbox than necessary in the last couple days and that didn’t work either.

“Only yesterday,” Rozanov tells him. “Felt like a long break, no?”

Shane furrows his brow. “I mean, I guess? Two weeks isn’t loads of time to be home. I’d have liked to spend longer with my parents, but I did miss the rink.”

Rozanov looks up at him for a moment, then lets out a snort of laughter. Shane doesn’t know what he said that was funny.

He tries to think of something else to say, and comes up totally blank. He’s not sure how he’s supposed to feel right now. He’s been trying so, so hard to avoid Rozanov, not to think about him at all. But confronted with Rozanov actually having been away in another country where Shane had no chance to see him even if he tried, he finds himself uncomfortably happy to be looking at Rozanov’s face again – his honey-coloured curls sticking up around his ears, the

way he rubs at the tip of his crooked nose while he waits for Shane to speak. Those interesting moles on his face, the rough suggestion of stubble under his jaw. Tension aches underneath Shane's navel; he sees Rozanov's gaze flick, just for a fraction of a second, down towards his crotch, and Shane's breath catches on a knot in his throat. God. They're in the fucking locker room.

Before Shane can figure out how to say anything else, Coach spots them from across the room, and comes barelling over with his iPad brandished in the air.

"Good, you're both here. We'll be going through pre-season strats with everyone later, but I wanted to give you a heads up that we want to play around with your line a bit in the exhibition games, see what sticks." He turns his iPad around and shows them their little red dots on the fake ice. "Hollander, for the next couple games we're putting you back in centre, with Rozanov on your right wing. Your line played great last season, but we're thinking it could be good to set up Hollander's playmaking in the centre, and Rozanov, your puck possession and scoring record works great on the wing. We'll keep Marleau on left wing for now and see how it goes, okay?"

When Coach says *okay* he always makes it clear there's not another answer except *yes, coach*. So Shane nods, a jerky movement of his head, before the idea has even really caught up with him. When he does, he turns his head, and finds Rozanov raising one eyebrow his way.

Shane's been switched around between a right winger on Rozanov's line and the centre for the second line for the past season. He likes both positions, but centre is always his favourite – he likes taking face-offs and having a versatile movement around the ice and keeping that whole, big-picture view. It's just interesting that Coach is thinking of switching them, even if just for a few games. Shane finds he likes the idea of Rozanov on his wing, and then squashes down the petty part of himself that feels like it means he's won something. It's a new way to skate together, which is somehow even more exciting than beating Rozanov for something, an insane thought Shane doesn't begin to process in that moment.

"If Hollander can keep up," Rozanov says to Coach, with a lazy shrug. Coach rolls his eyes, long used to Rozanov's attitude.

"Yeah, yeah. Alright, boys, practice jerseys on and skates laced, we'll call when it's time to hit the ice."

He heads off towards the guys in the hallway, and Shane chances a look sideways at Rozanov, who's now looking down at his phone, as if he couldn't care less about their line.

"Uh, well, see you on the ice," Shane says. Rozanov doesn't reply, so Shane heads over to his own locker.

It's weird, being back in the locker room after the short summer break, kind of like the feeling of the first day back at school; the environment is the same, but he's starting a new grade, maybe, in a way that makes everything more familiar but also more alien when anything's changed. What's weirder is the few new faces drifting around. They traded a couple of their defencemen towards the end of the season, so there are a few new faces in the

lockeroom as they go into their run of exhibition games to warm up for the new season. And as he's hanging his jacket in his locker, one of those new faces approaches Shane with open arms and a wide smile.

"Yo, Shane, dude! Good to see you again."

Hayden Pike claps Shane on the shoulder while Shane blinks at him. He didn't really know he was on a first-name basis with Pike. They'd been to a few league events back when Shane was in Juniors, since they were both based in Montreal at the time, and Pike had texted him congratulations on the day of his draft, but beyond that the only contact they've had is kicking each other's asses on the ice last year. Well, mostly Boston kicking Montreal's ass.

"Oh, hey. Good to see you," Shane says, offering a handshake, which he feels is the polite thing to do at least. The other guys are still playing sewer to warm up, and Shane dodges another wild soccer ball as he ducks towards his locker. "Um, congrats on the trade?"

He's never really sure whether people will think being traded is a good thing or a bad thing, and takes a gamble. In this case it earns him a snort of laughter that Shane identifies as probably less than thrilled.

"Yeah, thanks, man. I mean, don't get wrong, happy to be on the team and all – but my wife's like, eight months pregnant, so moving to another country right now has kind of been chaos. But hey, hoping to get settled in soon."

Jesus. From Shane's memory, Hayden Pike is only a couple years older than him. The idea of being twenty-two and married with a baby on the way makes something coldly nauseated flip over in Shane's stomach.

"Wow, congratulations on the baby, then," he says, to avoid saying *did someone force you into that?*

"Thanks! Yeah, we're psyched. Wanna see a sonogram?"

Shane really doesn't, but Pike's face is all lit up and naive, so he shrugs and allows himself to be shown several blurry, pixellated images of what looks like a sack of potatoes cast in black and white on Hayden's phone until coach calls them out to the ice. It's not what Shane would be choosing to do with his time, necessarily, but there's something nice about being latched onto by someone so friendly they just won't take no for an answer about socialising. The closest thing Shane's had to a friend on the team this past year is Rozanov – and that's a scary statement in itself. Maybe it'll be good for him to make friendly with Hayden Pike.

When Shane glances over from centre ice, Rozanov's staring at him with a face like stone.

Shane's parents fly down for the first game of the season.

They came to a lot of his games last year – nearly all the away games in Canada, and a lot of the home games in Boston too, even when it meant tiring flights and missed work. Shane loves having his parents at games. He does. It makes something nervous and tight build up in his stomach in a way that's made him vomit with nerves a few times in his life, but he plays harder on the ice than ever when they're watching, often gets more points when he can see his mom's face out in the stands.

So it's good, having them visit. Shane pays the cleaner double her usual to scrub his entire apartment from top to bottom the day before they arrive. They get a cab from the airport and when they ring his doorbell, Shane sinks into his mom's arms and hugs her for three full minutes, smelling her citrus-tinted perfume and remembering being five years old and scooped up in her arms.

"Hi, honey," she says, when he finally lets her go and they all get inside. "How are you doing?"

"I'm good," Shane says – not untrue, but also what he would have said regardless of whether it was true or not. "How are you?"

"Oh, we're fine, don't worry about us. Hey, you know what I saw in the cab on the way here? Your Rolex ad! It was on a billboard outside the airport and honey, it was *huge*. I'm telling you, I know you didn't love the shoot day, but that was such a great deal."

She's talking as she deposits her bags down by the doorway, moves into his kitchen, opens his fridge and starts poking around to see how he's organised his mealprep boxes. Shane shares a look with his dad; a raised eyebrow, amused smile. His dad wraps an arm around him for a quick half-hug.

"The shoot was fine, I mean, it was just kind of long and uncomfortable," Shane says. They've unpacked this plenty of times by now – endorsements are never going to be his favourite thing to do. Photoshoots where they dress you up in uncomfortable clothes and tell you to put on different facial expressions and shine bright lights in your eyes for hours are, actually, Shane's idea of hell. But they're a day every once in a while and they'll be paying for his retirement in twenty years, so he doesn't look them in the mouth. "Mom, why don't you get settled in before we start talking about Rolex? Was the flight okay?"

His dad says, "Oh, the flight was fine, we're used to it by now. We watched a movie on the plane – have you heard of this new one, 'Inception?' I couldn't make heads or tails of it."

"Uh, I think I maybe saw an ad for it," Shane says, not really sure. He only watches sports documentaries and hockey tape. "Hang on, let me put your bags in the guest room. Do you still want to go out for dinner?"

Shane's apartment is a two-bedroom, the spare set up specifically for his parents with a comfortable double bed and family photos on the nightstands. Other visitors could sleep there too, of course, except for the fact Shane never has any other visitors – who would he invite?

"Only if it doesn't mess with your game prep, honey," his mom calls from the kitchen. "Do you need to rest up for tomorrow?"

“I mean, I can go to *dinner*,” Shane says. “We just won’t stay out late.”

“Okay, if you’re sure. We made reservations at that seafood place, you remember, the one where we met the Speedo rep last time I was here? It was good there, wasn’t it? Lots of things you could eat on your diet, which always impresses me. Oh, that reminds me, I *have* to tell you about—”

Shane escapes to put their bags in the guest room, leaving his mom’s voice drifting through the open air of the apartment behind him. He loves his parents, but it’s going to be a long weekend.

They win their first game with Shane as starting centre. 5-2 against Detroit.

In the locker room afterwards, everyone’s in high spirits. Shane goes out to do press after showering and when he comes back after giving ten minutes of very generic answers about teamwork and training hard, someone’s blasting music Shane doesn’t recognise and the room is full of loud, exuberant voices. Their playoffs run in the summer had been kind of frustrating and put everyone in sour moods, so it’s nice feeling this light again, the thrum of new-season possibility. Anything could happen in their next game, but the first game of the year was good, and there’s nothing like that. God, Shane loves hockey.

“Man, that was awesome!” Hayden Pike says, slinging an arm across Shane’s back and shaking him back and forth. Shane laughs a bit, lets himself be jostled. “You and Rozanov are fucking something else, man. Hey, promise we’ll kick ass that hard when we play Montreal?”

“Got some post-trade bitterness there, huh?” Shane jokes, since Hayden doesn’t seem too serious about it. “But yeah, that was a great game. I mean, anything could happen in the rest of the season, but it was good to start out this way.”

Hayden lets go of Shane’s shoulders to start rooting through his locker, saying over his shoulder, “Dude, don’t be a downer already, enjoy the post-win glow! You have anyone here watching tonight? Jackie was pissed she had to miss it, but the doctor has her on bedrest until she pops.”

“Oh. That must suck,” Shane says. He knows absolutely nothing about pregnancy except for things that sounds awful to him. “Uh, my parents are here. They’re visiting for the start of the season.”

“Nice! They must be proud as hell, watching you on the starting line.”

Shane swallows. “Yeah, I guess.”

The question of his parents being proud of him isn’t ever really up for debate. They tell him all the time. Gush over him. Their house is full of his old jerseys and medals and childhood

photos on every wall. And his dad makes a point of periodically reassuring him that they'd love him even if he was awful at hockey, too. It's Shane's own fault that he feels the question like an ice bath every time it's asked, the possibility of disappointing them so terrifying that it freezes him to the core.

Hayden doesn't seem to notice the well of anxiety spilling in Shane's guts, and begins talking about his wife again. Shane robotically shrugs out of his locker room hoodie and into the cold dress shirt hanging in his locker. God, he hates game-day suits; arriving in it is one thing, but putting it back on after a full game and a shower when he just wants to be comfortable in his sweatpants is miserable. He's fumbling with the buttons and ignoring the cacophony of the locker room when he suddenly hears a loud, Russian voice right beside his ear.

Of course, Rozanov's not talking *to* Shane. He's just decided to stand right behind him, close enough Shane can feel the heat of his body and smell his shower gel, as he faces their thrum of teammates and calls out, "Okay, assholes, tonight we party, yes?"

"Hell yeah, man."

"Yeah, I'm in –"

"–Fuck yeah brother, first round's on me."

About half the team agrees at once, while a few of the older dudes and people with kids pass and pretend to be upset about it, like usual. A couple of glances land Shane's way, not exactly prompting. He shuffles closer to his locker, away from Rozanov's body, hyper-aware of the heat of him stood there. Shane really never goes out after games, and they've stopped expecting him to, but it was a pretty good night, and everyone's more casual during these first few weeks of games. It wouldn't be crazy if Shane decided to go out and celebrate. Unfortunately, he still doesn't want to.

On the other side of Shane, Hayden says, "Aw, sounds fun, but I gotta get home. Jackie could go into labour any day now, no more partying for me!"

"My condolences," says Rozanov, not sounding all that sorry. It's a long word to hear from him, and Shane, who doesn't know *why* he cares about Ilya Rozanov's English but somehow kind of does, glances over at him, impressed. Rozanov drawls, "What a shame for your life to be so boring this early. Are you nearly ready to retire?"

"Hey, don't be an asshole," Hayden says. "Being married is awesome. And there's nothing more exciting than having a baby!"

"Ah. If you say so," Rozanov says flatly, raising one disbelieving eyebrow. "Well, you enjoy changing diapers and going to sleep before the sun is down. I will go to fancy club tonight, drink good vodka and find beautiful model to have crazy sex with, poor me."

Right. Of course he will. Shane swallows and turns back to his locker, not looking at anything in particular while he listens to Hayden telling Rozanov to fuck off. He wonders if Rozanov will bring whatever girl he hooks up with back to his apartment tonight; if Shane

will be one-floor removed from whatever Ilya Rozanov counts as ‘crazy sex.’ He’s probably doing stuff Shane’s never even heard of, with women more beautiful than Shane’s ever met.

“Yeah, my parents are visiting, so I’ll pass too,” Shane says. He slings his suit jacket over his arm and gets out of there as fast as he can.

His parents stay for two nights before heading home, with plans to come see his away game against Montreal next week. His dad leaves a stack of fresh crossword books in his apartment along with some homemade soup in the freezer, and his mom rearranges his closet and puts the next two months’ worth of endorsement shoots in his wall calendar for him. In the end, he has to nearly kick them out so they’ll make their flight.

“Okay, honey, we love you so much,” his mom says in the lobby of his building, while his dad’s loading their stuff into the cab outside. “We are just so proud of you. You call if you need anything, anything at all, okay?”

She hugs him tight and Shane hugs her back, nodding into her shoulder. “Sure, mom. Thanks for coming.”

“Of course! We weren’t going to miss your first game of the year, no chance.”

“Yuna,” his dad’s warm voice calls out behind her. “We’re gonna be late if we don’t get going.”

“Oh, please, when have I ever been late for a flight in my life.” It’s true – Shane knows his mom and she always knows her travel itinerary down to the second. “I have time to hug my son!”

Shane’s laughing and extracting himself from her arms when the lobby door swings open behind them. Shane glances over his mom’s shoulder, and finds himself frozen in place.

“Ah,” says Ilya Rozanov, eyes flicking between them all. An unnaturally polite smile appears on his face, one Shane’s pretty sure he’s never seen before. “You must be Hollander’s parents, yes?”

Shane can see the surprise on his mom’s face as she wars over how to respond; in plenty of her phonecalls she still rants about how she thinks Rozanov is an asshole, a brute on the ice and a cocky idiot in interviews, but she also compliments his plays with Shane whenever they score off each other, which is a lot. Shane understands the mixed feelings.

When nobody says anything for a second too long, Shane swallows and says, “Uh, yeah. Yuna and David. Mom, Dad, this is Ilya Rozanov.”

Shane so rarely has a reason to say Rozanov’s first name that for a moment he worries he didn’t even pronounce it right; he’s never met anyone else called Ilya, and the way the long

vowel sounds flow together in his mouth feels bulky and foreign.

“It is nice to meet you,” Rozanov says, friendly as anything. “You come to watch first game? Was pretty good, no?”

Shane’s mom recovers enough to say, “Oh, it was great. You two are just an absolute powerhouse on the ice together, I’ll say that much!”

Rozanov smiles wider, revealing those crooked teeth at the bottom. Shane quickly looks away from his mouth. “Yes. Hollander is very fun to play with.”

Something prickles at the base of Shane’s spine.

“Well, that’s nice of you to say,” his mom says, like a compliment for Shane is half a compliment for her too. “Did any of your family make it out to watch the season start? I guess it’s a long flight!”

Shane doesn’t know if he’s imagining things, or if he’s just hyperaware of Rozanov’s every move in a way that he absolutely shouldn’t be, but he could swear he sees Rozanov’s posture change – his face shutter a little, his spine stiffen.

“Ah, no. Not this time.”

He doesn’t say anything else. Shane’s dad clears his throat a bit and says pleasantly, “Well, sorry to cut it short, but we’ve got a flight to catch. It was nice to meet you, Rozanov.”

“Ilya,” Rozanov corrects him. Shane blinks, taken aback by the sound of Rozanov saying his own first name, wondering when he even would have heard Rozanov say it before. Everyone in the locker room calls him Roz and everyone in the media uses his surname; first names are a rare trade in the hockey world. It feels almost like having him give a childhood nickname, something personal and rare, for them to call him.

“Ilya, sure,” his dad corrects. “Good luck tomorrow, you two.”

“Work hard, okay?” his mom says, because she doesn’t believe in luck.

Shane’s dad claps him on the shoulder affectionately and his mom gives him one more kiss before they dash off to their impatiently waiting cab outside. Shane watches it drive off through the glass of the doors before his eyes flicker sideways, and he finds Rozanov still standing there.

“Well,” Rozanov says. “Your parents are nice.”

It sounds like a chirp even though the statement is perfectly neutral. Shane narrows his eyes. “They *are* nice. Fuck off.”

“I said they were nice!” Rozanov insists, but he’s got half a stupid, cocky smile at the corner of his mouth. “You are good little boy, having your parents to stay. But I guess you are so boring anyway it did not, what’s the saying, cramp your style.”

“Jesus, they were here for two days, it’s not like they’re moving in with me,” Shane says, letting out an irritated breath and turning his back on Rozanov, heading back over to the elevator. He’s not exactly listening for the sound of footsteps behind him, but he maybe lingers for a second before pressing the button, which gives Rozanov time to catch up.

Rozanov does. He leans around Shane, one arm behind his back, to press the button for the elevator as well. Even though Shane already pressed it. The broad swell of his bicep touches Shane’s back for a moment.

“Going up?” Rozanov asks. “Or down.”

Shane glares over his shoulder. “We’re literally on the ground floor, weirdo.”

Rozanov raises his eyebrows, and doesn’t say anything else.

Ah, shit.

Shane’s cheeks heat up as the elevator doors open. “Shut up,” he tells Rozanov, hurrying inside and pressing himself against the edge of the mirrored wall. “I’m going home to get ready for our game tomorrow. You should, too.”

There are security cameras in the elevators. Shane knows, and he knows Rozanov knows too, because it was mentioned as a selling-point of the building when they sold him the apartment, the twenty-four hour security person monitoring the common spaces via camera. If there wasn’t a camera, Shane thinks, for just a moment, he could – do something. But there is, so he doesn’t.

Rozanov leans against the rail, two feet away from Shane, and looks him up and down.

“You seem tense, Hollander,” he says. “Not good energy to bring to the game. Maybe you should find some way to relax.”

Shane’s body sparks up like an electric current just ran through him. It’s almost an uncomfortable feeling, the hot-cold prickle along his skin, down his chest; like when you’re about to throw up, except it doesn’t come with that discomfort, just a loud pumping of blood around his body. The hairs on his arms are raised. He feels like he’s being literally fucking magnetised to Rozanov, which might be a sign that he has the worst luck in the universe, or is just really, really desperate.

He thinks about saying, *what, you don’t have a date with a model to get to today*, but stops himself at the last second. The last thing he needs is for Rozanov to think he’s jealous. Shane’s trying to get Rozanov to leave him alone, not get more invested.

“I know how to relax,” Shane tells him – keeps his voice even, low, flat. Doesn’t meet Rozanov’s eyes. “I don’t need any help with that.”

The elevator gets to his floor. The doors open.

“I am not sure about that. You are most tense person I know. Have you heard? The rest of the team talks about how you need to get laid.”

The doors are still open. Shane tells his legs to move, and they don't move. He stays pressed against the back wall of the elevator, locked in place like a statue. His apartment door is literally ten steps away, if he'll just fucking move – his apartment where nobody else can bother him, where he can make his usual pre-game-night dinner, drink his usual protein shake, watch the game tape he had planned to watch tonight, jerk off in the shower, go to bed early.

The elevator doors close again: *ding. Going up.* Shane hasn't moved. Rozanov flicks his eyebrows up, something flashing over his face – the expression is almost predatory. Hungry.

“You missed your floor,” Rozanov says, as the doors open on floor five instead. “Oh, well. You can come to my place, for something to eat.”

Heat floods Shane's stomach as Rozanov turns and walks down the hallway without looking back. Shane takes a deep, shuddering breath, and then follows.

He can't wrap his mind around what the hell he's doing, can't begin to comprehend all the ways this is a horrible idea. This isn't some nowhere hotel for a special event; this is Rozanov's *home*. They both live in this building. Everyone here knows them – the security staff, their neighbours. They have another teammate in the fucking building. It feels so close to Shane's life, his real, actual life that it's hard to breathe.

But God. Rozanov's unlocking his front door and he just looks – hot. He looks hot. Those golden curls in his face, dressed all in black Adidas like the jock he is, arms bare and his biceps probably bigger than Shane's head. The thick knots of muscle flex under his skin as he moves. It's been more than three months since they did this the last time; more than nine since Shane had him, for a tiny parcel of time, on an actual bed. And Shane hasn't slept with anyone else, all year. And even if he wanted to, he's not sure who the hell else he'd find.

“Come in, I don't bite,” Rozanov says, flashing him a grin like a shark. Shane follows, completely helpless to anything except his own roaring pulse.

The second they're inside, Shane slams the door closed behind them, and Rozanov wheels around and puts his arms around Shane's hips and kisses him like he's drowning.

The kiss is so good it makes him insane. Rozanov's mouth is hot and wet and he knows exactly how to tease Shane's lips, rub against the most sensitive parts of his mouth. Shane stumbles a bit kicking off his shoes, not pulling out of Rozanov's arms to look at what he's doing. He's glad their apartments have the same layout because at least he's sure he'd know the way in his sleep – Rozanov spins him and pushes him into a wall, hard, with every inch of his body pressed against Shane while he devours Shane's mouth, and Shane pulls a rough handful of Rozanov's silky curls and moans. An actual fucking moan, a noise he didn't know he could make, loud and low in his throat.

“God, Hollander, you are so fucking hot,” Rozanov tells him, pulling away from his mouth with a wet noise and running his tongue up Shane's throat. Shane wants to pass out. “It took you long enough to come back for more.”

“You were the one waiting for it,” Shane pants out, as he bunches his fists in Rozanov’s shirt and tugs it up, over his broad, strong torso, shoves it to his armpits so he can put his hands on the hot writhing muscle of Rozanov’s abs.

They kiss long enough against the wall that Shane nearly loses his mind. Half his clothes are off before Rozanov pulls away and says, “Couch.”

Shane says, “What’s wrong with your bed?” and gets his legs under control enough to lead the way to where he knows Rozanov’s bedroom must be, without waiting for an answer. Who would rather hook up on a couch than in a bed?

It’s the first time he’s been in this room, and while the layout and built-in furniture is the same as Shane’s own, he’s surprised there are some personal touches – art on the wall that doesn’t look like it was bought by a company, a few Russian comic books on the dresser, clothes spilling out of the wardrobe. It looks more lived in than Shane’s place, in a way he finds kind of stressful but which feels very Rozanov.

“You’re messy,” he says, as Rozanov comes up behind him and starts kissing the back of Shane’s neck.

“And you’re boring. Get on the bed.”

Shane does what he’s told, stopping first to take off his pants and fold them over the back of a leather armchair in the corner of the room, then take off his underwear too, because he figures that’s helpful. Rozanov watches him for a moment, a strange expression on his face, before pushing him down into the bed and rolling between his legs. He puts one hand on Shane’s thigh and tugs it around his hips, almost like he’s testing something – god, testing how they fit together. He rolls his hips a little and his hard cock presses into the base of Shane’s belly.

Last time they were together there was no getting undressed, no time for anything, just frantic kneeling on a bathroom floor and his mind spiralling over what a bad idea it was. He still knows this is a bad idea, but what’s perhaps even more fucking terrifying is when Shane realises that right now, they have *time*. Nobody’s expecting them anywhere until tomorrow. Nobody knows that Shane’s not home, alone, like usual.

“What do you want?” Rozanov asks, nuzzling his nose into Shane’s neck, bringing one hand up to squeeze Shane’s chest, rubbing his rough palm over the sensitive skin of his nipple. Shane shivers all over. The bedsheets are soft beneath his naked back, the body on top of him hard and rough and hot. He feels sensation everywhere. He can smell Rozanov’s sweat. “You want to suck my cock again? I know you like that.”

“Fuck you,” Shane gasps out, as one of his hands comes down to grip Rozanov’s ass, squeezing hard at the thick muscle. God, he has a good ass, and Shane has to share a fucking locker room with him, and it’s hell – “Just – I don’t know, shit, keep doing that.”

Rozanov’s rolling their hips together and Shane can feel his cock – so hard it’s twitching against Shane’s belly, burning hot with how turned on he is, same as Shane feels – and when they rub together it’s the hottest thing he’s ever felt. Rozanov kisses him wetly and ruts

against him harder and when he pulls his mouth away, a trail of spit is joining their mouths, and Shane nearly comes immediately.

“Yeah? You want me to get you off like this?”

He’s miles of hard muscle on top of Shane, so hot and heavy that Shane’s sweating, that he can’t catch his breath. He maybe says something back but he doesn’t fucking know; all he knows is he grabs the back of Rozanov’s head with one hand and drags him into another burning hot kiss, so messy that Rozanov’s spit is sliding down the corner of Shane’s mouth, and he kneads at Rozanov’s ass while their hips roll together, and it could last minutes or hours but Shane feels his balls drawing up and his toes curling in the soft sheets and he finishes all over Rozanov’s hand and he’s saying something, or maybe just moaning, while he does, and then Rozanov goes, “Fuck, *Hollander*, oh, shit,” and his hot cum spills over onto Shane’s belly. And then he collapses on top of Shane, panting.

“You got me dirty,” is all Shane can think to say in the aftermath, once he’s caught his breath. The feeling of cum sticking their bodies together is gross; Shane doesn’t like sticky textures. Rozanov pulls his head away from where he was kissing Shane’s neck and looks at him like he just said he came from Mars.

“You are weirdest fucking person I have ever met,” Rozanov tells him, without much affection. Shane’s brain still isn’t really back online, so he just nods.

He stays long enough to catch his breath and shower the cum off his stomach in Rozanov’s bathroom before he pulls his clothes on and walks back to his own apartment with wet hair. He wants to overthink how stupid this was, but his brain is just making computer error noises whenever he tries to have a thought. So he just goes home, eats dinner, skips the game tape he’d planned to watch, and passes out in bed without even reading a chapter of his book. He’s gotta hand it to Rozanov – Shane definitely, absolutely feels more relaxed.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: father 🥲

tysm for reading as always !! please do leave a comment / [reblog on tumblr](#) if you enjoyed xxx

Chapter 10: scarcely can speak for my thinking (what you'd do to me tonight).

Chapter Notes

two chapters in two days is literally unprecedented for me yalllllll. this is so left field but i wanna shout out the fic [Gatorade Gala's & Moscow Mules](#) solely bc i read it this morning and it was so, so good that it made me want to write all day so i literally dropped my other plans and wrote this chapter in one go?? the fic itself has no bearing on this one at all but it just reminded me why i love these two characters so much man fanfiction is incredible

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

It's hard to be on a hockey team and spend literally any time not surrounded by teammates, so on a rare free Saturday Ilya finds himself sprawled out on his couch kicking Marley and Conny's asses at Street Fighter.

"You are so bad at this," Ilya tells Marley, seriously, while winning for the fifth time in a row. "Man as big as you never learned to fucking fight?"

Marley throws his controller across the room, where it lands with a dull *thump* onto a chair.

"I'll knock your teeth out in real life, Roz, how about that?"

"Save it for the ice," Connors suggests. Ilya runs his tongue over his teeth inside his mouth; only two of them are fake, but he's got a lot of years of hockey left. Shane Hollander has never even chipped a tooth, as far as Ilya knows. If it were anyone else Ilya would consider that a sign of a bad player.

"You are supposed to fuck up *other* side, idiots. Not best player on your own team."

Marley laughs while he goes to retrieve his controller. "Hey, I didn't threaten Hollander."

The invitation to hang out was open to most of the team today, though some energy drink that sponsored half the team was having a DJ event across the city, so only Connors and Marley turned up. Con's always around since he lives in the building, and Marley's nearby and argues with his girlfriend enough that he's always looking for an excuse to get out of the house. It's unfortunate that Ilya's teammates are idiots, but someone has to put up with them. He'd texted Hollander an hour ago and let him know there was pizza and PlayStation upstairs, but he never got a text back.

"Okay, Marley, you are banned from playing, you are too bad. Hurts my head. Give it to Conny so I can beat him too."

“Fuck you, Roz,” says Marleau, but he does indeed release his lightly battered controller to Connors and wander off towards the kitchen in search of more food.

In his pocket, Ilya’s phone buzzes. He pauses in his attempts to find the character with the biggest tits to play as and palms his phone out, checking it subtly. He’s hoping it might be Hollander; probably not agreeing to come hang out with the team, but maybe declining in an amusing way, or even better telling Ilya to kick the others out so they can have their own kind of fun.

It’s not Hollander. His father’s name stares up at him from the screen.

Ilya declines the call and puts his phone on silent before shoving it back into his pocket.

“Okay, you ready for me to make you cry?” he asks Connors, and sets about winning the game as fast as possible.

Ilya wins three rounds before Conny starts complaining and wants to play a different game. Ilya blows a raspberry at him, unimpressed, and slouches down into the couch as Marley wanders back over, a beer in one massive hand and a half-demolished slice of pizza in the other. Through a mouthful of pepperoni he asks, “Yo, Roz, what was the story with that girl from the other night?”

Of course, Ilya knows who he’s talking about, if only because they’ve been on a long run of games so they haven’t been going out much this month. But last week Ilya had been invited out to a private party by a runway model that he’s slept with three or four times, Marisol. She’d told him to bring some friends, and hadn’t seemed too upset when Ilya showed up with half a hockey team.

“What do you mean, story?” he asks. “No story. She invites me out, I go, we have sex, I leave.”

Connors lets out a low whistle. “You are ice fucking cold, man.”

“Roz, dude, this is like the third time we’ve seen you with this chick. Are you guys together, or what? ‘Cus I know Dani will wanna make friends with her if you are.”

The suggestion of it sends such a strange, unimpressed feeling through Ilya’s stomach that he doesn’t quite know what to do with it. He’s never even met Marisol outside of a few parties. They’ve never had a conversation; neither of their English is great, nor do they seem to have much in common. She knows he’s famous but doesn’t care about hockey. He knows she’s hot and that’s about it. Why the hell would they be dating?

“Of course not,” he says, focusing on the PlayStation screen and keeping his face blank. “We fuck a few times, no big deal. I do not want girlfriend.”

Marley rolls his eyes as he flops his huge body down into Ilya’s armchair. “Yeah, right. The way you get around, I give you one more season before some girl has you leashed.”

Ilya decides that he'll delete Marisol's number. There are plenty of other women in Boston to fuck, and he's not really looking for repeats.

The next week, Ilya sucks Hollander's dick on his couch and then kisses him with a mouthful of his own cum. Hollander scores a hat trick against New York, two of them off Ilya's assists.

They shower together in Ilya's waterfall shower the week after that and Ilya pumps Hollander's dick with a handful of shampoo that makes everything wet and hot and slippery. Hollander gives a spinorama goal so insane that they highlight it on ESPN for a week.

In an after-game interview in late October that Ilya rewatches on his television three times, Hollander says, "Yeah, you know, the whole team is finding our groove, it's great to see at this point in the season. I really don't credit anything for my point streak except the hard work from the other players on the ice with me. Obviously, in particular, me and Rozanov have been connecting a lot."

They win against Vegas, Ottawa and in overtime against Colorado, then lose to Detroit. Ilya's paired with Connors as a roomie on the road. Connors sings along to loud music in the shower and puts LA gossip shows on the television so he can talk about which famous women he wants to fuck; Ilya spends a lot of time wondering if Shane Hollander is reading another hockey book in silence and boring Dubek to death in the other room. They have just a couple of green light nights on the road where they can go out partying without a curfew, and Ilya finds women to sleep with on both nights. Hollander doesn't come to the club either time.

They don't hook up with each other when they're on the road, mostly because they both have roommates. Or at least that's the reason Ilya understands. Hollander mutters something else about not messing with their game, when Ilya tries to corner him in the bathroom of a bland hotel in Edmonton and put his mouth on Hollander's neck.

"Mess with how? You are on record-setting point streak when I've been blowing you before games, Hollander. If you want the most goals I think you should let me fuck you on the ice before puck drop."

Which doesn't change Hollander's mind, but does make him go a lovely shade of red for a while.

It's a tight game against Philly. They've been on a tear this season and it being the last game on a roadie is tough for Boston; everyone just wants to be on the fucking plane home already. The game's a frustrating stop-and-start of play, a few too many penalties called, Ilya pissed off and impatient while he sits in the box for instigating, as if that's not part of his fucking job. But they get a few good goals in anyway. Hollander seems to be the only one in the team who's not tired, which doesn't help quash the rumours that he might be part robot. Designed in a lab to play good hockey. When he gets possession of the puck it feels like he's halfway across the ice before the other team can even remember how to skate.

It's Hollander who scores in the last twelve seconds of overtime, scraping the win out for Boston. Everyone piles on top of him, tapping his helmet and shaking him around on the ice. Ilya's at the outside of the pack but he catches a glimpse of Hollander's pleased, determined face through the arms of their teammates.

Everyone's in good enough spirits thanks to the win, but still pretty fucking exhausted in the locker room afterwards. They've been on the road for too long and they're all ready to head back to Boston as soon as they can. Dubek's nursing a nasty injury that they're all supposed to pretend not to notice, which is kind of hard when he's grunting and reapplying his KT tape in the middle of the room; the guys with kids are glued to FaceTime and distracted; Marley's girlfriend just dumped him for the third time via text so he's got a face like pickled fish. Normally after a win Ilya would suggest breaking curfew and going to celebrate, but tonight he knows nobody's in the fucking mood.

Ilya's really not in the mood either, when Hayden Pike comes over and claps Hollander on the back right in front of him.

Pike is a new player on the team who Ilya finds intensely annoying. He's a completely middling player who makes no real impact on the ice beyond tying a line together, which isn't the end of the world on its own, except for that he seems to be determined to make more impact in the locker room than the rink by talking to absolutely everyone. It was great when he was off for a few games because his wife had a baby, but he's all the more annoying now that he's back, always chiming into conversations with some dumb observation nobody asked for, or showing Hollander something on his phone and laughing.

"What are you two giggling about like children?" Ilya asks, feeling something irritated flare up in him as he watches Pike sling a friendly arm around Hollander's shoulders in front of their lockers. He tugs his sweat-sodden Under Armour off and leans across the bench towards them, expectant.

"Oh, uh, Hayden's just showing me some baby pictures," Hollander says, pushing his damp hair out of his eyes. He's not actually giggling and looks pretty awkward, which is how he looks at most times, but the irritating part is how Pike doesn't seem to care and is acting like

they're best fucking friends. Ilya settles his face into a blank, unimpressed stare; Pike, unbothered, turns the phone around.

"Wanna see? She's just figured out how to put her fingers in her mouth, it's so fucking cute, man. And Jackie got her a little Boston jersey!"

"I will pass." Ilya thinks babies are fine – kind of cute, sometimes; even entertaining when they definitely belong to someone else – but he has no interest in seeing Hayden Pike's child in particular. "Just making sure you do not bore Hollander to death over there. We need him to keep playing hockey."

Hollander rolls his eyes. "Fuck off, Rozanov," he says, even though he doesn't seem like he wanted to be looking at baby pictures either.

Shrugging, Ilya moves back to his own locker and starts dumping his equipment. Behind him he hears Pike saying, "So, the asshole thing's really not an act with Rozanov, huh?"

"That's part of his charm, man," Marley cuts in. Because he's a good fucking friend.

Ilya's about to insult Pike some more when his phone buzzes in his locker. He assumes it's Svetlana, although she normally texts rather than calls after a game – usually she's just giving him a rundown of the worst plays from the game. Ilya scoops his phone up to answer it, and only then goes still when he sees the name on the screen.

He takes a breath, steels himself, and ducks out into the hallway. "Hello, Father," he says in Russian.

His father's voice cuts back at him, "That game was a disgrace, Ilyushka. You think we send you out on the ice to play like that?"

The game had gone to overtime, but they'd won. Ilya scored two goals. He also didn't think his father watched most of his NHL games; he's distinctly biased to Russian hockey. Why is he sat home watching American sport tonight?

"Yes, it was tricky, but we got the win eventually," Ilya says. Logic doesn't work in an argument with his father when he's decided his high expectations have not been met, but neither does anything else. Ilya paces in a circle around the empty hallway, listening to the muffled sounds of his teammates in the locker room, finding himself suddenly glad none of them speak Russian.

His father lets out a scoffing noise. The sharp, rankling disapproval is nothing new. Ilya squares up his shoulders, reminds himself to stand straight, tall, use his full height. He's exhausted after the game. Sore in every part of his body, even the joints and tendons of his hand where he's holding the phone.

Then, his father says, "We'll talk about it more over dinner. What time will you be home?"

For a moment, Ilya can't quite figure out the words. He wonders, absurdly, if he's mistranslated the sentence in his head; then he remembers they're speaking Russian.

“Papa, I am in America,” Ilya says. “What are you talking about?”

There’s a beat of silence on the other end. Then, in the background, his stepmother’s voice says something. Ilya clenches his jaw, works his teeth back and forth. His father says, “Well, just play a better game next time. Then we will not need to talk.”

He hangs up, and leaves Ilya stood there, staring down at his phone. He’s had some weird texts from his father lately. Not outright insane, but a little off. Ilya wants to figure out what’s going on, but his brother is no help, impossible to talk to – his stepmother as uselessly scared of his father as his own mother had been. And Ilya’s an entire continent away.

He’s still holding his phone in midair when Marley sticks his head out the door, looks around, and says, “Dude, are you gonna hit the showers or what? I wanna make it out of this fuck-ass city before midnight.”

Apparently, it’s Shane Hollander’s mother who reaches out to Ilya’s agent and tells him that Speedo wants to do a joint campaign with the two of them.

Ilya can’t personally imagine a hell worse than having one of his parents actively involved in his entire career and image, let alone specifically in people requesting sexy photoshoots of him getting sprayed down with water while wearing tight clothes. But he’s not Shane Hollander, who is apparently fine with this sort of thing and views it as a normal part of being a professional hockey player. Ilya asks him why the hell he wants to do a joint ad, on Hollander’s kitchen floor with cum still drying on his cheek, and Hollander looks at him like he’s weird.

“Did you see how many zeroes were on the cheque?” he asks. It’s a pretty good answer.

It feels like a waste of a rare morning off, but a sleek car picks them up from their apartment building at 6AM and drives them to a concrete building that looks like somewhere you might get murdered by the mob back in Moscow. It turns out to be a luxurious photo studio inside. There are dozens of people buzzing around with cameras – and yes, Ilya’s done plenty of sponsorships and photoshoots in the past two years, but something about this just feels like a step beyond. Maybe it’s the fact that Hollander’s here, looking like he’s facing the gallows as a makeup artist gets him all pretty and someone sprays salt spray into his hair. Maybe it’s the fact that a PA keeps bringing Ilya different flavours of Diet Coke and measuring parts of his body without asking.

Ilya likes the attention. He flexes and grins for the cameras, flirts with the photographer shamelessly. Every time he glances over his shoulder, Hollander’s standing like a lego man, seemingly trying to will himself out of existence. He barely talks to Ilya all day, stilted and strange in front of the cameras, not making eye contact with Ilya where anyone else could possibly see.

But god, if he doesn't look good. Ilya would buy just about anything if he saw a photo of it draped over Hollander's naked body. Maybe the marketing people do know what they're doing.

In November they have a full week in Boston, and even with three games to play it's the most relaxing stretch of time they've had in weeks. They were all getting sick of hotel rooms and team dinners; even if Ilya's impersonal apartment isn't much better than a hotel and he's still just ordering takeout, it's better. On the Friday night he orders dinner from a Russian place downtown and collapses onto his couch, texting Svetlana about her new job while he eats.

Then, because they're a fucking hockey team and it's impossible for anyone to go two days doing shit on their own, the team chat pops up on his phone.

No game tomorrow, who's coming out?

Hell yeah, where we going? Not Journey

well yeah we're not allowed back there YOU got us kicked out

Dude how was I supposed to know she was the bouncer's wife????

5th Stop, 9pm?

Ilya idles his thumb over the keypad. He never really passes up on going out with the team, and it might help take his mind off the unanswered text from his brother he's currently ignoring, whatever's going on back home. He watches the text thread some more as the team keeps making plans, but, of course, there's one person who's not said a word.

He's actually not sure Shane Hollander has ever sent a single message in the team chat, except maybe *Good game* once in a while.

Stretched out on his couch, Ilya rolls over, and idly looks at the floor beneath his feet. If he wants Shane Hollander to come party with the team, it's not like he doesn't know where to find him.

Ilya sends, *maybe yes maybe no* in the text and then silences his phone. Shoves it into his pocket, puts his slides on, locks his apartment door behind him, and jogs down the single flight of stairs that takes him to Hollander's apartment. Ilya knocks on the door. He waits a few seconds, then a few more – he can hear rustling inside. He leans a little closer, and knocks again.

Three seconds later Hollander opens the door, flushed in the cheeks in a way he rarely gets except when Ilya's sucking his cock. For a moment Ilya is taken aback – does he have

someone in here? A girl? But no; the living room is empty behind him. And if he's honest, Ilya's really not sure Shane Hollander is getting laid anywhere but him.

Something molten and dangerous pools in the pit of Ilya's stomach.

"What are you doing here?" Hollander asks, snappish and irritated. Ilya looks him up and down, slowly.

"We are going to celebrate the week home and find a good club. I come to invite you." It's both true and not true; people are going out, but it's not like Ilya expected that Hollander would want to come with, and it's not exactly a firm plan. It would be fun to take him out and watch him try and dance, but it will be equally fun if he can needle Hollander into doing something else with the night. Ilya's easy both ways.

Hollander doesn't really seem to be buying it either. "You thought *I* wanted to go clubbing?"

"There is whole world of possibility out there, Hollander," Ilya says with a shrug. "But you look like you are busy already. What has you blushing?"

"Oh my god. I'm not *blushing*, shut up," Hollander grumbles. He's holding onto the doorway with one hand, clearly not inviting Ilya in. This delights Ilya. He decides it can't do at all, and shoulder-checks his way into Hollander's apartment, kicking his slides off just inside the door. Hollander scrambles behind him and says, "Hey!"

"Hey, what?" Ilya turns, watches as Hollander shuts the door and glares at him. "Oh, you were doing something so important you could not invite me in? Your favourite teammate?"

He pouts dramatically, to watch Hollander roll his eyes. "You are *not* my favourite teammate. You're about twentieth down the list."

"Oh, so not dead last?" They have twenty-three guys on the team right now. Ilya *knows* Hollander has the right number memorised. "You are so sweet to me."

"Well, Dutton threw up in my face on Halloween, don't get too flattered."

Ilya snorts, then casts his eyes around Hollander's apartment. He wanders a bit further in, trying to figure out what Hollander was doing when he arrived. The apartment's dim, lit only by lamps rather than the overhead lights. A ginger ale open on the coffee table. There's a laptop laying on the couch, closed, with headphones plugged into it.

With a wicked thought occurring to him, Ilya wheels around and says, "You were watching porn?"

It's worth accusing him just to watch Hollander splutter.

"I was not watching porn, Rozanov, oh my God. I was just watching a *movie*."

"Oh, and you can't watch a movie on your big fancy TV? It has to be secret?" Ilya laughs. "Must be very special movie."

“Shut up.” Hollander stalks over to the couch and grabs the laptop, moving it back to the desk across the room. He’s not facing Ilya when he mutters, “The movie’s about two guys. Who are. You know. I just didn’t watch it on the big TV in case someone saw.”

Ilya watches porn on his 63” television screen in broad daylight. In his own fucking apartment, with the doors locked and the shades drawn, like a normal person. His flirtiness takes a bit of a turn when he imagines Hollander all shut up in here, scared that someone’s gonna catch him – what, looking at something *gay*? In the same apartment where he’s sucked Ilya’s cock five times this month. Home’s supposed to be somewhere you feel safe.

Not that Ilya’s an expert on home.

He doesn’t have any good English words to respond, so instead, he walks over and leans on Hollander’s shoulder. Hears his intake of breath.

“If you want to watch two men fucking, just call me. I am only one floor away.”

“I already told you, they were not fucking in the movie!”

“Mm. Sounds like boring movie.” Ilya kisses his neck.

He knows the moment he has Hollander on the hook. He goes from being so wound-up tight to nearly melting back into Ilya’s arms. He doesn’t smile or get giddy about it when he gives over like this; it almost looks painful, sometimes, the expression on his face when he turns around and goes for Ilya’s mouth. Like the wanting is a little miserable to him. Ilya doesn’t want anything about this to be sad, but he’s not yet figured out how to keep their arrangement fun and lighthearted while fucking Shane Hollander, the most stressed out man in the universe. So Ilya just shuts up, and kisses him back.

He appreciates that they have time, tonight. No game tomorrow, nobody looking for them now. Their last few hookups have been frantic; against the wall, on the floor, in the shower while multi-tasking. This time, he spends time inhaling the scent of Hollander, his expensive shampoo, and running his hands up and down the broad sides of Hollander’s body through his clothes. He’s warm.

“Were you really gonna invite me out to a club or was that just an excuse to get your dick sucked?” Hollander asks, against Ilya’s mouth. His hand clutches Ilya’s jaw, moves it just where he wants it.

“Mm, guess it is a mystery,” says Ilya, because he’s honestly still not sure himself. Hollander at a club is funny because he looks so incredibly awkward and uncomfortable that it’s like watching footage of aliens on earth. Hollander in bed is a very different kind of entertaining.

“You’re such an asshole,” Hollander says. If he was a doll with a pull-string that would be one of his pre-programmed phrases. “Come on. Let’s at least make it to the fucking bed for once.”

Ilya kisses him down the hallway, into his room, while taking his clothes off, while pushing him down onto his mattress. His bed is covered in stupid pillows but Ilya can’t remove

himself from Hollander's lips long enough to insult them; he knocks a few off the bed but then gets distracted by the feeling of laying on top of Hollander, the heat and squirmy movement of his body. Ilya rolls himself between Hollander's legs, grabs one of his huge thighs and brings it up to bracket his own hips.

Hollander's needy already, his hot breaths fanning Ilya's face in quick little pants. Ilya pushes one hand underneath him, and grabs his ass.

"I want to fuck you," Ilya mutters into the scant space between them. He can feel the way Hollander's body goes still, raises his eyes to watch his face flushing red.

"Like – *now*?" Hollander asks. He looks turned on and mortified in equal measure. He clearly hadn't thought this was a blip of possibility in his day. Ilya hadn't really thought about it either, when he was coming over here, but it suddenly seems vitally important that he gets Shane Hollander's uptight asshole around his cock as soon as possible.

"What, you have other plans? You were about to stay in and probably do fucking yoga all night. I have more fun ways to stretch you out."

He pushes at the hinge of Hollander's thigh, making it fall open to the side. He's more flexible than Ilya, although this is a stretch they'd probably all be good at, because of hockey – their sport involves a lot more hip flexibility than Ilya thinks most people realise. For a moment Ilya just stares down at Hollander's cock, hard and twitching against his belly, and strong expanse of his open legs.

"I'm not, like – prepared," Hollander says stiffly.

"I will wait while you go take shower, if you want," Ilya offers. He puts his lips to the tender space where Hollander's inner thigh meets his groin, sucks on it for a moment. "We have plenty of time. But we don't have to, if you are scared."

He's maybe caught out by his English because Ilya doesn't mean it in a chirping way, genuinely not trying to dare Hollander into something, but he can see Hollander takes it that way – bristles, his hands shoving Ilya's head away from his crotch for a moment. "I'm not fucking *scared*," he snaps.

"No, is okay, is not a bad thing. I just mean maybe it's scary if you have not done it before."

"Oh my god, shut up." Hollander scrambles away from Ilya's hands and sits up at the top of the bed, leaning back against the headboard with his legs outstretched. His cock is still stiff and bobbing in the air. He covers his face with his hands for a moment. "I'm not – I've done *some* stuff before, okay? On my own."

Ilya looks up at him for a moment, still sprawled on his stomach on the bed, looking up at Hollander above him. He tries to parse what Hollander means behind the words he didn't say. Hesitantly, Ilya guesses, "By stuff, you mean put things in your asshole?"

"*Rozanov*." Hollander scrabbles to the side and grabs one of the obnoxious throw pillows, which he lobs at Ilya's head. "Oh my god, you are so annoying." But Ilya doesn't say

anything back, just sits up a bit, keeps looking at him. Eventually, Hollander bites his lip and says, “I mean, yeah, basically. I have – you know. A dildo.”

The entire world as Ilya knows it rewrites itself around that sentence. Shane Hollander. Has a dildo. Uptight, sexually repressed Shane Hollander, who gets embarrassed by locker-room conversations about dating, who can’t seem to say the word *blowjob* to Ilya even when he’s in the middle of getting one. He has a dildo. That he uses. Here, in this bed, where Ilya is currently laying.

Ilya puts his face down into the bedding and lets out a moan. His cock feels so full it could explode.

“Fuck, Hollander. Show me this dildo right now,” he says, voice muffled into the blankets.

“No! Fuck off, you are not seeing it,” Hollander says, laughing. He kicks Ilya in the ribs with his bare foot, and Ilya catches it in his hands, rolls over onto his back and squeezes Hollander’s ankle.

He says, “Mm, we will see about that.” He’s already thinking of plans to find it in the apartment, but first, a far more important question is on his mind. “Does this mean you will let me fuck you, or no?”

The air in the room feels still around them as Hollander sits there, up at the top of the bed, his foot resting across Ilya’s bare chest. This is maybe the most time they’ve spent together naked without anyone touching a cock, and it’s only been a few minutes. The world is swimming in Ilya’s head, nothing real outside of this bed, these soft sheets, this hot body beside him.

“Give me ten minutes,” Hollander says, and scrambles out of the bed.

He closes the bathroom door behind him and Ilya hears the shower cut on. His pulse is hammering through his whole body; his dick’s so hard it won’t stay still, twitching in the air like he’s trying to fuck Hollander through space. Ilya lets himself touch it for just a moment, squeezing the head and pulling his foreskin back, but it feels too good. He stops. Takes some deep breaths.

Figuring he’ll be helpful, Ilya sits up and opens Hollander’s nightstand. He wouldn’t have even thought Hollander was likely to have lube and condoms here if it wasn’t for the word *dildo*. Of course, the drawer is extremely boring. Neatly stacked away are two books with hockey players on the covers, a bottle of eyedrops, a phone charger, lip balm, a sleep mask. Ilya messes it all up rooting around at the back, and triumphantly emerges with a little black magnetic-closure box. When he opens it, he finds a roll of condoms and two half-empty bottles of expensive lube; one plain, one labelled *Strawberry Flavour, with All-Natural Oils and Berry Extract!*

Ilya is so delighted with his find that he spreads it all out on the bed. When Hollander emerges from the bathroom a few minutes later, his skin a little pink where he’s still scrubbing off his chest with a towel, he freezes where he’s stood when he spots Ilya on the bed, and then makes a face like an angry kitten.

“Don’t go through my stuff, Rozanov! There could have been private shit in there.”

“I was being helpful,” Ilya tells him innocently. “Tell me, is the strawberry lube approved on your special diet?”

“Oh my god, fuck off,” Hollander says, snatching the bottle up and shoving it back into the bedside drawer. But the other bottle’s still out, and the condoms. And now he’s stood above Ilya naked and warm from the shower and squeaky clean and Ilya can smell his soap from here. His cock’s not quite hard anymore but it’s still plump and red between his legs.

Ilya reaches out and touches his hip. “Sure you don’t want to use your dildo instead?”

“You’re the most annoying person in the whole world,” Hollander says, and climbs down onto the bed, on top of Ilya, his legs going either side of Ilya’s hips, his hands winding into Ilya’s hair. His body’s so warm and he’s heavy, delicious. Ilya kisses him and wants to live in his mouth.

He doesn’t know who told Shane Hollander to be such a good kisser, but it worked. Or maybe it’s all natural, because Hollander kisses kind of like he does everything else – earnestly and desperately, like he wants to be the best so badly that he’s shameless in his ambition, like he wants to give himself over completely to what he’s doing.

Ilya rolls him over, and grabs the lube, and over the course of the next few minutes he tries to ignore his own racing pulse and focus on sticking his fingers in Hollander’s ass. He lays himself over Hollander and pets his hair while Hollander scrunches his eyes closed and breathes hard; for a second it looks like he’s in pain, but no, he’s just enjoying it too fucking much. His cock gets hard again while Ilya’s fingering him and Ilya’s so turned on he could die.

“It feels good?” he checks. “Is okay?”

“Yes, fuck, it’s okay,” Hollander murmurs into the space between them, and then kisses Ilya again, while Ilya has three fingers in his ass and the other hand squeezing his tits. And Ilya’s not even the one being touched, but he could nearly come from this, it’s so hot.

Ilya’s had a lot of sex in his life; the amount of people he’s done anal with is a lot smaller than the general list, but he’s not exactly inexperienced. He’s done this to a couple of men and a handful of women. It’s been hot every time, although it usually seems like an unnecessary extra step with women that he doesn’t usually suggest. It’s always been hot, but none of those other times have felt like *this*. He doesn’t know if it’s because it’s Hollander’s first time, and Ilya’s feeling his excitement and nerves and vulnerability second-hand. He doesn’t know if it’s the leftover thrill of how *dangerous* this is, doing this with another player in their macho, homophobic sport.

The way Hollander tips his head back on the pillow, pants out Ilya’s name, sounds like he’s losing his goddamn mind. The way his eyes are shiny when he opens them like he might fucking cry from liking it so much. The smell of his skin when Ilya tucks his head into the crook of Hollander’s neck; the wet feeling of his mouth when Ilya leans up to kiss him.

“I want it, I want it, fuck, Rozanov, just put it in,” Hollander gasps, eyes scrunched closed, fingers clenching at Ilya’s back hard enough to leave little fingertip bruises scattered between his moles. How is Ilya supposed to fucking resist that?

He pulls his wet fingers out of Hollander’s ass and wipes them on the towel Hollander brought out of his shower – smart thinking, of course, because Hollander always thinks ahead. Ilya’s hands are kind of shaking as he puts on the condom. He notes that distantly, like an observer of his own body, because he can’t really feel anything other than the roaring pulse in his cock right now, and the tingle in his mouth whenever it presses to Hollander’s skin.

Ilya pulls one of Hollander’s knees over his elbow and uses the other hand to line his cock up with his hole. Hollander makes a noise like he’s dying; Ilya shudders, can’t catch his breath. He’s not even in yet. He rubs the tip over Hollander’s skin and could nearly come. When he pushes in, just some of it, Hollander’s back arches up from the sheets and his hands fly above his head, knotting in the pillows. He goes, “*Ah.*”

“Is it okay?” Ilya asks desperately. He leans over Hollander’s body to try and look in his eyes, and all he can feel is how hot the squeeze around his cock is, how Hollander shifts his lower body and it sends ripples all through Ilya’s spine where they’re joined.

“Fuck. Fuck, yes, it’s okay, it’s good,” Hollander gasps out. Ilya tips forwards and kisses him, a wet open-mouthed kiss as he shoves the rest of his cock inside Hollander. It’s so good he’s shaking. He rolls his hips and shoves his face into the side of Hollander’s neck, tasting his salty skin, inhaling the deep scent of him. Above him Hollander pants, “Yeah, like that,” and Ilya just wants to do a good job so he keeps kissing Hollander’s neck and squeezing his nipples and fucking him in short, sharp thrusts that make his stomach clench.

Ilya loses track of how long they fuck. He feels like he’s right about to come the entire time but somehow they just keep going and going, their bodies heating up together, sweating, kissing, Ilya’s necklace dangling between Hollander’s pecs as he fucks him, making desperate noises into each other’s mouths. It doesn’t make sense that it feels this good. Ilya’s drunk, his entire world is in his cock, his entire world is Hollander’s tight asshole. When they stop for a second to change positions it’s like the world’s swimming around him, he’s almost dizzy. He can’t see anything outside of the golden body in front of him. He buries his face in Hollander’s armpit and smells his clean fresh sweat. Licks it. Hollander makes a noise like he’s trying to be grossed out but has forgotten how.

When Hollander comes it’s like he doesn’t even realise it’s gonna happen – suddenly he jolts on Ilya’s cock and Ilya feels a hot, wet spurt of something hit his own stomach and Hollander makes a wild choked noise like an animal and his hands grip Ilya’s ass so tight it hurts, pulling Ilya further into his body while he goes tense from head to toe, and Ilya’s only a simple man. He shoves his face into Hollander’s throat and comes so hard inside him that the whole world goes dark.

Afterwards, Ilya lets his whole body fall on top of Hollander, trusting Hollander can take his weight, and they lay together in the mess of cum and take a long time to catch their breath.

“So, was it better than your dildo?” Ilya asks. Hollander hits him, but it’s clear that his heart’s not in it. Ilya’s fucked the fight right out of him.

Once they’ve caught their breath and traded a few kisses and wiped the cum off, Ilya showers at Hollander’s place, then goes home. Hollander doesn’t offer him dinner or to stay the night. It’s good that he doesn’t – Ilya would have had to say no, obviously.

They get on an eight-game win streak and it doesn't even feel like it's hard.

Chapter End Notes

next time: christmas, ottawa edition 🎄

sidenote: shane was watching brokeback mountain. ilya interrupted before he could get to the end

tysm for reading my loves !! pls keep leaving comments they make me so happy / this chapter is also [on tumblr](#)

Chapter 11: scratch, kick, let gravity win.

Chapter Notes

unfortunately for all of us work started again this week so no more twice-in-a-day updates. everyone boomed

eta: the lovely Dr_Dreiser gave me help with the russian lines in this chapter, thank you so much again!! translations in at the end notes but the russian snippets aren't vital to understanding the chapter as shane doesn't understand them either ofc :')

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

Shane puts his head down and takes a deep breath, focuses on pedaling the exercise bike as hard as he can. His legs are burning, which is a good thing. He turns up the resistance on the bike, pedals harder, tries to keep his breaths regulated – deep inhale through the nose, short exhales through the mouth, get to the end of the mile before breaking for a drink of electrolyte water.

Around him, the team's idle chatter fills the gym, along with clanking weight machines, whirring of treadmills, panting breaths. They're deep into the season now that they've hit December, and they have a momentum going that everyone's kind of stressed about keeping up, the way too much of a good thing can start to feel like a trap. Everyone's pre-game rituals are out of control. They're all so superstitious about how well they've been doing that you're liable to get tackled if you walk to the right of the locker room trashcan or don't let Heikkilä kiss your helmet before you step into the tunnel. Focusing is more important now than ever, so the energy in the gym is a little loopy. The TV is playing some poppy music channel above their heads, which Shane tries to ignore.

It's easier to ignore the TV than it is to ignore the sight across the room; Ilya Rozanov shirtless on a treadmill, wearing nothing but compression shorts and Adidas sneakers, sweating and out-of-breath while teaching Russian swearwords to Dubek in his low voice. That sight is, in fact, nearly nauseating. So Shane keeps his head down towards his bike, and counts his breaths.

Connors is cycling hands-free on the bike beside Shane, doing something on his phone. It's warm in the gym, heating pumping to compensate for the snow outside, and Shane's drenched in sweat by the time he's halfway through his cardio. He shifts on the bike, tugging the collar of his shirt away with one hand to get some air onto his hot skin.

And suddenly there's a delighted intake of breath next to him.

"Hollzy, is that a fucking *hickey*?" Connors asks. He sounds gleeful – Shane's whole body floods cold. He tugs his shirt collar back again, trying to hide whatever Connors has spotted,

but he doesn't know where exactly to hide because Shane hadn't known it was there himself. It's been all of one day since the last time he gave up on holding out and found himself lingering in Rozanov's apartment after the other guys they'd been playing Chel with had left. He didn't think to do a fucking full-body check for marks this morning.

"Fuck off. It's a bruise, from hockey – you know, that sport we play for a living?" he says, trying to sound like he's ribbing, casual, relaxed. But Shane knows himself and knows he's never sounded casual or relaxed a day in his life, especially when he's already halfway through his cardio and out of breath.

A couple nearby heads perk up, and before he knows it, three massive hockey players are descending on him in a sweat-drenched pile, someone tugging down the back collar of Shane's shirt and whistling while he tells them to fuck off.

"Our fucking rookie has a hickey? I thought Hollzy was still a virgin," Marleau says, with a laugh.

"Dude, I'm not a rookie anymore. And I'm not a – *virgin*."

He knows he should be less embarrassed to say the word. Sex is half of what hockey players talk about. It's such a standard topic of locker room talk and he gives away too much, he knows he does, with how he blushes and stammers when he's asked about who he's sleeping with. Everyone else is just so *casual*. It's not unusual for someone to send porn to the team group chat – usually something sensationalist and wild to laugh at rather than actually sexy, but still porn. A few of the guys keep a tally of which road city has the best *puck bunnies*, a term that makes Shane kind of want to barf. Whenever someone goes home with a girl when they team are out together, they're relentlessly ribbed and asked for details the next day. Which they usually give.

"Aww, he's all grown up." Marley pretends to wipe a tear out of his eye, then laughs and claps Shane around the shoulders, hard enough it stings. Shane takes his hands off the bike so he can shove Marley away, slapping at his hands.

"Who the hell'd you meet?" Cadyn asks. "You sure as shit didn't wheel anyone when we dragged you to that party on Saturday."

Shane's been making an effort not to be the total odd-man-out on the team, and had let himself be cajoled into going to a boat party at the harbour. He'd enjoyed hanging out and talking to some other athletes there, a few professional basketball players who didn't know much about hockey. He also got seasick after fifteen minutes, so definitely hadn't been in the mood to flirt. If there was even anyone there he'd have flirted with to begin with. Which there wasn't, with one notable exception, although that notable exception had been three-way kissing two women on the dancefloor while Shane was taking nausea pills in the corner and texting his mom.

"Nobody," Shane says. "I mean – just a friend."

"Hollzy has a fuckbuddy? And she's leaving huge fucking marks on you? Damn, kid, it's always the quiet ones!"

A few of their teammates laugh and someone gets Shane in a noogie and he tries to laugh it off, too, but his heart is racing in a way he can't blame on the gym.

"I bet it's that yoga chick he's always fucking watching on Youtube," Connors says. "Her studio's in Boston, right?"

Marley says, "Shit, you gotta be onto something. You been doing the freaky downward dog, Hollander?"

Shane has to search his mind for a moment before he even knows who they're talking about, and eventually comes up with the sports masseuse he saw a few times last year who also posts yoga videos for high-performance athletes. She's very good at her job, so he follows her, and he's never even considered before the fact that she's in her twenties and very – like, *yoga* looking, which he guesses means attractive. Fit and bendy and wearing a lot of tight clothes, at least. Long, shiny black hair. Maybe she is hot. Maybe if people saw them together they'd assume they liked each other.

He knows he should deny it, because it's not true, and it's not fair to let rumours spread about a woman he's met twice. He hasn't even seen her in person since his shoulder injury from last season healed. The problem is that it's so, so much easier for Shane's life if the team believes the person leaving hickeys on the back of his neck, an improbable placement for most heterosexual positions, is a walking Lululemon ad.

"I'm seriously not going into details," Shane says, trying to sound neutral enough that they maybe think it's true, maybe not. He's sweating a lot but he's mid-workout. Surely nobody could question that, right?

He's swamped with relief when, across the room, Dubek manages to fall off his treadmill, and the room's collective chirping descends onto him. Shane shakes his hands out for a moment, taking a breath before he starts cycling again.

With one last flick at the back of Shane's neck, Connors gets off his bike to head over to the weights, and he's replaced by Hayden Pike a few minutes later. Hayden just gives Shane a nod, at first, which he gratefully returns. After a pleasant couple months playing together, he's finding it's easier to be quiet without feeling like a total loser around Hayden than around a lot of the team.

After a little while of cycling in silence, Hayden leans over and says, "Hey, man, you wouldn't wanna come over to my place for dinner tonight, would you? Jackie's kind of losing her mind with nobody to talk to except a newborn, and she keeps hounding me to have you over." He laughs, adds, "She keeps watching your interviews and saying you seem like the only hockey player with any fucking manners."

Shane, as much as he fucking hates it, pauses. He slides his gaze towards Rozanov's treadmill across the room. Obviously they aren't going to see each other tonight. They just hooked up last night. Shane's gone from telling himself *never again* to *not more than once a month* to *not more than once a week* and he refuses to fall any further down that scale. But still. It's a night off. Would Rozanov have wanted to?

“Come on, it’ll be fun,” Hayden says. “Hey, I promise not to ask about your sex life. Scout’s honour.”

Shane lets out a short, surprised laugh before he can help himself. “Well, in that case, I’d be an idiot to pass it up.”

“Hell, yes! Jackie’s gonna be thrilled, man. I’ll text her. Hey, what food can you eat on your weird-ass diet?”

It’s nice, the idea of having been invited somewhere. Shane likes hanging out with the team to play video games and work out and get team meals and stuff, but a lot of the Raiders are more into partying and clubbing, which is his worst actual nightmare. He worries about not spending enough time bonding with them because he doesn’t want to get wasted on random weekday nights. If Hayden and his wife want to cook Shane’s diet food and listen to him talk about hockey stats, he’s not gonna pass it up.

Eventually they finish up cardio, getting up to stretch out and rehydrate before weight training. Shane’s bent halfway over touching his toes when Rozanov’s voice appears behind him, close enough that Shane can smell him, kind of feel the heat of his body.

“Ah, you two are off bikes at last? I thought you were going to be sitting there all day. Good practice for how long you will spend sitting on the bench next game, Pike?”

Shane straightens up just to give him a glare. Rozanov grins, winks, and walks away again, leaving Hayden flipping him off behind his back.

“He’s a total dick, right?” Hayden asks Shane, as Shane sighs and goes to start loading up weights. Hayden trails after him. “I’m still figuring out most of the guys on the team, but Rozanov just seems like an asshole.”

Shane wavers for a moment, hefting a plate onto the barbell. It’s not like he wants to defend Rozanov. He is an asshole. At the same time, it feels wrong, to Shane, that someone on the team have that as their sole opinion.

He settles on saying, his voice coming out kind of stilted; “He likes riling people up, but he’s not actually the worst. I mean, yes, he is an asshole most of the time, but if you need him to be decent about something actually important then he’ll be decent.”

It’s the nicest way he can think to phrase it without digging into the weird, uncomfortable knot of language stuck somewhere in Shane’s chest, where he can’t begin to access it or even understand it himself. Shane doesn’t know how Rozanov comes across to people who aren’t getting railed by him. Most of the team seems to like him, in the exasperated way you can like anyone with that much ego, but Shane doesn’t think anyone really *gets* him. They treat him like a wild animal, a little amazed and unsure of his next move at all times, or sometimes more like a badly-trained pet, like they love him but always believe he’s about to pee on the floor. Which, to be fair, Rozanov has done at a team party before, after a half bottle of vodka and a line of something Shane pretended not to see. He’s an asshole and out of control a lot of the time. He acts like rules don’t apply to him. He tests boundaries like it’s his job.

But he's also dragging half of this team to playoffs by sheer will alone, with Shane's help, and elevating all of their careers with his tenacity and talent. He buys everyone lavish birthday gifts on their birthdays, usually to make fun of them in some way, but he still remembers. And he shuts down ignorant shit in the locker room with derisive insults; has this way of doing it that doesn't even seem like he's being progressive or anything, just that he's making it seem fucking uncool and unfunny to call bad players *faggots* or tell Shane to speak to the delivery person when they get Chinese food even though they know he's not Chinese. The kind of stuff that makes Shane's stomach flip but that he never stands up to, because he's used to it, because his career is only possible if he doesn't rock the boat. Rozanov has no problem rocking the boat. He knows he's too valuable for anyone to push him off it.

Yeah, Shane has no idea how to say any of that to someone who doesn't already know.

So Hayden makes a neutral kind of noise, but raises an eyebrow at the answer. "Huh. So you guys are like, friends? Sorry, I bet you get sick of being asked that, but I can't fucking figure you two out. You play insanely together on the ice."

"We're not *friends*," Shane says, running his tongue over the inside of his teeth. "We're, you know, teammates. He's ridiculous, but I respect his hockey. And you can't exactly be on the same team without hanging out."

It's not an answer at all, which Hayden seems to realise. He looks at Shane for a quiet moment and then says, "Sure, okay. Gotcha. Well, if that makes me your best friend on the team, so be it!"

Dinner at Hayden and Jackie's is nice. Jackie cooks food that Shane can actually eat and they talk about things they miss from Canada, summer vacations, Boston sightseeing. Nothing that stresses Shane out. They do make him hold the baby for a minute, but she's not crying and her head smells good, so Shane enjoys the cuddle until he can pass her back without seeming rude.

They lose to Toronto on December 23rd, and the next morning Shane flies home to Ottawa.

It's not exactly how he wanted the last game before Christmas to go, but they can't win them all. At least they'll be playing again between Christmas and the New Year – Shane hopes they can go into next year with a win as their most recent game. It's kind of a superstitious thing in his mind, like they'll have a good year of hockey if they cue it up just before the date turns. With that thought in his mind, he allows himself to clock off for two full days of relaxation at his parents' house.

Shane's version of relaxation is probably different than a lot of people's, but he likes it.

On Christmas morning he wakes up early in his childhood bedroom, the sky still dark outside his window. His parents switched the old twin bed out for a double a few years ago, after he first moved out, but a lot of the room is the same as it was when he was a teenager, only living here part-time thanks to Juniors; shelves full of textbooks, old pairs of skates hanging on several different hooks, a couple pucks from special games propped up on the desk, posters of hockey players on the walls. One on the ceiling above his bed.

On Christmas morning Shane stares up at that poster, noticing that the paper's gone a little yellowed on the corners; one of them's starting to peel away from the blu-tac.

Shane's always been obsessed with hockey. So obsessed that nobody, not even him, had questioned his decision to put a poster of a muscley, shirtless man on the ceiling above his bed when he was fourteen. It was normal, because it was a hockey player, stood in a hockey rink, with other hockey players in the background; he just happened to have his shirt off, because that was the photoshoot, nothing weird about it. Shane's mom had seen it and said it might be good for his visualisation tactics if he looked at it before bed and tried to make himself lucid dream about playing. Shane learned to jerk off looking up at that poster and convinced himself that he just really liked Ottawa's power play.

God. He thinks briefly about the amount of Ilya Rozanov merch some closeted teenager in Boston might own right now and it sort of makes him want to rip down all the posters in this room. Which is really stupid. So instead of doing that, he takes a deep breath, smelling his mom's favourite detergent on the sheets, and then rolls out of bed.

Christmas is no excuse to slack off, when he has nowhere else to be. His parents are still asleep, so Shane runs four miles on the treadmill in the basement – too snowy outside to risk a fall, nearly icy enough to be better of skating down the road than wearing his Reeboks. By the time he's stretched and showered, Shane can hear the signs of life from the kitchen. He wanders in to see his parents crowding over the stove together, chatting while his dad scrambles eggs in the pan.

"Good morning," Shane says. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, honey!" his mom says, leaning over to kiss his cheek. "Did you sleep okay?"

There's Christmas music humming from the radio, twinkling lights up on the kitchen walls, a heavy coat of snow on the windows outside. It feels almost like Christmas when he was a little kid, except back then they'd be in a rush trying to get their shit together to drive to his grandparents' and have lunch with his aunt and cousins. Now they spend Christmas just the three of them, at home, so Shane actually gets time to take a breath.

"Yeah, I slept great." He always does, when he's home; something about the feeling of being in his parents' house just knocks him right out to sleep like he's a little kid again. "Still kinda exhausted, but it's not like that's weird."

“It’s been a hell of a season for you,” Dad says, as he sprinkles some torn spinach into the eggs. “I wish they’d give you more than a couple days off for Christmas.”

Shane’s mom strokes his shoulder and then says, “But then people wouldn’t have any hockey to watch during the holidays.”

“You really are worse than me,” Shane tells her, laughing. He kind of agrees, though. Some of the guys on the team complain about not getting any time off to travel with their kids and families, but Shane doesn’t like the idea of too long of a break in the middle of the season – how would they keep their skills and momentum up? What if people slacked on training and they came back awful in the New Year and missed playoffs because of it?

“Oh, you’re dying to get back already, don’t lie,” his mom says, because she knows him, rolling her eyes at him as she scoops up a tray of coffees. “Come on, mister. Let’s eat on the couch and you can open your stocking.”

He eats four eggs scrambled with vegetables for breakfast, alongside his protein shake. He needs to keep his weight up for the second half of the regular season, and everyone’s already starting to try and up their calories in hopes they’ll be sailing into a spot in playoffs where they’ll need the extra energy. In between eating, they open the stockings his dad still insists on making all three of them every year and claiming they’re from Santa. Shane’s parents stopped really knowing how to buy him gifts a long time ago, since he has everything he wants and is stressed out by too much clutter, so he ends up with nice essentials – new stick tape, protein bars, gym socks.

“Thanks, dad,” Shane says, once he’s found the single orange at the bottom.

“What are you thanking me for?” his dad says, faux-innocent. “I don’t have a clue where all that came from!”

They clean up breakfast together, Shane rinsing before his mom stacks the dishwasher, and then it’s time to start making lunch. His dad does most of the cooking, but dispatches Shane and his mom to help in the places they’re least likely to mess up. They always do fish instead of turkey; better for Shane’s diet, and they’re not really traditional Christmas dinner people anyway. They do a few classic dishes and his mom makes wasabi peas and buys mochi from the good Asian supermarket for their dessert – Shane lets himself eat one. After lunch, they watch an action movie that’s playing on the TV while his parents sip wine and his dad unboxes a brand new jigsaw onto the coffee table. Shane drinks a full-sugar ginger ale, thinking *well, since it’s Christmas*.

In the movie, there are some supposedly Russian bad guys with terrible accents.

Shane slides his hand into his pocket, feeling the edge of his phone. The guy on the screen says *spasiba* in such a lilting, unconvincing way that even Shane can pick apart the bad pronunciation, after a year and a half of being on the same team as Rozanov. He didn’t think he’d picked up any Russian vowels, but clearly they’ve slipped into his mind somehow. Along with other things of Rozanov’s.

His face gets warm. Shane glances sideways, making sure his parents are focused on the movie and the puzzle.

One text can't hurt.

He slips his phone out of his pocket and angles his back to the arm of the couch so his parents can't see who he's texting. Opens the thread with Rozanov. The last few messages aren't incriminating, unless you know what they mean, but even looking at them still sends a dizzy tingle through Shane's body. *8PM?* and *u aprtmnt or mine* and *u r loser i am 5 points ahead*)))) and a link to an ESPN clip of Shane's best goals of the season. Anyone seeing these texts between teammates would think nothing of it. Shane is very careful to make sure of that; he deletes anything that seems too risky as soon as they're done with a conversation.

The texts could mean anything, but what they mean to Shane is: it had been 8.30 by the time Rozanov was sucking on his nipple like his life depended on it while Shane pulled his hair. They'd decided on Shane's apartment the next time and then Shane had regretted it when he had to change the sheets.

Shane types out, *Merry Christmas*, and then immediately backspaces it. Rozanov told him last year that he doesn't celebrate Christmas on the 25th, right? And anyway, it's a bit weirdly earnest to send a text to *just* him. Shane already messaged the team group text at 7am wishing everyone a good holiday, and got a lot of chirps back about his morning wake-up time several hours later.

He stares down at his keyboard for a minute and then tries, *Are you bored out of your mind while everyone else is off spending time with* – no, that's already getting too long, he deletes it. *Hope you're not too lonely* – god, no, that's needy.

The smell of warm sugar and cinnamon is drifting out from the kitchen; there are tarts in the oven. On the television an explosion rings out, following by a string of supposedly Russian expletives on low volume, but Shane doesn't recognise any of them from the extensive cursing he hears at practice.

He types *Watching a movie with terrible Russian accents*, and sends it before he can overthink anymore. He quickly shoves his phone back in his pocket and puffs out his cheeks for a moment, letting out a long, slow breath.

The buzz of a text comes less than a minute later. He doesn't know why he even put his phone away. He pulls it out again.

From: Rozanov (Boston Raiders) [16:23]

all amrcn movies have bad russian accents You are all very offensive

Sent [16:24]

I'm not American, you can't blame me for that.

From: Rozanov (Boston Raiders) [16:24]

i can blame u 4 watever i want 2 hollander))

Sent [16:26]

Would you learn to text properly?

From: Rozanov (Boston Raiders) [16:24]

(((

no

u have good boring canada chrismis?

Sent [16:27]

Sure, it's been nice. How's your day?

From: Rozanov (Boston Raiders) [16:28]

very boring nobdy want 2 get drunk with me

what you do NYE?

Sent [16:27]

I don't have plans. We have a game that evening

From: Rozanov (Boston Raiders) [16:35]

yes & after game i have party. renting out whole club wth marley. you wil cum?

*come, i mean ;)

Sent [16:38]

Shut up.

I guess, if I'm not too tired after the game.

From: Rozanov (Boston Raiders) [16:39]

))))))))))

Shane shoves his phone in his pocket just in time to see the credits beginning to scroll on the movie. He has no idea how it ended – presumably the fake Russian bad guys were defeated since he knows this movie has like three sequels, but he really wasn't paying attention to the details.

He clears his throat, stretching out on the couch a bit. His dad's looking at him; Shane only notices it after a moment.

"So, kiddo," his dad says, looking back down at the jigsaw he's still working on, the picture of level-headed calm like he always is. "I was wondering. You met anyone nice out in Boston lately?"

Shane blinks at him. "Sure. I'm getting on well with most of the team; I mean, there's always a few bad apples in the locker room, but it's not a bad group of guys. The new trade, Hayden, he's really friendly. I had dinner with his wife and baby. And him, I mean, he was also there."

He doesn't catch any other meaning in the question until he watches his parents trade a glance over their glasses of wine. His whole life, Shane's parents have had their own secret little language. They can talk to each other with a tiny incline of the head, a subtle raise of eyebrows. A lot of people's parents are married, but aren't really *partners* the way Shane's parents are; he's always admired them for that. Except when they use it against him to psychologically evaluate him right in front of his face.

"Well, that's great," his dad says, while his mom turns the television off and starts taking some leftover dishes into the kitchen, a silent retreat from the conversation. "But I was more talking about if you might have met anyone you'd like to date down there. There must be lots of nice girls who like hockey in Boston, right?"

"Uh, no. I mean, yes, I'm sure there are girls who like hockey." That sounds like one of the dumbest statements Shane's ever heard once he's said it aloud. "But none that I'm, like, dating. I'm honestly just really focused on the team right now."

"Hey, nothing wrong with that," his dad says, clapping Shane on the shoulder in the way he does when he wants to be supportive but doesn't really know how. Shane gets it. He's also

not good at these conversations. “I just worry about you being so focused that you forget to have fun sometimes. You know that.”

Shane says, “I’m having lots of fun, Dad. I’m playing hockey.”

True to Rozanov’s word, he and Marleau have rented out a small, expensively decorated private club for New Year’s. *Private* doesn’t mean *quiet*, unfortunately. Between twenty hockey players and their plus-ones, random friends, a couple celebrity fans who were in boxes at the game that night, and a lot of pretty women Shane’s never met before in his life, it doesn’t feel all that different to being at a regular club. The only major difference is that Rozanov’s making them play Russian techno music and the drinks are labelled with different members of the team. If you want a vodka shot you have to ask for a *Rozy*. The champagne is a Bubbly Marley. Shane rolls his eyes when he looks at the dumb printed lists that have been left out on the tables and sees that a *Virgin Moscow Mule* is a Hollander. That’s basically just ginger ale and syrup. The team still haven’t forgotten him having a hickey one single time a month ago.

They played a game tonight and won in OT. Shane had a pretty satisfying breakaway goal, which is the only reason he’s actually agreed to show up tonight – he’s still kind of pumping with adrenaline from the game and going back home to his quiet, empty apartment feels a little anticlimactic. It means it’s already late by the time they make it to the club, and the rest of the guests are pretty deep into partying already.

Shane hugs the wall as he finds his way to a table, taking in the small, enclosed space of the club, the dark velvet walls, the handful of enclosed booths surrounding a neon-lit dancefloor. He’s awkward and uncomfortable in his own skin, as fucking usual, but he lets himself be pulled down to sit with a few of the guys when they spot him, cramming into a seat next to Heikkilä, their huge Finnish goalie.

“Hollzy! You fucking shark, man, that goal, I could kiss you. Fuck Tampa, right?”

“Sure,” Shane says, kind of flushed, pleased and warm under the layers of his team hoodie and jacket. “Fuck Tampa.”

“I pour you a drink, okay. Happy fucking New Year.” There’s a bucket of champagne on ice in the middle of the table, a bunch of shining glasses set out for them already. Heikkilä pours him some and sloshes it towards him, bubbles spilling over the edge, the sweet, sticky scent of champagne flooding Shane’s senses. He’s really not a drinker, but he can hold onto it, maybe have a few sips. He nods, tilts his glass Heiks’ way.

“Thanks, man,” he says, setting the glass down. “Hey, about that power play, your first save was seriously impressive—”

“Kak dela, blyat?” Rozanov’s voice is suddenly booming beside him, cutting off everyone else’s conversation, loud even over the thump of the music. *“Ty sobirayesh’sya pozdravit’ menya s zabitym golom?”*

Shane’s startled for a moment, turning to see Rozanov stood beside the little table, his curls glowing under the neon lights. Shane so rarely hears Rozanov speaking Russian for more than a quick burst of cursewords; he speaks fast in his native language, his voice low, words blurring together. It honestly sounds kind of hot. Shane wishes he understood a single word.

He also wishes he was looking literally anywhere else when all of a sudden, the most gorgeous woman Shane has ever seen in his life has her arms around Ilya’s neck, hugging him. She’s tall and slim with a perfect halo of dark curls, in a tiny silver dress that’s glimmering under the club lights. It looks like she fits right up against Rozanov’s muscular body with ease, familiar with him, one of her hands coming up to brush his curls out of his face.

She leans close to Rozanov and says something like, *“Znayesh zhe menya. Pozdravlyu, kogda tvoye vladeniye shayboy ne budet takim kosyachnym.”*

Shane watches as Rozanov gets play-irritated, the way he sometimes does with Shane; baring his teeth like he’s growling, shoving her away but not really using any weight behind it. And she laughs, tilting her head to the sky. She has perfect teeth.

Rozanov turns to the table and says, “Who has already met Svetlana? Marley, not hitting on her again or I will break your teeth. Heiky, this is my friend – Sveta, our weird fucking goalie. Oh, and this is Hollander.”

He turns to Shane with a twinkle in his eye, one arm around the woman’s shoulders. Rozanov’s wearing an absolutely ridiculous outfit, a silky red shirt patterned with golden tiger-stripes that probably costs more than most people’s cars. It’s half unbuttoned to show off the ,matching gold of his necklace and his hair is smoothed down around his ears, making him look kind of older, almost predatory under the dark club lights.

“Nice to meet you, Shane Hollander,” the woman says. She’s got an accent but it’s not as heavy as Rozanov’s, doesn’t choke over the vowels the way his does. Something in her gaze looks just like Rozanov, though – a cool, calculating look of intelligence covered up with a smirk, the way a hunter looks at prey. She reaches out a hand and Shane doesn’t know whether he’s supposed to shake it or kiss it, what’s normal. “I’m a big fan of your game.”

He goes for a kind of weird handshake and nods at her, leaning a little closer to speak over the loud music. “Uh, hi, yeah. Sorry, you’re – Svetlana, right?”

He knows who she is, but he kind of wishes he didn’t. Apparently, the year before Shane joined the team, five of the guys walked in on Rozanov eating her pussy in the locker room. They never fucking let him forget it, which means Shane’s had to hear about it too. Repeatedly. He obviously knows Rozanov sleeps with women – a lot of women. Shane’s fine with that, of course, because he has no reason not to be. It just feels a little different when it’s a fact he knows about a woman whose name Rozanov still brings up on a casual regular basis, even if he only refers to her as a *friend*.

“Yes, but you can call me Sveta if you want,” she says sweetly. “Like we are old friends. Ilyusha does.”

Ilyusha. Shane’s never heard that nickname before – is it a nickname, or does it have some other meaning in Russian? He swallows, his throat kind of stiff.

“Right,” knowing he will never call her anything other than her full name, “Uh, nice to meet you.”

“You want to dance with me?” she asks, leaning into his space suddenly. Russian dance music is still blaring over the sound system, loud enough to hurt Shane’s head.

“I’m – oh, I’m good, actually, I don’t really dance.”

She looks at him, raises one eyebrow, “Suit yourself,” then glances over her shoulder to Rozanov. “*Eto ty o nom postoyanno govorish?* Okay, we’re dancing now.”

Shane doesn’t get a chance to see what Rozanov’s face is doing before he’s been dragged back out onto the small, cramped dancefloor by Svetlana, and Shane is left nursing his drink in the corner, trying not to stare. They dance like people who’ve had sex, not an inch of space between their bodies. The drinks are flowing and the whole place smells like hot bodies and spilled booze and it’s loud and happy, everyone’s having a great night.

This weird stressed-out ball of sickness wads up in Shane’s chest and he doesn’t know why it’s there or how to get rid of it. So he stays at the table with Heikkilä and talks about the game and laughs when people laugh and holds his glass of champagne until it gets warm.

The music stops a minute before midnight, replaced with a loud, echoing countdown over the speakers; the voices of all the guests stumbling over the top of each other in drunken glee to shout along. Shane nods in time to the counting for a bit, sort of smiling at the other guys who’ve ended up draped around the same table as him, not sure when it’s the right time to start counting aloud or when it’ll seem like he’s trying too hard.

“*FIVE!*” everyone is shouting, when Shane decides to join in, and suddenly something *thumps* into him from the side and it’s Svetlana, being pushed into the booth by Rozanov until she falls half on top of Shane.

“*FOUR!*” Shane scrambles away from her body into the scant space on his other side, apologising in a mumble that nobody can really hear. She’s got a half-full drink and she’s laughing, saying something to Rozanov, while he pushes her further into the seat so he can sit down too.

“*THREE!*” Rozanov’s ass must be hanging half off the edge of the seat, to make himself fit. There’s no room at all, and it’s not like his ass is exactly small; Shane knows that, very well.

“TWO!”

Except Svetlana and Rozanov are saying it in Russian, their voices rising above everyone else's because they're suddenly so close to Shane's ears, and the hand Rozanov has wrapped around Svetlana bumps into Shane's shoulder. Readjusts, and lands, fingertips brushing the bare skin of Shane's neck. Shane swallows.

“ONEEEE!”

The music cuts back on the second it hits midnight, making Shane jump.

“Is midnight!” Rozanov cheers. He leans around the table towards Svetlana and puckers his lips, gives her a huge, wet kiss on the mouth. Shane's right there, he's looking right at it. He suddenly feels like he's going to throw up, but he hasn't had more than two sips of champagne.

Except then, Rozanov pulls away from the beautiful woman he's draped over, leans to Marleau across the table, and grabs his face, and plants a messy, exaggerated kiss on his cheek as well.

“Mwah!” he says, while Marleau shoves him off, cursing at him. Rozanov turns back, and his eyes lock onto Shane's.

He winks, and moves forward, and before Shane can even breathe enough to think about backing away, Rozanov's leaning around Svetlana and kissing the side of his face, just between his cheek and the corner of his mouth – close enough to how he kissed Marleau, unless you're Shane, and you can feel the way his lips drag away just over the seam of Shane's mouth for the barest hint of a second. The tiny subtle dab of his tongue.

“Happy New Year! *S Novym Godom*,” Rozanov says, and then tries to go for the next guy in the team before he's unceremoniously shoved out of the booth. “What? You don't like my kisses, assholes? Is good luck!”

Shane's heart thunders in his chest. He can feel the wetness of Rozanov's mouth left on the crease of his cheek.

He's so fucking brazen. And nobody thinks anything of it, because Rozanov's here draped over a beautiful woman and he'll probably take a different woman home and everyone knows that, so him kissing some dudes is just - him being an asshole. Not *gay*. Except when it is, and nobody else knows it, and Shane feels like he's being chased by a tiger through the woods, like he could be caught and killed at any moment, just fucking ripped to shreds.

“I'm gonna get a drink,” he says, to anyone nearby who isn't currently making out with someone or already too drunk to care. Shane scrambles past Svetlana and takes a few deep breaths as he walks through the club; not as crowded as it could be, given the small space and private event, but still plenty of dancing bodies to dodge past in his quest to find the bar. He makes his way around to the quieter side of it, away from the dancefloor and the loudest music, to a darker corner of the room. He feels like he's able to take a breath when the lights are off him.

Shane half-collapses over the bar, waving down a bartender and thinking of the last drink someone else sat down with so he can figure out what a normal thing to order is. “Hi – happy new year – uh, can I get a vodka soda?”

“We’re supposed to call it a Rozanov Sparkler,” she tells him, grinning conspiratorially. “Sure, coming right up.”

Shane doesn’t remember the last time he really drank. He’s not completely tee-total, obviously, but he doesn’t want to drink during the season, terrified of it messing up his game. When he was on his old meds he wasn’t supposed to drink at all, because of the side-effects, but he’s been off them for more than two years now, so he can’t blame that anymore. Mostly, he just doesn’t think he needs it. The last thing Shane Hollander needs is anything that interferes with his self-control. But right now, he just needs literally anything to calm himself down.

Suddenly, a small, cool hand slips around Shane’s shoulder. He jolts and turns, only to see Rozanov’s fucking friend stood next to him, pressed up close like they know each other, smiling his way.

“Hello, Shane Hollander,” she says. “You looked lonely so I thought I would come and say hi.”

Shane’s only been stood alone for a minute.

“Oh. Uh, I’m fine, you really don’t need to do that.”

“But I wanted to. You know, I’m a big hockey fan. I watch all the TV specials about you calling you *generational talent*. And you play so well with Ilyusha on the ice, I wanted to meet you in person.”

“That’s, um, nice of you – I mean, I’m always happy to meet a fan?”

The bartender slides Shane his drink. He takes a long sip, and winces at the bitter taste – then takes another sip. Everything is so loud and the lights are flashing and there’s so many people here that the dulling of his senses feels worth the unfortunate taste.

Svetlana leans against the bar with her chin in her hand and looks him up and down. Her other hand rests on his arm. “I hear you’re very intense about hockey. I am too. I think we’d get along.”

There’s clearly something happening that Shane doesn’t understand. Behind them, the song changes in the room, and there’s a succession of drunken shouts that make him think the new song is probably something popular, although Shane’s never heard it before.

“Sure, maybe,” he agrees. With no idea how to subtly get out of having a conversation with her, Shane pulls his phone out of his pocket and pretends to check it. He’s got messages from his parents wishing him a happy new year, and jumps on the excuse to respond to them.

When he glances up again, Svetlana is still looking at him, something calculating in her expression. Their eyes meet, and she lets out a little snort of laughter.

“Okay, got it, I’ll leave you alone now,” she says. She withdraws her hand, steps out of his personal space, adjusts her dress a bit for reasons Shane’s not sure of. “We are definitely going to be friends eventually, Shane Hollander.”

Shane’s got absolutely no fucking idea what she’s talking about so he doesn’t say anything back, and she’s laughing as she walks away, and then he sees her dragging one of their teammates out onto the dancefloor. Shane’s stomach turns over in his body. She’s really, really pretty. He’s glad she’s not touching his arm anymore.

Shane’s been drinking alone for a couple of minutes when his phone beeps. Thinking it’s his parents again, he glances down at the notification immediately – and chokes on another mouthful of his vodka soda, feeling the harsh sting of it up his nose, the bubbles in his throat. His pulse roars; his eyes water.

From: Rozanov (Boston Raiders) [00:18]

if u come to staff bathroom behind bar in next 10 minute i give u dirtyest blow job u ever had in whole life door locks dont worry i check ;)))) hny

Under the flashing lights, Shane watches Svetlana’s glittering dress out on the dancefloor for a moment. Then he leaves his half-finished drink, makes sure nobody is watching him, and sneaks away behind the bar.

Chapter End Notes

next time: road to playoffs 🏒

russian lines: when svetlana comes in they go "You’re here, fuck! Aren’t you going to congratulate me on my goal tonight?"

"You should know me better than that. I’ll congratulate you when your puck handling is less sloppy."

and then after she meets shane she says, "This is the guy you’re always talking about?"

tysm for reading !! i love all your comments 💚 as usual u can also see this chapter's post [on tumblr](#)

Chapter 12: send your name off from my lips like a signal flare.

Chapter Notes

i'm pretty sure this is the longest chapter yet,,, nearly 10k PLEASE send help

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

Ilya starts his New Year by swallowing Shane Hollander's cum on a bathroom floor again. Then he goes back out to the club and drinks some more, a little disappointed when the vodka washes away the taste of sex, and dances with a lot of different people, and eventually pours himself into a cab with Svetlana at around 4am.

He lost track of Hollander hours ago — too boring to stay out this late, of course, it was a miracle he had made it to midnight. A miracle he came to the club at all, although Ilya had bugged him about it multiple times, promised to have non-alcoholic drinks there, promised nobody would laugh at him if he left early. Ilya had thought up a stupid plan to kiss him at midnight weeks ago, and the knowledge that it actually worked is almost more intoxicating than the booze. The fact Hollander probably hated it is even better.

Back in his apartment, pleasantly drunk and finding himself horny in that way he always gets after alcohol and crowded spaces and music shaking his bones, he tries to wrap himself around Svetlana and kiss her neck.

"I don't want to fuck tonight," Sveta tells him, pushing him away and rolling her eyes. Ilya pouts.

"It's New Years! We're supposed to celebrate," he complains.

They hadn't done a lot of their usual traditions for the holiday, given Ilya had a game in the day and they were out at the club all night. It feels a little strange but also not — Ilya's not exactly a traditionalist. And he's lived in America for three years now, long enough it seems some of their different cultural expectations have made their way into his head. But he can't shake the feeling that the New Year is the most important holiday this time of year, and that he doesn't want it to end. Svetlana also looks gorgeous, which doesn't hurt. And Hollander's already all tucked up in bed somewhere else in the building, so Ilya's options for a fuck are limited.

"You should have thought of that before you left the bar without one of those two million girls you were grinding on," Sveta says, as she takes off her heels and helps herself to a can of coke from the fridge.

She presses the cool can to her face for a moment, closes her eyes. Ilya looks at her smeared makeup, the hint of sweat on her brow. Looking at her face doesn't turn him on the way her body often does; he just feels fond, when he sees her like this. Almost familial. He

remembers her young, long before she discovered makeup, before she grew into her eyebrows and all the other kids made fun of her looks. Still bossing him around, even back then, complaining when he threw snowballs at her nice dresses or showed her the half-chewed food in his mouth during fancy dinners.

Ilya goes back and wraps his arms around her again, this time in a tight squeeze more teasing than horny. She laughs and tries to shove him off and he squeezes harder, putting his head on her shoulder, says, “No, you asked for it. If we’re not going to fuck you have to have an Ilya limpet instead.”

“You’re like a child,” she tells him, but eventually gives in and allows herself to be hugged.

The long-awaited exhaustion begins to catch up with Ilya quick. A game-day, where they’d played brutally, followed by all this dancing and drinking and it’s so early in the morning now. His body can take a lot, but even he has limits; his limbs are starting to feel like cooked noodles, his head spinning.

He smells the mixture of Sveta’s clean sweat and perfume, his head on her, and slumps a little further. She wobbles under him, nearly falling back into the counter with a laugh, and Ilya abruptly remembers that not everyone can take two-hundred pounds of hockey player muscle with ease. He’s become a little over-used to collapsing on top of Hollander.

Pulling back, Ilya sighs and steals a sip of her coke. “Tonight was fun, though, yes?”

“It was great,” Sveta tells him. She looks in his eyes while Ilya debates if he needs a late-night snack or just to jerk off in bed and pass the fuck out, and he’s distracted, and he’s not expecting it when she says, “Fun meeting more of your team. I think Shane Hollander is gay, by the way.”

Ilya feels his posture turn stiff. He should know better, at this point in his life, than to underestimate Svetlana, who seems to have eyes everywhere and know every detail of everyone she ever meets. But there are some things he’s just not prepared for her to bring up.

“Why do you think that?” he asks. He turns away and walks towards the couch, begins unbuttoning his shirt like he’s only thinking about bed. God. Hollander would be so mad if he knew anyone was talking about this. Maybe mad’s not the right word. He’d probably stop breathing and pass out from stress. Ilya doesn’t think Hollander has ever said the word *gay*. He always dances around it, during the little talking they do behind closed doors – he’ll say ‘two guys’ or ‘guys together’ or ‘like, you know, this’ and gesture between their bodies.

The sound of Svetlana’s bare feet follow him across the room. “I can just tell,” she says. “He wasn’t interested in any of the girls there. Not even me.”

“Not everyone has to want to fuck you, Sveta,” Ilya says, although in his experience almost everyone *does*. “Anyway, I don’t want to talk about Hollander. I’m going to bed. Goodnight.”

Svetlana knows where the spare room is. She always sleeps in there when she visits, even if they fuck, when she’ll deign to cuddle for maybe two minutes before she wants to either watch hockey or get dressed and get out; Sveta doesn’t like sharing a bed, gets irritated by the

presence of someone else in her space for that long. Ilya has never said aloud that he sometimes wishes she, or someone, anyone, would keep him company through the entire night in his huge, empty bed.

As they go into January, the Raiders are the top ranked team in the Atlantic division.

The way they've been playing this season, it seems pretty crazy to think they won't make playoffs, but nobody wants to be the one to jinx it. Some insane losing streak could still take it away before April. So they keep their heads down, and they focus, and they fight like hell on the ice every game.

Dubek takes a major injury halfway through the month, which rattles everyone a bit. They have to be a little cautious not to push themselves too hard now; it's no good burning out this early in the year. Ilya has never been the biggest fan of routine, but it's what he has to do for his job, so he does it. Works out with the team trainer every home day, follows the workout plans. Shovels down extra helpings of fish or ground beef at every meal to try and keep his body fuelled. Doesn't go for that petty fight against St Louis in the second period even when their rookie seriously pisses him off, because time off the ice means less goals scored, and Ilya's job is to be here and score goals for his team.

He only gets to fuck Hollander twice in January. Ilya fills the time in-between with women he meets on Instagram or at parties. One wannabe model in Boston who he hooks up with a handful of times even agrees to do anal one time, which is hot, but it leaves him feeling strangely unsatisfied afterwards, itchy and craving a cigarette. She seemed like she enjoyed it but she wasn't losing her *mind* over it. Maybe Ilya has high standards.

The All-Star game this year is in Buffalo, of all places. Ilya scrunches his nose when he's told.

"They couldn't put it in real fucking New York?" he asks. "The fuck is there to do in Buffalo?"

The rest of the team laugh at him, but they don't have *go* to the damn place. Well, none of them except for Hollander. Once again, Ilya and Hollander will be the two Raiders headed to All-Stars. Ilya had considered faking a reason to get out of it, but then remembered the year before, and quickly decided he shouldn't pass up the chance for something equally insane to happen this year. It's worth a trip to Buffalo if it can match the energy of getting Shane Hollander on his knees for the first time.

It's kind of like their anniversary, in a funny way.

They don't get to fly in together, because the day before Hollander's off in Canada shooting some commercial for something – probably a terrible perfume that wants to use his pretty face to make themselves seem less terrible, but what does Ilya care. The flight's only an hour, so it's not like it matters, but Ilya's still grumpy on the flight alone, asks the staff in first class for three different drinks and doesn't finish any of them.

At the hotel, Ilya dumps his shit in his room and wastes no time in finding the bar. Of course there's already a hum of people milling around – players, their families, advertisers and sponsors chatting about boring things. He doesn't see anyone he's particularly interested in talking to, on a first scan of the room.

The New York captain is there – Hunter. He's too old and boring for Ilya to remember much about him, except that there's one hockey podcast which absolutely hates him, which is kind of funny. Ilya slides onto the barstool next to him and taps his fingers on the bar to get served.

"Rozanov," Hunter says, nodding his head at him while Ilya pays for a beer. He doesn't say anything else – just his name, kind of a greeting, not exactly a conversation-starter. Ilya glances at him sideways.

"Ah, Hunter," he says, then looks away and swallows a long gulp of his beer. "Why did they let you in here? I thought you have to score goals to be All-Star."

"Wow," Hunter says, "Okay. Good to know you're as much an asshole off the ice as you are on it."

Ilya winks at him. "That is what people say," he agrees. "Have you seen Hollander?"

"He's your teammate, dude, why would I know where he is?" Hunter asks. He catches someone's eye across the room and raises a hand at them; Ilya watches one of the other New York players start to approach. "He doesn't seem the type to hang out at the bar, anyway, right?"

There, Hunter has a point. Ilya scoops his beer up and hops back off the barstool again, dodging out the way before Hunter's teammate can reach them and bore him to death. He leaves Hunter with a quick wave and a, "Well, good talk. See you on ice when I beat your ass."

Some irritated grumbling follows him out of the room, but Ilya doesn't care. He finds a quiet corner to down the rest of his beer and pulls out his phone.

did u get lost on way 2 boring hotel or comershal photo person kidnap you as sexy prisoner?
should i call police?

hollander

hollander answer

hollander where are you or i call police tell them u have comited murder by leaving me so
bored and alone at stupid hotel

HOLLANDER U MAKE ME SAD BOOOO ((((((((((

From: hollander 🖋️ [13:22]

Jesus Christ, calm the fuck down! I'm down at the rink watching it get set up, where the hell
are you and why can't you amuse yourself for ten minutes?

Ilya finds Hollander in the stands, watching a fairly disinterested crew paste up
advertisements on the boards and arrange light displays. He's sat up high up in the rows, just
a nondescript figure in a black hoodie and baseball cap if you're looking from the ice. Ilya
jogs up the steps to find him, giving a gleeful smile when Hollander spots the figure
bouncing towards him and rolls his eyes.

"You're such a stalker," Hollander says, as Ilya collapses into the seat next to him.

"Me? I am stalker? You are one in secret disguise staring down at all these nice people doing
their jobs, like creep."

"I'm watching them set up the game, fuck off," Hollander protests. Ilya reaches out and pulls
one of his hoodie strings. Hollander shoves his hands away. "I'm surprised you're actually
here. I thought last year's All-Stars you promised you were never gonna do another one."

Ilya shrugs. "Eh, is kind of fun. Shame to miss vacation, but this is like a big hockey party.
Lots of attention and cameras, all those things you hate."

Sure enough, Hollander's staring down the ice like a man facing the gallows. The point of
All-Stars is really supposed to be the fact that it doesn't matter – the records aren't real, the
games don't count, you can show off and score a fuck ton of goals and nobody tries to beat
your teeth in. Unfortunately, Ilya knows Hollander pretty well by now. The less something
matters, the more Hollander hates it. It's like he finds it offensive when things are less than
one hundred percent effort. He'd probably be happy playing the Stanley Cup finals every
single day of his life rather than a single three-on-three game of pond hockey.

“It’s a part of hockey,” Hollander says, sighing. “I’m flattered to be asked to be here.”

“Hollander, it is fucking me you are talking to. Why are you giving press answer?”

Ilya nudges with his knee; Hollander glances over at him, then kind of shakes a little, laughs, just once. “Yeah, okay. Fuck this stupid weekend, it’s so pointless.”

“Aha!” Ilya says, slightly delighted. “Now I am happy, there’s your dirty mouth.”

“Asshole. I do not have a *dirty mouth*.”

“You say ‘fuck’ more than anybody I know,” Ilya tells him. “Oh, and do lots of other things with your mouth I could talk about, too.”

Hollander suddenly tenses up, glances around the empty stands, hisses, “Shut *up*, we’re in public.”

Ilya follows his gaze to the exactly zero people sat in the stands around him. The closest other human being is a lighting tech like, two sections away. Ilya spreads his arms and gestures around the ocean of space.

“I think the million people listening will not tell,” he says, grinning.

“God, you’re annoying.”

“You are the one who told me where to find you. I think you like being annoyed.”

“I already was being annoyed. You texted me a million fucking times. Are you actually a child, by the way?”

Ilya shrugs, thinks about it for a second. Then he licks his hand and rubs it in Hollander’s face.

The spluttering, indignant shove he gets is worth it; Ilya’s laughing as he’s pushed out of his seat in a sprawl of limbs, one of his feet ending up caught on Hollander’s knees.

“Asshole,” Hollander says, scrubbing at his face with the sleeve of his hoodie. “See if I let you—”

Then he stops himself, in the middle of a sentence. Grits his jaw and looks away and oh, Ilya can just *tell* he’s embarrassed. He gleefully pulls himself off the ground and says, “What was that? What are you going to let me do?”

“Nothing. I’m not going to let you do anything!”

“Really?” Ilya does lower his voice, leaning into Hollander’s shoulder a bit, turning his jaw so he’s talking right into Hollander’s ear. Even if someone was doing a film test for sound for the game or something, they wouldn’t be able to hear it when Ilya mutters, “Were you going to let me come to your room tonight?”

Hollander's cheeks look warm; the corner of his mouth is twitching. "I guess," he says. "Maybe. If you play well enough in the game."

"Oh, well, no need to worry then. I will play very well. Haven't you heard what everyone keeps saying? I am the best player here."

"Now you're just *trying* to get yourself uninvited," Hollander says, but he laughs, so Ilya laughs too. He thinks, suddenly and with no real reason behind it, that if someone were to take a picture of them now – two teammates sat in the stands together before an event, laughing and pushing each other around – they'd probably look like friends.

All Stars is a bit of a joke, as usual. They spend more time filming dumb video clips of them playing table tennis or ranking the ugliest jerseys than they do actually on the ice. But Hollander lets Ilya fuck him twice, in his big hotel bed, so it's not a bad weekend.

They play a brutal game against New York a couple weeks later.

Ilya doesn't ever imagine the Admirals as being very good – and they're not, really, certainly not this season, still wobbling about underneath the wildcard spot in the division, not able to get more than a two-game win streak going. Ilya doesn't watch a lot of other hockey teams play on a regular basis, but whenever he turns on the Admirals for a quick look he finds himself with a lot to criticise; they're sluggish, pass too wide, don't communicate on the ice. He's not expecting it to be a hard game.

Hollander wins the first face-off and New York doesn't let them forget it for the next three periods.

It's enough to make him feel insane, but there's something electric about playing like this. The way the entire world disappears into his screaming muscles; the ache in his lungs from forcing down panting breaths of ice-cold air; the tender spreading bruises where he's been shoved hard into the boards, gone crashing down onto the ice and hit the bone of his hip in just the wrong way; the way he's sticking to himself with sweat beneath his gear, hair soaked under his helmet, knuckles bruised from the grip on his stick. And they just keep going. They get the puck for a few seconds and pelt down the ice and he knows where Hollander is, always – or Marleau, if Hollander's not on the ice, or Dubek or Feller, but mostly Hollander, catching the streak of black jerseys out of the corner of his eye and making passes in a second, between the legs of other players, flipping the puck on his stick. It feels like they're fucking incredible.

The difference tonight is that New York is giving it back, for once. Speeding down the ice and slamming into him so hard Ilya feels bones rattle, blood vessels pop. Hounding so close he can feel breath on his neck and the oppressive sense of bodies over his for nearly every second he has the puck. Their goalie's a brick wall tonight and sends the puck spiralling out his net before it can cross the line on more than one great shot.

Hunter sends Ilya sprawling into the boards in the second period. Ilya scrambles up ready to fight, but then Hollander skates past and asks, “You okay?” in this quick tight tone of voice, and Ilya finds himself just grunting back and then the moment to punch Hunter’s teeth in has passed. So that’s different.

Hollander gets the next face-off too and Ilya flies down the ice with him, ignoring the tight pain in his legs and burning heat of his body and the way he can’t quite fill his lungs with enough air. Hollander makes like he’s sending the puck off – then spins and takes it back on the other side of his stick. Ilya feints around the New York defence and rounds goal and sets himself up.

When Hollander passes with a backhand, it lands right in the middle of Ilya’s stick. Slapshot that he doesn’t even have to think about, set up perfectly, but he’s the only one with enough power for it. The puck goes in the net, and the adrenaline rush feels like he just jumped out of a plane, falling fast into the wild, unknown air. Hollander’s giddy laugh. They crash into each other for a split second, jostling helmets, to celebrate.

In the end they win 4-3, but it’s a fucking battle. As they huddle up to celly afterwards, Ilya finds himself squished in the middle of the team next to Hollander. He can feel Hollander’s hot breath on his face, hear his panting as the team cheers and the stands around them erupt. There’s like ten different hands on his back but Ilya doesn’t say anything to anyone, just wobbles there, pressed up against Hollander’s face in the foul scent of sweat and hockey gear.

“Good game,” Hollander says to him, as they skate off the ice. He kind of jostles Ilya’s shoulder. They’re still in view of the cameras, the fans.

“Very good,” Ilya agrees. He nudges Hollander back, sending him off-kilter on the ice for a moment before they hit the boards and clamber out towards the tunnel. “Hard, though. I want to fucking kill New York.”

“You can’t kill a whole city, Rozanov,” Hollander says to him – Ilya can practically hear him rolling his eyes. He grins, slings an arm over Hollander’s shoulder just to be shoved off and sent sprawling into the wall. It hurts his bruised, aching body, but it’s worth it.

They take a while changing out after the game, all fucking exhausted. When Ilya comes out of the shower and checks his phone for any post-game texts from Svetlana, he has a missed call from his father and another one from Alexei.

He puts his phone away.

“Now don’t get me wrong, Josh, the Raiders are good. They’ve had a good foundation for a few years now, clearly ready to build around some younger star-talent, and their coach knows what he’s doing.”

“Why does it sound like there’s a ‘but’ coming?”

“There’s no but! Well, not really – I mean, it’s just, like, why are we pretending the whole team matters, when you’ve got Rozanov and Hollander on your first line together? I’m just gonna say what we’re all thinking.”

“Yeah, you know I like to disagree with you, but in this case, you’re definitely right. I mean, you could scrape the bottom-barrel of AHL rejects to fill out the rest of that roster and I bet they’d *still* be heading to playoffs if they just had Hollander and Rozanov.”

“That’s probably not even an exaggeration. I know we were wary when they first drafted Hollander, because they kind of fit the same role, and it’s not always that useful to have two super-star centres on your team. Not when they’re this talented and they can be consistent with over 20 minutes of ice time per game. And you can bet they’re gonna be earning a ton of money, taking up cap space once they’re off their rookie deals, which is gonna be a separate conversation.”

“-Plus the fact that those two were touted as not getting along, having a bit of a rivalry – as any two young guys with that much talent coming in at the same time are bound to.”

“Yeah, of course. But the way they’ve fit together now, especially with Rozanov playing wing this season? Damn. I don’t think we’ve ever seen anything like this before from two players their age.”

“When they’re on, they’re really on. Of course, we’ve got teams with more established rosters this year playing awesome seasons as well – it’s not that the Raiders are gonna have smooth sailing right to the cup. But if one of those kids isn’t MVP this year, what the hell are we even doing here? Hell, maybe they should share it!”

March hits like a sledgehammer in all the ways that matter.

The hockey’s one thing, in the final month before playoffs, when everyone’s scrappy and desperate for it. The other thing is that Ilya’s father starts calling him more. Some of the phonecalls are normal – berating, asking him when he’ll be home, telling him all the people he knows back in Russia who have become more important since last time he was there. Some are less so. His father asks him to buy milk from the store. He calls Alexei the wrong name.

Something tight and painful coils in Ilya’s throat when they talk – a panic he doesn’t like. He never learned how to deal with panic except running away from it.

Ilya declines two calls from his dad in the first week of March, then finally picks up the phone on the third. In Russian he says, “What is it, Papa?”

He's alone in his apartment, just back from an away game, literally just getting in the door. He's exhausted down to his bones and his thigh is killing him, where a nasty bruise from a stick has seeped all the way down to the muscle. All that he wants to do is take a pain pill and pass the fuck out. Instead, he wedges the phone between his shoulder and his ear while he toes off his shoes, drops his keys, makes his way into the dark, empty apartment.

"Is that any way to answer the phone?" his dad says – voice gruff, disapproving. Ilya's chest settles. It'll be a normal conversation, he thinks. "Speaking like you already want to hang up?"

"Sorry, Papa. It's been a busy week, lots of games. Why are you calling?"

For a moment there's just breathing on the other end of the line, the muffled, distant sound of traffic outside Ilya's windows.

Then, his father says, "When will your mother be home? She won't answer my calls. Just like her son, I suppose."

The world goes from being still and quiet around Ilya to ceasing to exist altogether. The space of his apartment is gone, the traffic outside silenced, even the aching bruises on his body blink away. All he can feel is his own breath, and this huge, dark tunnel around him – like he's swallowed up into it and watching the light at the end zoom further and further away. His pulse thuds. His vision spots.

"Papa, what are you talking about? Mama is dead."

His voice comes out like he's twelve years old again, on the phone to the ambulance – clammy, choked up. Not holding his shit together. Ilya squeezes his eyes shut and digs his fingernails into his palm.

For a long minute, his father says nothing. Then, he says, "You don't understand, forget it," and hangs up.

Ilya doesn't know what to think. The fear that's been building in him for months is swirling, with no real place to go. His dad has the appreciation for alcohol that any old-fashioned Russian man does, but he's never been the type to drink to excess. Certainly always been disdainful of drugs, nearly ripped Ilya's hair out the one time he caught him doing coke. But in Ilya's experience, the reasons people have for saying shit that doesn't make sense are – too much alcohol, too many drugs, or too many concussions. Here, none of them seem to make sense.

He stares down at his phone for a few long minutes, breathing heavy. Then he pulls up his brother's contact. The last texts between them are all about money; demanding more of it, asking how it's already spent. Nothing new. Ilya's thumbs hover over the keys before he finally figures out what to write.

Sent: [10:04]

Papa sounds weird every time I speak to him. What's going on?

The typing bubbles appear almost immediately, and don't leave. Ilya stands there. Doesn't sit down, doesn't get a drink, doesn't even turn on another lamp, even though the apartment is dark in a way that's irritating him. Just stands there, and watches his brother type, then delete, then type again.

From: alexei [10:12]

He's sick and he's not getting better. You'd know that if you were fucking here.

He reads the words, and the worst part is, he thinks he already knew them. Of course his father's not drinking too much and forgetting what country Ilya lives in. Of course he's not suddenly taking up a coke habit in his later years. He's certainly never been concussed – for all he likes to criticise Ilya's skill, he was never a hockey player himself.

He's sick. Ilya's father is sick.

Ilya hates his father. Loathes him. The threat of him, his stoic disapproval, his sharp words and blunt fists. But it's still family. He's the last parent Ilya has left. Ilya's wished him dead in place of his mother every day since he was twelve – screamed it at him a few times, *why couldn't it have been you, I wish you'd done it instead* – but he never wasted much time to think about what would happen if his dad actually did die someday. He seemed so looming, ever-present that it felt impossible.

Fuck. Ilya finds, abruptly, that he doesn't want to be alone tonight.

He could call Hollander. He's right downstairs, probably already unpacking his luggage like a neat freak, putting his dirty clothes in his hamper and lining his toiletries up on his sink. Or maybe he has a special bag of toiletries just for travelling with that he doesn't need to transfer between suitcase and bathroom. He's organised like that. It would take thirty seconds to go knock on his door and bury his face between Hollander's tits and do whatever the hell he wants to him.

For the first time in months, Ilya hates the thought of fucking Shane Hollander tonight. Looking in those big brown eyes, or hearing his earnest little noises while he's on his knees – god, it grates at something sharp and painful in Ilya's chest. It'd make him sick right now. It'd make him lose his mind.

He scrolls back through his recent text conversations and messages the last three women he slept with, *are you free tonight? ;)*. Waits until the first one responds, invites her over, fucks her from behind. Doesn't look in her eyes. Doesn't ask her to stay the night.

The next morning, Hollander texts him, *Team breakfast this morning, want to share a ride? Doesn't make sense to take two cars.*

Ilya lays in the musty, rumpled sheets of his bed and stares down at his phone like he can't quite make sense of the words. For once it's not the stupid English language – it's the swirling inside of his own head.

He switches to his text thread with Alexei, where he never responded the night before. Texts him, *I will call you tomorrow to talk about this and pay for whatever doctors he needs once you explain what's wrong. Keep me in the fucking loop for once.*

Then he switches back to the messages with Hollander and says, *you drive, i have so bad hangover* ((((((

He didn't drink last night, but it's funny to see how pissy Hollander gets when he thinks Ilya's partying too much during important parts of the season. That rant will probably last them the whole drive to breakfast. He rolls himself out of bed and out towards the shower, kicking away the forgotten pair of panties laying on the floor beside his bed. In the light of day, he finds it a little less sexy and a little more annoying that they're just abandoned there. He thinks the woman from last night probably left them on purpose, so he'd call her to say she'd forgotten them and then they'd meet up again; he's had girls do that before. Before he gets in the shower, Ilya deletes her number from his phone. Problem solved.

The closer they get to playoffs, the less time there is for partying and distractions. Regardless of having free time, even the idea of going out clubbing after a game becomes less appealing; the whole team are worn-down, trying to conserve energy, nursing a few nasty injuries between the lot of them that they're not admitting to. Loading up on food and sleep is the best use of a night off. They're top of the standings for their division right now, definitely heading to playoffs, but nobody wants to lose the momentum. So for a while, everything becomes about hockey.

The interesting thing is that for Ilya, while parties and women slide to the background for a while, Shane Hollander is still right there. He's very reliable.

Hollander puts up a front, but he never seems too tired to fuck. Not after a game, not fresh off a fucked-up hit that he's riding out with no pain meds. The more that life becomes about hockey, the more it becomes about Hollander, too. He's there during the games, and after them. He's there at team meals and he's there at conditioning. He's sweaty in the gym, he's huge in his pads on the ice, he's in a suit on the billboards in front of the fucking rink. He's a tight, vibrating ball of anxiety in public and a feral beast in Ilya's bed, trying to get his mouth on every square inch of his body and suck it. There's no getting away from him.

After a couple of tough road games in a row and an afternoon game to end, they land back in Boston with a free evening, and everyone's just fucking over it. They file off the plane in an exhausted, straggling line, barely getting up the energy to fist bump each other goodbye.

"Get early night, sleep tight, sleep well, get some fucking rest," Ilya tells every teammate in turn as they leave towards their homes; kind of the opposite advice of what he's usually giving when he wheedles everyone to come out clubbing, but nobody fights him on it tonight.

When he's home, Ilya doesn't even turn on the lights in his apartment; kicks his shoes off, dumps his bag, goes right to his bed and collapses onto it with a heaved sigh. It's not that he's tired in the sleep-deprived way, but his whole body is aching and sore and desperate to just switch off and sink into a comfortable surface for the next ten hours. He should probably take a steaming shower, put some Deep Heat on his tight shoulder and stretch, but he does none of that, instead crawling out of his clothes and throwing them over the edge of the mattress, then grabbing his phone and starfishing out across the huge bed.

The only feeling strong enough to get past Ilya's pervasive exhaustion is his equally pervasive horniness. Laying in his underwear, he pulls up PornTube on his phone and scrolls through the front page for a while. Nothing particularly grabs his interest. Ilya rolls over onto his side and presses on a video of a girl pegging some big strong guy.

It's kind of hot, for a minute. He palms himself through his underwear but it's not doing much. Ilya backs out of the video, thinks about what he's feeling tonight, and searches *gay*, then, *gay athlete*, then, *gay hockey*. There aren't a ton of results, and certainly none which are more related to hockey than taking place in a locker room with a couple of sticks laying in the background, but it's more interesting, at least.

One of the videos starts in a locker room shower. Two huge guys – huge enough they're probably on steroids, by Ilya's guess – are soaping themselves up beneath a thin trickle of water. There's about five seconds of preamble before they're both jerking off. One of them forces the other to his knees and then the video is full of the wet sounds of blowjob. Ilya turns the volume up on his phone.

His dick's interested now, more in the sounds than the visual. Ilya loves noisy sex. It's one of his favourite things about Hollander; he's so desperate for it all the time that he can't shut up during sex, making all these little groans and grunts, swearing his head off, saying unhinged things that he acts like he doesn't remember later. It's nearly as hot as the actual sex is.

Something wicked suddenly occurs to him. Ilya copies the link to the video, pauses it, and then opens his texts.

Sent: [21:34]

[link]

From: hollander 🖋️ [21:35]

Oh my god

Why are you sending me porn

Don't do that!!

What if I was with someone and I opened it jesus christ

Sent: [21:37]

then do not open link from me in public u shuld kno better

but i know u r home alone we just got back from trip

video is hot right?

From: hollander 🖋️ [21:39]

What did you even search, 'gay locker room'?

Sent: [21:40]

i search gay hockey i was hoping they would have picture of u

From: hollander 🖋️ [21:41]

Fuck all the way off, Rozanov

Sent: [21:41]

i bet you watch all the gay hockey porn they make it is only thing that turns you on

From: hollander 🖋️ [21:43]

[typing]

[typing]

Fuck off

Sent: [21:45]

u say that already

if u dont want to tell me what porn u like in text u can always come over

From: hollander 🖋️ [21:47]

We just played a game! We need to sleep

Sent: [21: 28]

it will help you sleep ;) Sex very good for hockey

is why they make porn about it

Hollander doesn't reply again. Ilya keeps staring at his phone for a few minutes, then a couple minutes later, just in case. Eventually he sighs, and switches back to the video, resigned to jerking off to not-that-good porn and going to sleep early instead.

Then, the doorbell rings.

Ilya's dick responds faster than his mind. He knows it could technically be anyone – it could be fucking security telling him his car got towed, for all he knows. But he rolls out of bed and drags his aching body to the door in just his underwear, and looks through the peephole, and sure enough, it's Hollander's nervous, jittery face looking back at him.

Grinning, he opens the door a crack and lets Hollander force his way inside. Ilya can almost see the pissy comments building in him, until his eyes focus on Ilya – naked but for his tight white underwear, his dick half-hard under the fabric. Hollander swallows, the bob of his throat visible.

"You are so annoying, do you know that?" Hollander says. "You couldn't choose a night we're not fucking exhausted to pull this?"

"Is not like this is the only night," Ilya points out. "I am very horny, is not my fault."

"I think it literally is your fault," Hollander says. But his eyes are stuck on Ilya's body, the thick stretch of his torso. Ilya preens under his attention, flexing his chest a little, turning his chin.

“So, did you come up here to yell at me, or something else?” he asks.

Because he’s a very good boy, Hollander takes his shoes off at the door. Then he makes a noise in his throat like a wounded animal, falls into Ilya’s body, and kisses him.

There’s something really hot about the fact Hollander is still wearing his hoodie and sweatpants and socks, and Ilya’s nearly naked, out in the open like this. He mouths at Hollander’s lips, pushes his tongue between them, and lets Hollander back him into the wall. Their kiss is open-mouthed and messy immediately, saliva sliding down Ilya’s chin. His pulse thumps. His scalp tingles. He feels warm down to his toes.

Shane kisses like nobody else in the world. He’s so needy, so legitimately desperate, that it’s all Ilya can do to give, give, give to him. Nothing about it ever feels fake, performative, like Shane’s playing a role he thinks Ilya would like.

“Couch?” Hollander asks, breathless already, into Ilya’s mouth. His hands have come up to squeeze at Ilya’s pecs so tight he’s leaving indents from his fingers.

Ilya says, “Mm, no. Bed.”

It’s late enough and he wants to be comfortable, wants the space and the time of a real bed, especially when they’re both sore and bruised enough for this to probably be a bad idea. He pushes Shane backwards and then kisses him again, holding onto his face with one hand, letting the other come down to cup and squeeze and hard muscle of his ass as they stumble their way towards the bedroom. Shane keeps squeezing Ilya’s chest and he can feel the rough, sharp sensation in his nipples, enough to make him buck into Shane’s hands.

They collapse onto the mattress in a hard slam of bodies; it feels like hockey, except the landing is softer. Ilya’s more than used to the press of other men’s bodies into his, though usually it’s through two sets of pads and to the soundtrack of a screaming crowd. Right now the only soundtrack is their mouths and the rustle of fabric as Ilya pulls Shane’s hoodie off and throws it to the floor, then his sweatpants too.

“Asshole, they’re gonna get wrinkled,” Shane mutters, but he doesn’t get up to fold them, because Ilya’s sucking on his neck and thumbing roughly over his nipples and Shane’s too busy wriggling on the sheets, which Ilya takes as a compliment.

“It’s a fucking hoodie, Hollander. Is fine,” Ilya says, rolling his eyes. Then he sits back on his heels a bit and looks at the stretch of naked man in front of him, feeling the searing heat all over his body. “God, you are hot.”

“Shut up. I’m a mess right now.”

Ilya doesn’t even know what he’s talking about for a second, before he realises Hollander means the lurid purple bruise spreading over most of the left side of his ribs. There’s another one the size of a puck mottling green on his thigh. A couple of rough games this week. But it’s hockey.

“You think that is not hot? No way. You are turned on by hockey, you must like bruises,” Ilya says. He ghosts his fingers over the older bruise, the one on Shane’s leg, just scratching against the surface of it, pressing in the tiniest, gentlest bit. Shane’s dick jerks on his stomach. “Hah. Got you.”

“Oh my god, fuck off.” Shane surges up and wraps his arms around Ilya’s neck, drags him down, pushes him onto his back on the mattress and then rolls and climbs on top of him, leans down to kiss his open mouth, a series of long, wet kisses, touching his tongue to the back of Ilya’s teeth, the roof of his mouth. His body’s warm against Ilya’s skin, heavy on top of him, sitting over his pelvis and crushing his thighs. “Will you just fuck me already? I have to get some actual sleep tonight.”

Ilya doesn’t need to be told twice. He lets a wild noise escape his throat as he rolls them over again and presses into Shane, humping at the hard line of his dick for a minute just to get some release while they kiss, grab at each other, too hard on the tender spots of injuries, the searing ache of his sore muscles somehow piling into Ilya’s arousal. Eventually he scrambles off Shane, desperate and uncoordinated, and fishes out lube and condoms and tissues from the nightstand.

“So you liked the video?” Ilya pants into Shane’s mouth while he slips the first finger inside him. Shane groans, grabs hard at Ilya’s arms, pushes his ass back while Ilya shushes him and says, “You’re doing good, you’re so good.” Then he tries again. “The video?”

He crooks his finger inside Shane. Shane says, “Sure, it was hot.”

More lube. Ilya rolls his dick against Shane’s hard thigh and shoves another finger inside him and puts his face in Shane’s neck and smells the scent of him, soap and sweat, laps at his skin with wet presses of tongue. “You ever think about that?” Ilya asks. “Fucking in locker room?”

Ilya’s done it once – with Svetlana, who’d been so impressed when she came to visit the practice rink for the first time in his rookie year. It had felt like a good idea at the time, but now something in Ilya’s mind keeps poking at him, thinking – you’ve done that in the locker room with someone and it *wasn’t* Hollander? What’s the point of bringing sex to the hockey rink if you’re not fucking a hockey player?

“Fuck off, no way,” Shane gasps. He’s tilting his head to the ceiling, squeezing his eyes closed. He still has good enough aim to pinch Ilya’s nipple, which sends a flood of heat through him. “That’s so dangerous.”

“But if nobody else was there? It would be hot. Think about it. If we just got off rink, we had been playing. All dirty and sweaty, so we have to take showers. And we are there in the shower, all alone, looking at each other. And then I just get on my knees.”

Shane lets out a noise like the air’s being forced from his lungs, like an impact. He says, “Oh my fucking god, Rozanov, I’m ready, just fuck me, I swear.”

Ilya suddenly feels frantic in a way he’s not sure he’s ever felt in his life. He fumbles to roll the condom on – a stupid amount of lube, making a mess – hands kind of shaking as he

plasters himself over Hollander's body, spreads his legs, kisses him heavily and uses one hand to push his cock into the hot tight space waiting for him and oh, *god*, it's insane how it gets better every time – Hollander scrabbles at Ilya's back, sharp nails on his sore muscles, pants in his ear.

“You are fucking –” Ilya doesn't finish the sentence, groans instead and starts moving his hips against Shane's, slow for like three seconds and then already frantic, the way they always seem to get with each other. He doesn't know why he can't resist this but he just can't. It's too good, he's on fire in his core, the whole universe has become Shane Hollander's tight asshole. “Hollander, *fuck*. ”

“Fuck, Rozanov,” Shane pants. Drags Ilya down into a kiss that's more just breathing into each other's mouths, rubbing their lips together. “Oh my god, keep doing that, go harder, come on, harder.”

Ilya reaches down and gets a hand around Hollander's cock, squeezing the head of it the way he knows Hollander likes now, giving him a tight ring to fuck into. He gets all sensitive like this, his dick wet and leaking, working the exposed tip of it makes him lose his mind – like now, as he groans into Ilya's ear, gets a fistful of Ilya's curls and pulls so hard it hurts, and Ilya rolls into the sharp spike of pain against his scalp. He lets go of Hollander's dick, and grabs his thigh instead, hoisting it up over his hip – squeezing down on the sore green bruise.

Shane goes, “Oh my fucking – *Roz* –” and then Ilya feels his dick spill over between their bodies, the hot spurt of his cum and the wild noises he makes as it happens and it's so hot that Ilya comes too, shoving his dick into Hollander's body and groaning.

Like always, with them, the comedown's intense. Ilya lays there and pants into Hollander's body for a while, sticks his face in Hollander's armpit and hides there, while Hollander strokes his curls like he's apologising for nearly pulling them out a minute ago. His skin tastes salty and is so hot to the touch. Ilya's body is heavy as a stone, sinking down into the man beneath him. He begins to feel like he's losing track of time, like the whole night could be passing while he drifts.

But eventually, Hollander says, “Fuck, that was so hot. Okay, I guess I better go now. Get some actual sleep.”

For a second, a crazy part of Ilya wants to say, *don't leave*. Even thinking it startles him so much that he doesn't know what to say or do; what a stupid idea. They both know what this is, and it's not *that*. Kind of irritated at himself for even thinking it, Ilya rolls over, and nods, and lets Hollander pick up his wrinkled sweatpants and leave.

They're at a team dinner, nearly twenty of them piled around three tables in a little Italian restaurant that's struggling to supply enough chicken and pasta for a whole hockey team, and

everyone's a little loopy and delirious when Connors says, "So, Hollander, who'd you keep sneaking off to text?"

Hollander – across the table and a couple seats down from Ilya, trying subtly to hide his phone behind his plate of chicken – balks, scrambles to lock his phone. Ilya's been feeling the buzz of texts against his own thigh all night. He's been sending things below the table – *what if I blew you under this table right now, would you like that, what if i took you to bathroom and put fingers in your ass and then you had to come back out and eat boring chicken like nothing happen*, and Hollander's been texting him back fake-furious denials that Ilya knows he doesn't mean because he can see his flushed, horny face. The thing is, Ilya's better at hiding his phone than Hollander is.

It's very funny, if you're Ilya. Probably if you're anyone else in the room except Hollander, who looks mortified and scared whenever anyone brings up the mere possibility that he's ever touched another human being in his life.

"That's definitely a sexting face," Feller says. "I'm a fucking expert, trust me."

"Oh my god, it's really not," Hollander insists, but he's a bad liar, so he's not helping his case. Beside him, Pike lets out a sympathetic laugh and pats Hollander's shoulder.

"It's alright, buddy," Pike says. "We've all been there. Hard to find the time in the season, right? I'm sure she's real nice, whoever she is."

"Is it the same chick who gave you that hickey a couple months ago?" Marley asks, because he has absolutely no tact. "The yoga chick?"

"I *never* said I was dating my yoga teacher, oh my god."

Feller says, "Who is it, then? It's gotta be someone we know, you're always with us, I dunno where else you'd meet someone."

"Aw, she's not someone back in Canada, is she? Long distance sucks, bro," Connors pipes up across the table. "High school sweetheart, or what?"

It occurs to Ilya in a single, delighted moment that he has the power to completely ruin Shane Hollander's evening. This is an opportunity he always wants to take.

"You know," says Ilya, the tiny edges of a grin beginning to tug at his mouth. "I live in the same building as Hollander."

He knows he immediately has everyone's attention.

"Damn right you do," Marleau laughs. "Come on, then, you got the inside scoop?"

Ilya flicks his eyebrows in Shane's direction, looking at his pale, dreading face.

He says, "At least once a week, leaving Hollander's apartment with not many clothes on, is the hottest person you have ever seen in your life. With nice curly hair, and a huge, *perfect* ass. Do you think they are regular thing, or just fuck-buddies?"

Ilya winks at Hollander across the table while a sea of catcalls emerge between them. Hollander is flushed and mortified even as Marleau hoots, “Hollzy, you fucking beautician! You’ve been holding out on us, man!”

“Rozanov doesn’t know what he’s fucking talking about,” Hollander snaps, but it’s way too late. Feller leans over and clinks his water glass against Hollander’s with a grin.

“Here’s to Hollzy’s fuckbuddy. Whatever the hell she’s doing to you in bed is making you a monster on the ice.”

“I’m good on the ice because I *train*—”

“No, is definitely the sex, we can all tell when you have it,” Ilya agrees, more delighted than he has been all month. He crams some more pasta into his mouth and watches Hollander squirm in discomfort, which is pretty much Ilya’s favourite thing to watch, besides him squirming for other reasons.

After dinner, Hollander corners Ilya outside the restaurant, glancing all around them to make sure nobody’s looking their way before dragging him by the hem of his jacket into a secluded little alleyway corner. Ilya lights up for a second, thinking he’s about to be dangerously ravaged in public. He leans forward for a kiss, only to find Hollander shoving him against a wall, eyes wide in alarm.

“You can’t fucking say shit like that,” he hisses. Ilya looks at him, deflates into the wall a bit when he realises he’s not gonna get a kiss.

“Say what?” he asks. “The thing about Buffalo? Because is true, I would rather die than spend long weekend there again, I hope whole city burns down.”

“You fucking know what,” Hollander says lowly, voice quick like he’s in a rush to get it out. “Telling the guys that I’m – seeing someone.”

“What’s problem with that? Everything I say was true. Or, what, you do not think my ass is perfect?”

“That’s not the fucking point,” Hollander says, which Ilya takes as an *of course I do* and decides to be flattered by. “What if they start asking me questions about this girl they think I’m hooking up with? Asking why she’s not my girlfriend or how we met or something? What am I supposed to say?”

“Jesus, Hollander, is okay, I promise. Nobody is thinking about your sex life as much as you. Well, maybe me, too. But I am cool about it. If you do not make it a big deal, nobody on team will make it a big deal either.”

Hollander still looks stressed out, worrying his lip with one tooth, his fingers fiddling with the string of his hoodie.

Despite a strange sinking feeling in his gut, Ilya says, “Maybe you take some girl on a few dates, take some pictures with her, they all shut up about it, okay?”

“Jesus, Rozanov. We’re about to go to playoffs. I’m not thinking about dating anyone right now.”

“Okay, okay. Was just a suggestion. Hey, you know what else will get everyone’s mind off your sex life? Winning fucking Stanley Cup.”

Hollander looks at him for a moment. They’re stood too close like this, really pushed together against the wall, with the only plausible deniability being that it looks more violent than romantic. They’re tucked into a little alcove in the alley, definitely out of anyone’s sight, but also close enough to hear voices on the street, feel the air vents of the restaurant and smell the rich scent of Italian cooking filtering out the restaurant kitchen. Hollander’s fist is still knotted in Ilya’s shirt, holding him there like a threat, but having any part of Hollander pressed against his skin only makes Ilya horny these days. He kind of wishes Hollander would shove him around a little more, really make him feel the bite of the brick wall.

Ilya wants to kiss him, but he doesn’t. Shane says, “Fine. So let’s win the cup.”

Chapter End Notes

next time: playoffs 🏆

thank you so much for reading as always !! please leave a comment and/or reblog this fic on [tumblr](#) if you enjoyed :')

Chapter 13: after one long season of wanting.

Chapter Notes

step right up and enter SHANE HOLLANDER'S TORMENT NEXUS aka stanley cup playoffs !

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

They made the playoffs last year, too, but they hadn't lasted long and it hadn't really felt like they put up a proper fight. There'd been other things in the way – injuries, trades, line changes, coaching issues – whatever, there's always a hundred things you can blame. Shane doesn't care about blame. Every time he's on the ice, he thinks he should be able to win, and if they don't, it's because they didn't fight hard enough.

He wants it this year. Wants it so bad it tastes like blood in his mouth.

Any superstition that might help them win is something Shane's willing to entertain. He wears the same shirt into the rink every game day, he warms up in the exact same order with every exercise in odd-numbered sets, he adds ground ginger to all his smoothies, he only calls his parents after games and not before. And –

“Listen,” he says to Rozanov, one morning when they're sharing a ride to practice – just them, because Connors is hardly ever at the building anymore because of a new girlfriend, which Shane is secretly not mad about. “Just so you know, we are not having sex during playoffs.”

Rozanov laughs, for a second, like he thinks Shane's joking. Which is funny in itself, because Rozanov's always the first one to say that Shane has no sense of humour.

“Hollander, what are you talking about?” he asks, a second later, when it seems to dawn on him that Shane's not just saying random words for the fun of it.

“It's a thing,” Shane says. “A tradition, during playoffs. Like, a performance thing. Everyone's supposed to do it.”

“Hollander, *nobody* follows this tradition.”

“Lots of people do,” Shane says. “And if they don't, maybe they should! The Raiders haven't made it past round one of the playoffs in like, twelve years.”

It's a bit of a sore spot for the team, and one he knows he and Rozanov were supposed to be the cure for – two young, hyped-up draft picks meant to breathe life back into the franchise and bring Boston back some glory. The pressure comes from every direction; management

and coaches, older guys on the team who are running out of chances for a cup, fans on the street or outside the rink who mob them for pictures.

Rozanov says, voice full of unveiled disbelief, “So being wound up tight and horny is supposed to help us focus on game?”

“No, not – not when you put it like *that*. It’s to help us focus. No distractions. And no, like, extra energy being used for anything except the game. Playoffs are exhausting enough as it is.”

Shane pulls up at a red light and stops the car, but keeps his eyes on the road, doesn’t glance Rozanov’s way. He doesn’t want to see what his face is doing.

“Ah,” Rozanov says, tapping his thumb against the dashboard. “I see. The problem is our sex is too crazy and athletic. We can do slow boring sex to save energy for a while.”

“That’s *not* what I’m saying,” Shane grits out, desperately trying to ignore the flood of heat through his body. He wouldn’t call their sex crazy, or overly athletic. Not that he has much to compare it to, besides all the porn he’s watched in his life, which isn’t a reliable source. Sure, they go pretty hard. Sometimes for a long time. Sometimes leave each other bruised or sore. They wrestle and Rozanov pins Shane face-first into the mattress occasionally. A bit of spanking. Rozanov held Shane against the wall last month and if they’d fallen that would have been really bad. But none of it’s *crazy*, he doesn’t think. “Anyway, lots of guys do it. Like, abstaining. I read some Olympic athletes won’t have sex for like two months before the games.”

“They must be very sad and frustrated,” Rozanov says. “Lots of bronze medals for blue balls.”

“You’re not funny,” Shane tells him. The light turns green; he shifts gear and pulls out onto the road again.

For a moment there’s just quiet in the car, the sound of traffic around them outside coming in filmy and filtered through the windows. Then Rozanov says, “Well, you can become virgin again if you want to. I will have to fuck less boring people while we win the cup.”

Something churns in Shane’s stomach, like his breakfast hasn’t settled. Obviously, he knows he’s not the only person Rozanov’s sleeping with; his sex life is a constant topic of conversation in the locker room. It’s felt like maybe less so, lately, but Shane’s sure that’s just because they’re all focused on hockey. It’s not like Rozanov’s stopped picking up girls. And it’s totally fine if he wants to go out and do that during playoffs, too. Stupid, sure, because Shane will be focused, and playing his best game, and Rozanov will be – distracted. Worn out. From the crazy, athletic sex he has with other people. But that’s not Shane’s fault.

“Do whatever you want,” Shane says, looking straight ahead at the road. “I’m just telling you.”

They’re quiet for the next few minutes, a weird, tense air hanging around them, like another presence in the car. The practice rink finally comes into view and all Shane can think is how

glad he'll be to get out of this car and escape this entire conversation. Probably he should be cutting off their arrangement for good, not just for playoffs. The less chance of anything going wrong between them, the less chance of anything going wrong in his hockey. A bit of a break will be a good thing.

As he pulls into his parking spot, Rozanov says, conversationally, "Berry got his girlfriend pregnant during playoffs last year. Says she let him do it raw for good luck."

Shane huffs, working the tight line of his jaw back and forth a couple times.

"We went out in the first round and Berglund's baby is ugly as shit. Maybe it's cursed."

Rozanov lets out a surprised bark of laughter, pressing a hand to his mouth a second later like he's trying to push it back in. The secret flush of pleasure Shane gets whenever he makes Rozanov laugh roars up inside him, but he forces it back down, keeps it to just the twitch of his lips as he climbs out of the car.

In the first round of the playoffs, they're up against Montreal.

It doesn't really occur to Shane that this was the team Hayden played on for the last three years until they're getting into the hotel for the first game – he and Hayden are sharing, because Shane had gone to player services and asked to be put together, promised it was the arrangement that would be best for his game. The least stressful person to share with. No distractions. He likes sharing with Hayden because Hayden's neat, pretty chill, and goes to bed early because he's still on the schedule of a newborn baby.

As they set down their stuff, Hayden says, "Man, it'll never stop being weird playing against guys who were my teammates this time last year."

"Oh," Shane says, abruptly remembering that fact. "Uh, yeah, that must be strange?"

It's not necessarily that weird. Shane plays against other guys from his Juniors team all the time, now drafted all over the league. Then again, he was never exactly close with any of them, so maybe it's different. Hayden's friendly, extroverted, can't really take a hint – he probably had lots of friends in Montreal.

"It's super weird! Honestly, thank god we've got different jersey colours, 'cus I'm always scared I might forget for a second and end up passing the puck to the wrong team."

"Please don't do that," Shane asks politely, as he unpacks his toiletries from his suitcase.

Hayden laughs, and then looks over his shoulder and probably realises Shane isn't kidding. "Uh, no, I promise, I was only joking dude," he says. "I do actually remember I moved to Boston."

That's good to know, at least. Shane's shoulders feel tight, drawn up and ready for battle. He nods a bit, not looking Hayden's way.

He didn't bring his anxiety pills with him. Told himself he wouldn't need them. He doesn't – he's never needed the help for hockey itself. It's all the stuff surrounding hockey that's the problem, like interviews and parties and talking to his fucking team. But ahead of the first game of the playoffs, he feels keyed up and jittery in a way he never really has before about hockey. It wasn't even like this last year, when they went to the first round and lost. They'd all kind of known it wasn't going to be their year.

This could be their year.

“Good,” Shane says. “Because we're gonna kick Montreal's fucking ass.”

After knocking out Montreal over a gruelling five games, they face Philly in the conference semi-finals.

It may only be the second round, but playoffs are already weighing on everyone. The elation of making it past the first round for the first time in a decade wore off quick, only to be replaced with intense, obsessive pressure – if they go out now, it barely will have been a record worth breaking.

The guys who are better at growing beards are starting to look properly ragged. Shane's got a thick layer of dark stubble over his chin but not much else. Rozanov's grown a decent half-centimetre of golden-brown facial hair that makes him look older, more mature. He's pulling it off like a fucking model, and Shane's not having sex. He doesn't know if Rozanov's having sex. Probably he is, although Shane doesn't know how anyone could find the fucking time.

Every spare second of the day that he's not playing hockey, Shane is eating. They all are. It's impossible to keep enough weight on – no matter how miserably he crams his face with protein bars, shakes, noodles, chicken, none of it's enough to stop a few pounds dropping off what feels like every game. He should have tried harder to bulk earlier in the year. Shane doesn't like the feeling of his body changing – he keeps up his diet and training religiously throughout the year precisely so he feels like he's always on the same even-keel, not on the rapid swing of bulking and cutting that a lot of guys are. But nobody can really avoid it during playoffs, with the relentless pace of the schedule and the insane caliber of the hockey. They're lucky they can all still stand up.

“If I have to eat one more fucking spoonful of ground beef, I'm gonna throw up,” Hayden says, groaning as he leans back in his chair at team dinner after the second game.

“Don't be a pussy, Pike,” Marley tells him, in his usual charming way. “Big winners eat big dinners, nobody ever tell you that?”

“I’m pretty sure you just made that up,” Shane says. He’s heard every saying about hockey that has ever existed, and never heard that one. But, still, he crams down another mouthful of food, because it’s not wrong at all.

“So what if I did, people should be quoting me. It’s fuckin’ true.”

Rozanov says, talking out of the side of his mouth around a disgustingly full mouthful, “It is true, but you are a fucking idiot, so it will not catch on.”

“Fuck you, Roz.”

“Ah, you wish, Marley. No fucking during playoffs.” Rozanov winks. Not at Shane, in particular, but Shane still flushes and puts his head down towards his plate, not looking at anyone. There’s twenty guys at the table and yet he still feels targeted.

“Whoever told you that’s just trying to cramp your style, Roz,” Marleau says, laughing.

“Uh, no way! It’s true. You gotta conserve energy, man,” Feller interjects quickly.

Heiky adds, “Yes, everyone knows this.”

Shane wants to say, *see! I’m not crazy!* but also doesn’t want to remind the team that he has ever had sex, ever, in his life, because they never let him forget it whenever it comes up. He’s glad it’s not just him locking himself in a miserable torment of celibacy for the next two months, of course.

“Honestly, I don’t care about superstitions or whatever, but I don’t know how you’d have the fucking energy,” Hayden says. “Every day I get home and pass out in like, three seconds. Barely even have time to kiss Jackie hello.”

“So not that different from your normal sex life, then?” Rozanov says, because he’s an asshole. Hayden throws a piece of bread at him. Rozanov grabs it out of the air and eats it, grinning.

Just briefly, his gaze shifts to Shane. Their eyes meet. He’s got a lurid purple bruise over half his face and his cheeks stuffed full of food like a hamster, so there’s really no justification for why Shane feels a flood of frustrated heat through his spine, suddenly absolutely desperate for it.

Shane drops his eyes and forces more food into his mouth and reminds himself that as soon as they win the cup, this will all be worth it. Two months without dick isn’t some huge sacrifice. He shouldn’t even want dick in the first place. He’s here to play hockey.

In their first game against Tampa for the conference finals, Dubek takes a puck to the jaw and has to go out on injury to get his teeth replaced.

In their second game they win 6-1 on home ice and the high is insane.

On the day of their third game, Shane turns twenty-one years old. A bit of a thing is made about it being his birthday, by the announcers and by the team, but Shane just wants to ignore it. Nothing should be about him as an individual person, right now. He only cares about the team, about the hockey. His parents have been staying with him for a week in Boston, watching all the home games now that it's getting close to finals; they want to come out to Tampa to see this one in person too but he tells them not to. Doesn't want the distraction. Certainly doesn't want to eat cake, when he needs every calorie he forces into his body right now to be carefully calculated for the maximum amount of dense nutrition he can funnel into insane hockey plays.

The guys offer to take him out for his first legal drink and Shane says, "Guys, I'm Canadian. I've been legally drinking for two years." So that's that. They win the game, which is enough celebration for him.

Tampa win the next game. Then Boston win again. They go to the last game of the seven on Tampa's ice at the end of the month.

He's roomed with Hayden or Connors for most of the roadies so far, which has been extremely vital to Shane's sense of sanity and self-control. So when they arrive in Tampa before the game and the team's travel coordinator is handing out hotel room keys and says, "Rozanov and Hollander, end of the hall," Shane's blood goes cold.

He glances over, but Rozanov's face is impassive, staring straight ahead with his usual steely Russian gaze, leaning back on the wall like he couldn't care less.

It's not like Shane's been avoiding Rozanov. They talk, on buses and planes and in the locker room. They've been playing like heaven together on the ice. Rozanov taunts him and prods him and texts him little dirty texts that Shane instantly deletes off his phone. The only difference is that they haven't had sex for nearly two months, which is something Shane shouldn't even care about.

"Hollander," the travel coordinator says. It's only when he calls it out the second time that Shane realises he's the only one who hasn't gone up and grabbed their keycard.

"Oh, yeah, uh, sorry," Shane says, stepping up to take the little plastic card. He looks sideways, and Rozanov raises an eyebrow, dangling his own card with the matching number off his finger for Shane to see. Shane looks down and mutters, "Fuck."

"Try not to kill each other before the game," Hayden advises Shane cheerfully, slapping him on the shoulder before they all retreat to the elevators. "We kind of need you two out there."

Shane can't sleep.

His whole life he's lived on routine for reasons just like this – to make sure this doesn't happen. He goes to bed at the same time every night. He trains his circadian rhythms religiously. He eats well, doesn't do caffeine, exercises plenty, all so that shutting off at the end of the day will be like the flick of a light switch, instant and easy. Usually, Shane's body does what he tells it to. He's used to being in control of his body; what it does, and when it does it.

Not tonight. They're playing Tampa tomorrow, a game that could determine if they make it to the cup finals or not, and he can't fucking sleep. Shane rolls over onto his back in a fitful, irritated swoop of blankets. Kicks out his legs, trying to find a comfortable position. Can't. Rolls back onto his side again, the mattress squeaking beneath his weight. There's only dim light coming through the windows, just enough for him to make out the shape of Rozanov in the other bed, curls on the pillow, body a sprawled mound beneath the blankets. Shane can just about hear his breath over the air conditioning.

He rolls over onto his back again in a swift motion, flopping back against the mattress with a sigh.

"You are making so much fucking noise, Hollander," Rozanov says from five feet away, his voice a low beam cutting through the dark room.

"Sorry. Can't sleep," Shane mutters. He hadn't been sure if Rozanov was still awake. Hadn't seemed like he was, since he wasn't bothering Shane, which is what he makes his mission to do every single waking moment they're around each other.

"Yes. I can tell. You are way too tense," Rozanov says lowly, rolling over onto his other side to face Shane. His features are indistinct in the dim light but Shane can imagine them anyway; the sharp jut of his mouth, crooked slope of his nose. Those seafoam eyes staring at him intensely. "Like someone has tied you in knots."

"We have kind of a big game tomorrow, if you haven't heard," Shane grumbles.

"Oh, I have heard. This is why I would quite like to go to fucking sleep."

"Sorry," Shane says, chastised. "I didn't mean to keep you up. I'll go – go down to the gym for an hour, or something, until I can shut my mind off."

He doesn't really *want* to go down to the gym, when he's already in bed, in his sweats, nightly routine done, teeth brushed. He's not sure that exercising will do anything more to wear him out than all the rest of their training and hockey should be doing – not to mention that he's supposed to be keeping off his leg when he's not playing, which is currently strapped up with KT tape to relieve the muscle tension that never went away after a hit last week. But he doesn't know what else to do when he can't get out of his head.

Rozanov says, "Hollander, is middle of the fucking night. You cannot go to the gym now. We have curfew. Plus you will be too tired for the game tomorrow."

He's right, but Shane doesn't like it. He lets out a low, frustrated noise, sinking down into the pillows. Rubs his hands over his face. The shadows in the room press down on him, the quiet

grates on his nerves. Rozanov's heavy presence across the room is a constant thought, too, but Shane doesn't want to admit that plays into it.

"Fine. I guess I'll just lay here. I've got to fall asleep eventually, right?" he mutters.

Rozanov makes a noise in his throat, presumably an agreement. So Shane lays there, stares up at the dark ceiling. Tries to count his breaths, matching his inhales to his exhales. He briefly recounts hockey stats, listing every Stanley Cup finalist in his head from the inception of the league until today, but that's less comforting than usual and he abruptly stops. He doesn't know yet if he'll be adding his own team to that list. Oh, god. What if they lose? What if Shane can't ever recite that list of stats again because he'll always be miserable that Boston isn't in the list for 2012?

Then, he hears a rustling from the bed next to him. Shane glances over reflexively – only to see the murky shape of Rozanov, laying on his back, with one hand reaching below the blankets, his arm working up and down. Shane can't see anything exactly but he can *see*.

"Oh my god," he breathes. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Jerking off," Rozanov says, like it's normal. Just – a normal thing to do in a shared hotel room with someone in the bed next to you. He lets out a little throaty noise of satisfaction, keeps moving his hand.

"I fucking told you, we are not having sex during playoffs!" Shane hisses. He wants to shout but doesn't dare raise his voice in case it somehow carries over to the next room – their entire team is staying on this floor, NHL players wedged on either side of them.

"You do not have to do anything," Rozanov says. He shuffles in his bed, the rustling of the sheets briefly covering the lewd sound of skin-on-skin. Then he's on his side, looking right at Shane, while his hand works beneath the covers. "We are not having sex, you are not touching me. What, I can't jerk off now too?"

"You don't have to do it right *here*," Shane whisperers. His hand clenches in the blanket. He feels nearly feverish. "Go do it in the shower like you would if you roomed with anyone else."

"How you know I don't do this when I share with Marley?"

"Because Marley would laugh his head off and tell literally everyone in the locker room immediately," Shane says. Then, a sinking feeling in his stomach, like ice water drunk too fast, and his words slip out without him meaning to; "You *don't* do this with anyone else on the team, right?"

Rozanov's hand stills for a second. Shane is embarrassed he even notices it, that he's watching the movement of his arm close enough to tell. Rozanov says, lower, "No, Hollander. Don't worry. You are the only hockey player pretty enough for me."

He wants to say *I wasn't worried*, but it would be a lie, and his throat isn't working anyway.

The slow movement of Rozanov's hand beneath the blanket starts again. He takes in this little sharp inhale of breath, almost a grunt.

It's so dark in the room, a sensory vacuum; the only smell is bland hotel laundry powder, the only sound the air conditioning humming lightly in the background. Shane's body prickles with heat. He tries to swallow and his mouth is full of saliva. Rozanov's arm speeds up a little bit and then Shane can hear the sound of his hand again, and it sounds like when they have sex, when he can hear Rozanov's balls slapping against his ass at the same time he feels them.

Shane's hard. Aching, rock-hard in his sweatpants.

"You are the fucking worst," Shane says, because he can't think of anything else to say. His eyes feel watery. He wants, so bad. He wants not to want it. He hates that he wants it. He shifts in his bed, trying not to think about his dick, but moving just makes his pants rub against him and his hips stutter and twitch against the bed before he can help himself. Shane puts one hand over his face, leaves the other fisted in the sheets.

"Hollander," Rozanov says. "Is not that serious."

He pulls the blankets down himself a bit so that Shane can see, just about in the dim light, the shape of his hand working beneath his shorts. He hasn't pulled his dick out but Shane can make out the head of it poking from his waistband while he works himself. God. More than a month since Shane's had it in his mouth. He feels like he could suffocate himself on it and it wouldn't be enough. He wants Rozanov to force his head down on it and make him choke. He never wants to come up for air.

Rozanov says, "You are not breaking your rules if we do not have sex. But is no good for you to stay so tense. Here. Stick your hand out."

He gestures for Shane to reach out into the canyon of space between the two beds. Shane, helplessly, does. The beds are far apart enough that his hand just misses the edge of Rozanov's bed; Rozanov reaches out himself, leaning over the edge of his mattress a little. Stops jerking off for a second to take Shane's hand in his – with the hand that was just touching his cock, oh *god* – and turn it palm-up in the air. Then, Rozanov stretches out his neck. And spits into Shane's palm.

"That's so gross," Shane whispers, as he retracts his hand. He feels dizzy.

"I have had my tongue on your asshole, Hollander. Now my saliva is gross?"

"Shut up," Shane says, "Stop talking."

He shoves his wet hand down his pants and grabs his dick, smearing Rozanov's saliva all over it.

Oh god. He *has* been jerking off occasionally during playoffs, sure, but it's not been that much. Shane's always had this ability to ignore anything his body might think it needs, when it suits him. The only time that ability really disappears is with Rozanov, where Shane gets so

feral for it that he finds himself doing insane things, stuff he'd never otherwise have done. In Juniors he wasn't like this, even when other guys were going nuts through puberty, ready to walk through fire if it meant getting a mediocre handjob from a girl at a party. Shane tried that a couple of times – even let one girl blow him, once, when he was seventeen – and found it frustrating and miserable and embarrassing enough that he sort of just turned the switch off in his mind. Said to himself that even if most people felt this drive towards sex, he clearly didn't need it.

“That's good,” Rozanov tells him, voice breathy and low, while Shane starts rubbing frantically at his cock, almost ready to burst after three seconds. “Fuck, Hollander, good, you will feel so good after this, I promise.”

“Don't act like this is the first time I've ever jerked off, asshole,” Shane says, but his voice comes out wet and needy which he's sure negates some of the threat. A little choked noise escapes his throat. His other hand is still fisted in the sheets and he squeezes so tight his knuckles hurt while he drags his other hand over his dick, rubbing at the swollen head of it, rocking his hips forward and chasing it.

“I wish it was,” Rozanov grunts from the other bed. The wet rushed noises of their fists get closer and closer to tandem. “Would be so hot. I would teach you how to do it. Tell you why it feels good and where to touch. Bet you would like that.”

“Oh, god, Rozanov, I'm gonna come.” Shane works his hand faster and feels this liquidy heat swimming through his cock and his balls drawing tight to his body, a taut string ready to snap under pressure.

“Do it,” says Rozanov, “Now, Hollander.”

Shane comes.

He loses track of what he does with his face or any embarrassing sounds he makes; everything fades into white noise for a moment, the entire world contracting. A few minutes later his brain comes back online as he's hard-breathing into the soft hotel sheets and has a fistful of jizz stuffed down his pants.

Shane looks back over at the other bed just in time to see Rozanov coming into his shorts. He always opens his mouth when he comes, his expressive lips bowing around something, like he's begging someone to stuff something in there. Shane's heartbeat rings through his whole head.

Their ragged breathing fills the room for a minute as they try to catch their breath.

“So, you feel more relaxed?” Rozanov asks, breathless and grinning.

“Shut the fuck up,” Shane says, but he finds he's grinning, too. He pulls his hand out of his sweatpants and grabs a tissue from the nightstand to wipe himself on, wrinkling his nose at the texture. But Rozanov's not exactly wrong. The tension leeches from Shane's shoulders, and once he's cleaned up a bit, he finds himself passing out easily – a deep, dreamless sleep.

They win the series against Tampa. In Shane's second season in the NHL, they are officially going to the Stanley Cup finals.

They win the first game. Lose the second. Win the third game. Win the fourth. Lose two.

By the time they go into the final game, Shane's mouth always tastes like copper and his heartrate will never quite come down. The whole world is at the tip of his skates, and it feels like he's gonna fall off. He wants it so bad it feels like being hungry, and he's scared so bad that he sees danger out of the corner of his eyes everywhere he looks.

"Listen, boys. We have fucking got this," Marley says, over team breakfast. His loud voice cuts out all the other noise in the room; he makes a point of making intense eye contact with everyone at the table. "This is our year, you hear me?"

"Hell yes, man," Connors says. The thrum of anticipation is running through all of them like a live wire. Shane sort of feels like nobody's breathing, nobody's daring to even think. The entire world has narrowed down to hockey. They're so close they can taste it, that their breakfast could be made of gold the way it's already in the air.

Rozanov stands up in an abrupt scrape of chair legs, and toasts with a protein shake. "We make Vancouver wish they never been born. Fuck them all. We are better than them. We work harder all season. We fucking earn it."

"That's the spirit, brother," Marley cheers. "We're gonna fuck Vancouver up the fucking ass."

Shane chokes on his eggs.

"And there you have it, folks! Your 2012 Stanley Cup Champions – give it up for the Vancouver Blades!"

"What an incredible journey it's been this year. Boston sure did put up a fight, but in the end, the Blades take it by just one goal in this final game."

"Boston just couldn't get past that incredible goaltending from Kravchenko, huh, Josh."

"He's called the best in the league for a reason. Not that it stopped Boston's offensive line from sinking a whopping six goals on him tonight, mind you."

"This truly could have been anyone's game right up until that last goal."

“Well, congratulations to the Blades, and the entire city of Vancouver, who I know will be celebrating hard tonight.”

Nobody says anything in the locker room for a while, just a silent symphony of rustling jerseys and pads landing heavy on the floor. A few water bottles or loose junk being thrown, hard, against the wall. Coach comes in eventually and gives some big speech about being proud and bad luck and incredible points records or whatever. Shane doesn't hear a word of it. His ears are ringing in his skull.

The whole world feels underwater. He's dimly aware that he's not breathing well but it doesn't seem overly important in the moment. He's played a thousand hockey games in his life, so his body can do this part on an easy autopilot; get undressed, put your gear in the right spot to be collected, go to the showers, scrub your body so hard it hurts like scrub with the soap until your skin is red scrub until you feel like every missed pass or split second mistake in that game isn't embedded in your skin anymore – get out of the shower, dry off. Put on your deodorant and your fucking itchy, uncomfortable suit.

A few hands land on Shane's shoulder at various points, people speaking to him in low, bummed-out voices. Each time he sort of just makes some noise in his throat and they leave again, so it must not be important. Nobody's talking much, still, but the occasional low rumble of voices comes through the room as guys exchange condolences, bad jokes, whatever.

The bus takes them back to the hotel; they'll fly out in the morning. Back to a city that probably hates them now. On the bus, Hayden comes and sits next to Shane, patting his arm a bit while Shane hunches into the window.

“Hey, man, are you doing okay? Listen, it sucks, but we really did put up a good fucking fight, you know? Like, that easily could have been our game.”

“Then why wasn't it?” Shane asks. His voice comes out cracked and strange, almost like he's been crying, although he hasn't – he just feels numb all over.

“I dunno, dude, that's just how it goes. Mysteries of life and hockey, right? But we're good enough, like, we were good enough to win. So we just gotta carry that to next year.”

Shane thinks, *but I wanted it now*. He doesn't say that, though. He puts his arm against the window and rests his head on his arm and watches the city lights pass by outside. Hayden doesn't say much else for the rest of the drive.

They're not sharing rooms this time; being a cup finalist was enough to get everyone their own private room, apparently, even the rookies. Shane brushes off all the team condolences and goes right back to his room and sits on the edge of the bed. Breathes out. Presses his hand into his collarbone and tries to feel his heartbeat.

He falls backwards, feet still on the floor and back on the bed. Stares up at the ceiling fan. Loses time.

It's late by the time his phone buzzes enough times to rouse him, and the first text he sees there is, of course, from Rozanov. *1244. i have corner room no neybour. come now or i have 2 chase u down hotel to make sure u r not having panic attack*

It's maybe a testament to how miserable Shane feels that he doesn't even bother putting up his token resistance. He just bundles himself into a team hoodie and a pair of gym shorts, puts on his slides, and goes. Even if someone catches him going, it's not like it could be weird, right? They're two teammates coming off a loss. If Shane wants to go get blackout drunk off Rozanov's minibar, he can. If they want to watch gametape and pick apart their mistakes, they can. There's nothing inherently suspicious about going to his room.

When Shane knocks on the door, Rozanov answers in his underwear, which is maybe a bit more suspicious. Shane dodges into the room quickly and plasters himself to the wall, out of Rozanov's touch.

"You do know anyone could have seen you, right?" he grumbles. His body's aching and his mind is spinning and he's honestly not quite sure why he's here, but he's here.

"Oh, so they would all know I have fantastic body? Poor me," Rozanov says. He closes the door. Turns around, and looks at Shane. "You look like shit."

"Gee, thanks."

"What, is just a fact." Rozanov's hand reaches out and settles on Shane's cheek – Shane finds himself flinching, but he doesn't move out of Rozanov's reach, and Rozanov doesn't let go of his face. "You are upset about loss."

"We're all fucking upset," Shane says. "It's the fucking Stanley Cup."

"Yes. I am pissed off, too. One fucking goal. Should have seen the deke coming."

"Larsson's a good player," Shane says miserably. "People miss his feints all the time."

Rozanov grunts, but doesn't look happy about it. Shane's kind of glad he's not in a good mood, or being glib, or even worse trying to *comfort* Shane, tell him it's not their fault. Because it is, quite literally, their fault. It's partly luck, of course, but if they'd been better, they could have accounted for the luck. There's a dozen missed chances waiting on that game tape for Shane to beat himself up over – so many things they could have done differently that would have brought home the win. But they weren't good enough. He wasn't good enough.

Rozanov's other hand comes up to the other side of Shane's face, cradling his jaw. Raising his head until their eyes meet. Shane can only bear to look at him for a second in his steely, serious gaze before he shuts his own eyes, hoping they don't look as damp as they feel.

"At least there is one silver lining," Rozanov says. Shane lets out a wet, pathetic laugh.

"I find that really hard to believe," he says.

"No, there is. Silver lining is it is not playoffs anymore. So now I can fuck you until you forget the Stanley Cup even exists."

Shane's aching all over to the point where his muscles are screaming. His knee's painfully swollen and wrapped in KT tape that tugs sharply at his skin when he moves. He's lost like ten pounds and he's starving no matter how much he eats. He's exhausted. Could sleep for a month. Kind of just wants to cry.

Rozanov's tongue darts out of his mouth for a second, the wet, red tip of it prodding at his split lip, an injury left from a rogue stick earlier in the week. The scab looks painful to touch. It would probably hurt Rozanov if they kissed, or Shane shoved his fingers in Rozanov's mouth, or his cock. Shane wonders if it will hurt more or less than his knee if Rozanov fucks him from behind.

"Yeah," says Shane. He leans forward and puts his head in the soft crook of Rozanov's neck, grabs a fistful of his curls at the back of his scalp, sighs. "Let's do that, please."

After, they lay in the big bed in Rozanov's hotel room and are just quiet for a while. Rozanov lays on his belly and breathes loud and plays with his own ear. Shane lays next to him; for a while he focuses on stretching out his knee so it doesn't hurt so bad, then he wonders about getting up and getting a drink, and finally he turns his gaze to the expanse of naked skin next to him – Rozanov's pale, mole-dotted back. The swell of his incredible ass. The hairy backs of his thighs, one sporting a large mottled bruise.

"You know," Shane says, letting his fingers skate along Rozanov's back and watching him shudder, "You have this little group of moles that sort of look like a hockey rink. Like, these four in a sort of square and then this bigger one in the middle? They could be face-off dots."

He presses his two fingers into the centre one, moves them back and forth a bit like they're vying for a puck.

"You are obsessed, Hollander. I worry about your brain. Did somebody scoop it all out when you were small and only leave hockey in there?" Rozanov says. But he lays there a while longer and lets Shane play a little imaginary game on his back. Shane remembers the face-off against Vancouver's captain at the start of the night. He thinks that's probably where it all went wrong; if he'd been just a little faster in that first second, the whole trajectory of the

game could have been changed. He plays it out on Rozanov's golden skin, letting the Shane-finger get out ahead of the Vancouver-finger, race down the ice to a goal somewhere beneath the cluster of moles he's looking at. He imagines he scored. Imagines celebrating the cup win on the broad, strong expanse of Rozanov's body.

Hockey hurts so much sometimes. Caring so much hurts.

Eventually, Rozanov rolls over and says, "I need a cigarette. Don't tell me off, I am not in the mood."

Shane knows what he means. He's never going to like that Rozanov smokes, but they're still tender and sore off the loss; their usual jostling, irritated banter doesn't feel as safe right now. So he just takes his hand off Rozanov and lets him roll out of bed, watches as he bends to tug on a pair of sweatpants. Rozanov palms through his luggage for a half-finished box of cigarettes, a lighter tucked inside of them, and retreats to the balcony.

He leaves the door cracked; a warm summer-night breeze filters into the room. Shane feels cold in the sheets, even though he knows the temperature's fine.

The sex has settled something under his skin – he doesn't feel the same jittery, uncomfortable urge to rip his own flesh off that he often does after a big loss. He knows he could be feeling a lot, lot worse. He has before. He'd honestly be a little worried about how he was going to handle this, if Rozanov hadn't fucked all the frustration out of him.

Without the frustration, though, Shane just feels sort of – sad.

He finally checks his phone to see the messages from his parents. They were here, to watch the game, but Shane hadn't wanted to see them afterwards. They're staying at a nearby hotel, so he didn't feel like he had to entertain them. He's got some other texts – one from Hayden telling him to hang in there, a couple from extended family members he rarely speaks to but knows watch his games, a few notifications from the team group text that he immediately ignores. His mom's tried to call him three times, and both of his parents have sent multiple texts.

He feels abruptly guilty for making them worry about him. Doesn't even want to know what kinds of things they might be imagining. He quickly texts them both, *I'm bummed, but fine. Hanging with a teammate. Speak to you tomorrow. Love you.*

That should put out the fire, at least.

Sick of his phone already and not wanting to give into the urge to rewatch the night's game and regret his every move, Shane rolls over in bed and looks out the window. It's dark outside, but he can see the glowing orange tip of Rozanov's cigarette standing out against his pale cheeks. He's slumped in a chair out there, one arm wrapped around his own chest, legs sprawled.

Rozanov was lucky, getting the corner room. The balcony faces a different direction than everyone else's, looking out into a dark parking lot. There's no adjoining balcony, and anyway, there are high, slatted privacy screens around the sides of it.

Shane climbs out of Rozanov's bed, pulls on the nearest clothes he can find, and treads over to the door. He slips out onto the balcony and, in a move so insane he'll have to blame his extreme exhaustion later, takes a seat on the floor beside Rozanov's chair, leaning his head on his thigh and wrapping one arm around his calf to hold onto. Rozanov startles for a second, but one tentative moment later, Shane feels a hand work its way into his hair.

He sighs, breathing in the night air. It's refreshing, at least until he smells the bitter cigarette smoke coming from above him.

"Those things really do smell like shit," Shane mumbles, rubbing his mouth on the soft material of Rozanov's sweatpants. The hand in his hair tightens admonishingly for a second, pulling at his scalp.

"So do your horrible smoothies but you do not see me complaining every breakfast."

"You complain all the time, dude," Shane huffs. He falls silent, and Rozanov does too for a minute. The sound of late-night traffic is pretty mild from up here, and the hotel's not central in the city. It feels kind of isolated here, even though it's not. Like a tiny sliver of another universe.

Shane can't quite put his finger on what he's trying to ask, but eventually, he grasps around at something and says, "You seem more upset about losing than I expected you to be."

Rozanov lets out a little snort of laughter. His hand slips down the back of Shane's neck. "I hate to lose, you should know this by now."

"I mean, not really. You're competitive, but you usually turn it into a joke. Tonight you just seem kind of sad."

He's probably overstepping. Shane knows he has a tendency to do that – he's not good at dancing around emotional topics. If he notices them, which is not a common occurrence, he immediately feels like he needs to address them aloud. It sometimes feels like if he puts off asking someone about their emotions when he thinks something's wrong, he'll leave it too long and they'll develop some other secret problem that he won't notice or know to ask about and then he'll mess everything up when he talks about the first thing. It's better to just get it over with.

"Is not just the game," Rozanov finally says. "I will go back to Russia soon. For the whole summer."

"Oh." Shane pauses. Picks a piece of lint off Rozanov's knee, then presses his mouth there through the sweatpants. Asks, "And you're not happy about that?"

He does know that Rozanov has some complicated stuff with going home; Rozanov had mentioned it the first time they hooked up, that Russia wasn't a good place to be *gay* or whatever. He never really talks about his family, although Shane has googled him and seen the brief sentence on Wikipedia pieced together from interviews in *Men's Health* or clips on Sports Centre. *Rozanov's mother died in his youth. His father still resides in Moscow, and is a government official. He has one older brother.*

“No,” Rozanov says. “It is not very fucking happy.”

Shane doesn't say anything for a moment. He can't really figure out what to ask. Like, which part of it is the problem? Is it the country, or his family? Does he still fuck men in Russia and worry about being caught? Does he miss his mom? Is his brother nice? Because people with siblings always tell Shane that being an only child must be weird, but Shane never wanted some other kid in his house taking his parents' attention when he was small. He wonders if Rozanov's brother played hockey too; it usually runs in the family.

“You don't have to go back,” Shane points out, eventually, instead of asking any of that, because the words feel strange and intimate when he tries to script them out in his mind. “I mean, you could stay in Boston, or whatever. Coach would probably be happy to have you in conditioning early. If we're going for another cup run next year we'll have to get in even better shape.”

“God, Hollander, even hearing you say that right now is exhausting. I do not want to hear the words Stanley Cup for at least two months,” Rozanov groans.

Shane laughs a little. “Sorry.” He gets it, but also doesn't, because the only way to recover from a loss in hockey is to start planning harder and better for the next win. He is his mother's son.

It occurs to him abruptly that what he's doing right now is actually insane. Sat on the floor at Rozanov's feet, nuzzling at his thighs, practically – what, *cuddling*? He only came here tonight to get fucked so he wouldn't have to focus on the crippling feeling of their own failure all night. He and Rozanov have only hooked up once in the last two months, and Rozanov's surely been sleeping with other people during that time. He doesn't need Shane getting all *clingy*. Acting like they're – like they're –

Shane leans away, sits up. Stretches his arms above his head and shakes out his neck and doesn't look Rozanov's way.

“I should get back to my room,” he says, voice cracking a little, like he's forgotten how to use it even though they were just speaking. “I, uh, I have to get up early to have breakfast with my parents. They're worried I'm depressed about losing or whatever.”

“You are depressed about losing,” Rozanov points out, as he withdraws his hand from Shane's neck and tucks it into the pocket of his sweatpants casually, like they were never touching at all.

“Yeah, well, guess they know me pretty well.” Shane pulls himself off the ground, stands up. His hands feel awkward, like they're attached to a body that's not even his. He reaches out and touches one of Rozanov's curls, just lightly, moving it out of his face. “Goodnight, Rozanov. Get some sleep.”

“You too, Hollander. And don't you fucking dare watch any hockey tonight,” Rozanov says to Shane's back. He stays out on the balcony, smoking and looking out at the city, while Shane puts all his clothes back on and flees the room.

Chapter End Notes

next time: summer in russia 🇷🇺

[art of the balcony scene](#) ❤️

please do leave a comment and/or reblog this on [tumblr](#) if you enjoyed, ur nice words are load-bearing for my writing motivation lmao

Chapter 14: mama, we're all full of lies.

Chapter Notes

this chapter deals with heavy stuff regarding ilya's canonical family background so please be mindful if that might be tough for you ❤️ in my mind i've been referring to this chapter simply as 'the big oof'

i really tried to do as much research as possible before writing this chapter, but i have not ever been to russia myself so if i have anything horribly wrong about ilya's time in moscow or the names/language stuff included etc, please forgive me and do feel free to correct me if you know better than i do lmao !

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

There's a part of being home in Russia that always feels like sinking into a warm bath. Warm in the summer, at least – and while Boston gets snow, it's nothing like the chaos that descends on Moscow every winter, so Ilya supposes there are some benefits to spending the dark parts of his year in Boston now. But June back home is warm, the many green spaces blooming, and the city is buzzing with life. A nearly frantic energy pulses around him whenever he steps out onto the street. The days for hard work and the nights for the nightclubs, the parties, the wild and exciting social scene Ilya stumbles into wherever he goes.

He's travelled a lot, now, and Moscow still stands out in his mind as a city that never stops. There's always something to do; the nights blend into the days with no border.

And he's not surrounded by annoying Americans, which is the best part. A hockey team is a decent place to find commiserating Europeans, of course – they have two Finnish guys on their team, a German, one defenceman from Denmark – but he's not got any other Russians. Walking the streets of the city under the prickle of summer heat, Ilya is comforted by the easy lack of fake smiles around him. He doesn't have to put on any stupid pacifying expressions or smalltalk for Americans with hurt feelings, and if someone's friendly to him, he knows they actually mean it.

Unfortunately, beyond that, being home is actually hell.

He gets a cab to his father's house from the airport, not making smalltalk and sulking on his phone in the back seat, pays heavily in cash when he gets out. He has plans to buy his own apartment in Moscow next year, once he's off the final year of his capped rookie deal and making the multi-millions of dollars everyone says he's worth, but for now going home for the summer really means *home*. His father's house is an opulently decorated townhouse in an expensive part of the city, wedged between similar houses belonging to other government officials and families with money. It's the same house Ilya grew up in. His father lives there now with Polina; once, Ilya's mother had lived there, with him.

He doesn't use the bathroom on the second floor anymore but he knows it's there and he'll always remember what it looks like inside; the spill of vomit and pills on the dark tile.

There was never much personality to his childhood bedroom. It had been decorated for guests long before he was born and Ilya grew up with that same furniture, just a few things switched out to account for his age as he grew. When he tried to put up posters or stupid trinkets they were taken back down; he was told he was ruining the place. His hockey trophies decorate a shelf in the dining room, deemed good enough to show to guests. There are no pictures of him, or any of them, on the walls.

"How was your flight?" asks Polina, politely, when Ilya finds her in the kitchen, looking for anyone who's home. Ilya thinks of Russian as a deeper, rougher language than the English he speaks most of the time now, but Polina's voice is always quiet, like someone took a remote and turned down the volume on her. By the time she married his father, Ilya was already consumed by the junior leagues, travelling a lot for games around the country, then around Europe, then as far as Canada for Worlds. He didn't feel he was home a lot once she moved in, dancing mously around the edges of their impersonal space. Didn't feel he knew anything about her. Didn't try to learn.

"Fine," Ilya says. He scrubs a thumb over his lip, watches the golden tassels on the curtain fan in the warm breeze from the open window. "How is my father?"

He's not looking at her, but he can see the way she bites her lip. She looks down into the tea she's brewing like it might have answers.

"He's been a little confused," she says, carefully, as she stirs. "The doctors have given him pills."

Polina's much younger than his dad. A younger than Ilya's mom would be if she was alive, and she was younger than his dad too. Sixteen when she married him. Seventeen when Alexei was born. Ilya's twenty-one now; the age she was when she had him. He tries to imagine being locked up in this big house with a child to look after and no fucking idea what he's doing.

The feeling doesn't make anything better. Ilya presses his knuckles hard into his ribcage for a moment, trying to still the knotted, horrible feeling in there that he can't express or explain.

"Alexei said he's sick. Like, dying," Ilya bites out. "Nobody will give me a clear answer."

The tea she's pouring sloshes over the side of her cup, and she jolts. He can see her hands shaking.

"The hospital said dementia. Progressing quickly." A pause. "It's difficult to deal with." Her voice shakes like her hands; she's quiet enough to be near silent. She feels so indistinct to

him that a strong breeze may blow her away.

Ilya snorts, pushing down the dark feeling in his stomach. “He’s always been difficult to deal with. That’s not new.”

She doesn’t say anything else, but she pours him a cup of tea. They drink in silence, feeling the warm summer air filter through the windows, the city pressing in on them from outside.

His father’s been given some time off work. That’s how they phrase it. Nobody says it’s clear he won’t be going back.

When Ilya finds him that first day, he’s in his office, pouring over papers like he always would have been in Ilya’s memory. It always looked like he was doing something important in here when Ilya tried to sneak peeks as a child, usually quickly dragged away by his ear and told not to disturb him – it was always confidential, hush-hush, likely often shady, other high-level police officers appearing and disappearing from the house without ever saying hello. It would seem likely his father was doing something important and top-secret now if Ilya didn’t know he wasn’t working. And dying.

“Father,” Ilya says, knocking on the door to the office and letting himself in. The room’s dark and ostentatious, stuffed with dark leather and carved wooden furniture, heavy fabric drapes. The form of Ilya’s father over the desk once looked so imposing to him, but as he stands there now, all Ilya can see is how small he looks. Thin wisps of hair clinging to the sides of his head, but mostly bald. Shoulders hunched, thinner than he was ten months ago. Ilya’s been taller than him for years now, but never felt larger, not really, until this moment.

His dad looks up. “Hmm,” he says; a clipped tone, no niceties. “When did you get home?”

“Just a little bit ago,” Ilya says. He doesn’t quite cross the threshold of the room. “I saw Polina. She said you were working.”

“Yes, yes,” his dad says, shuffling the papers in his hands. He looks down at them and blinks a bit, like maybe he’s not sure how they got there. “It’s confidential. You shouldn’t be in here; how many times have I told you not to disturb me at work?”

“Okay. I was just telling you I’m back,” Ilya says. The room smells musty, like mothballs and old books. Dust tickles his nose. “Will we have dinner together tonight?”

“What, you think we are throwing some welcome home party for somebody who just lost as badly as you did? You should be training, not loitering around here. Cups don’t win themselves, you know, Ilyushka, not without discipline. What am I always telling you?”

“Discipline,” Ilya repeats dutifully. He peers closer, trying to meet his father’s eyes. “You watched my cup match?”

The loss is still fresh, of course; stings a little, though not as much at Ilya as he knows it does at Hollander. Not that they've spoken since Hollander fled up to Canada to lick his wounds as soon as they got back from the cup finals. But Ilya just knows that it'll still be bothering him, because Shane Hollander has never let anything go in his life. Ilya's mostly been trying to ignore it and move on; he certainly wasn't expecting his father to bring it up, not when he's openly disdainful of the North American league, and not with everything else going on.

His dad says, "Of course I watched. I was expecting to see Russia victor over that weak Canadian team, but you couldn't even do that. How do you expect the KHL to take you if you can't even win at Juniors, Ilya? Like I said. No discipline."

Right.

Ilya nods. "I understand," he says, and leaves the room.

He eats an awkward, silent dinner with Polina and his father that night, then retreats to bed early, scrolling through his phone and tapping his foot restlessly late into the night, unable to sleep. Svetlana texts him startlingly early the next morning, when he's reluctantly awake, jetlagged and grouchy about the eight-hour time difference.

Sveta [06:05]

So did you survive one night in Moscow without me?

The answer is yes but really it's no. Moscow never quite feels right without her. Svetlana had been born in America to a half-American mother, but moved back to Russia when her father retired from the NHL, when she was five. She and Ilya had been inseparable ever since their fathers first dragged them in stiff formal outfits to the same government event that year, shoved them in the corner and told them to behave. They'd gone to the same private school until they were teenagers, when Svetlana was sent to an American boarding school for her last few years of education and Ilya to an athletic schooling programme that worked around his hockey. The distance between them had felt stark, then, but every break had been spent together, summer and winter holidays always shared in Moscow.

Childishly, he does wish she was here now. The last couple of years she's been splitting her time between America and Russia, and she's made sure to coincide her visits home with his summers, the way they did when they were at school, so they'd get several weeks running rampant in Moscow. But she's just got a new job in New York, being paid an obscene amount of money to be a rep for an expensive alcohol in exclusive clubs, and she's booked up with events all month. So Ilya's here alone, for what somehow feels like the first time.

He won't say any of that to her, of course. He's not dumb.

Sent [06:05]

yes, it's fine. how's new york?

Sveta [06:07]

Well now I definitely know you're lying, you never ask me how I am

Sent [06:08]

*shut up that's not fucking true
i am a great friend*

Sveta [06:11]

*Whatever you need to tell yourself
But really, is it okay?
I know things have been weird with your dad*

But she doesn't know, not really. Ilya hasn't really told her the details. He hasn't even wanted to think the details to himself.

Sent [06:13]

is fine i'm just jetlagged. stop acting like a worried mother it doesn't suit you

Sveta [06:23]

Fine, fuck you, is that better?

Sent [06:23]

much)))

For the next few days Ilya puts out an open-call for social events to old friends from the city; mostly teammates from Juniors, a couple of whom are now in the KHL and others who have drifted into other careers but still hold their teenage team bond in high regard; a few, separately, friends from other places, the queer club rats he knows from dirty secret parties and bad decisions. He fills up his days with exercising in the parks, goes swimming, eats expensive lunches with people he hasn't seen in years; then spends his nights drinking and dancing. No drug testing until he's back for pre-season in Boston so he snorts whatever he's offered and gets several bathroom blowjobs, which is a reasonable distraction even if they don't quite scratch the usual itch. Staying out until 5am cures his jetlag easily, since that's nearly bedtime in Boston.

Even when he's home for brief stretches of time, he doesn't see much of his father. Polina hovers around the edges of the house like a nervous ghost, and his dad locks himself in his office for long stretches of time, occasionally emerging, unsteady on his feet, to ask where somebody is or tell them they're late for something. Polina has a timer set on her phone to deliver him pills from a hospital-white box that looks like the one Ilya found on the bathroom floor when he was twelve. Ilya offers to help and she takes the offer gratefully but still lingers around him while he gets his dad to take the medicine, like she doesn't know what else to do with herself.

Alexei doesn't visit the house that first week, and Ilya doesn't call him. But the anger at him not being there simmers beneath the surface, every time he sees Polina counting out pills for their father with her trembling hands.

He's not aware of having lots of childhood pictures stashed away anywhere – his mother didn't have a camera when they were young and it was probably the last thing on her mind. There are a few, though, stashed away in a lone box in Ilya's closet, where he'd taken them from her things after she died. He hadn't wanted his dad to find them and throw them out. It was a good impulse, because her clothes and jewellery and books were all given away a month after her death, no word about it.

The pictures in the box are posed family photos, taken once a year at New Year's. His mother sat on an uncomfortable chair, his father stood behind her, one hand on her shoulder. Holding tight. None of them are smiling; that wasn't the look. They were supposed to seem stern and impenetrable. Until he's five, Ilya sits on his mother's knee in the photos. After that he's made to stand beside her, Alexei on the other side, closer to their father.

Sprinkled into the shoebox with the posed photos are a few other mementos – newspaper clippings of Ilya's hockey games, mostly. A couple of Alexei's school reports. There's maybe twenty things total, to summate their entire childhoods.

Ilya picks out a few of the photographs at near random – one where he's a fat-cheeked baby, another where he's probably four and has a head of white-blond curls like a cherub in an old painting, one where he's old enough to be stood with a pissy look on his face. He takes the pictures of him at hockey games, too, and stuffs them all into his bag. He'd rather have some of these things back in Boston with him, even just these tiny painful keepsakes, than leave them here to rot in the closet of his father's house, where nobody else cares.

Ilya's been home for two weeks when Alexei strolls through the door like he fucking owns the place.

He doesn't, of course. He lives outside of Moscow with his girlfriend in a nice apartment that Ilya gave him the down payment for; that Ilya makes half the mortgage payments on, too, whenever Alexei calls him and complains about being broke. Ilya's never visited the apartment, doesn't particularly want to.

"Wow, nice of you to show up," Ilya says. It's already late into the evening, and he's getting ready to go out – sat at the table cramming down a sandwich before he goes to a party one of Sasha's old friends had invited him to. He's been promised it'll be wild. Distracting. That he

won't be able to think about anything else while he's there. Ilya had thought that sounded like a pretty appealing invitation at the time.

"What the fuck did you say?" Alexei asks. His broad, heavy-browed face always looks angry, has his whole life, and Ilya fought with him enough when they were kids to know it's usually not lying. "What the fuck would you know about how often I show up here, asshole?"

"I don't know, just that I've been back for two weeks and not seen you," Ilya says, rolling his eyes as he shoves the last quarter of his sandwich into his mouth.

Alexei shoves a heavy wooden chair with one hand, just enough to send it rattling for a moment before it rights its balance on the floor. "Yeah, and it's been how many fucking weeks since you were here the last time? Fifty? You don't know shit."

Something burning hot and furious rises in Ilya's chest. His food tastes ashy in his mouth as he swallows, breathing out heavy through his nose. He stands up. Rounds the edge of the table to stare at his brother eye-to-eye while he wipes his hands.

"I know a lot more now than I did before. You never told me how bad papa's been getting. He can barely tell where he fucking is, and nobody told me this until I came home? Jesus, would you even have called me if he'd been about to die?"

"Oh, what, would you have come running home for that? You usually love to walk out on us, so I figured it didn't exactly matter," Alexei snarls. Ilya takes a step closer to him. He stinks of booze and cigarettes and bad cologne.

"He's my *father*," Ilya snaps. "I should have known what was happening as soon as it started."

"He's my father too! You never seem to to give a shit about *that*, though, do you? Don't give a shit that I'm the one who had to cover for him at work for a year while he was losing his fucking mind, had to talk the minister into putting him on leave, had to call a doctor the first time because his piece of shit wife is too hopeless—"

"Jesus, Alexei, she's *terrified*, can't you tell?"

"WE FUCKING ALL ARE!" Alexei bellows, spit flying into Ilya's face. He shoves at Ilya's chest, not hard, but enough to make impact. They're both breathing heavily. The stifled air in the room bears down on them.

Alexei's fist bumps against the chain around Ilya's neck when he shoves him again. Their mother's necklace; he always tucks it away when he's here, hides it under his shirt. Ilya pulls furiously out of his grip and shoves him back a little, trying to fight the balance of awfulness between them.

Drunkenness is clearly pulling at the edges of Alexei's voice when he says, "Why don't you just go the fuck home, Ilya. Nobody needs you here."

Ilya snorts. All anyone ever tells him here is what they *need* from him. “Oh, so it’s just my money you need, then?”

“What, does it surprise you if I say yes? Yes, that’s all you’re fucking good for.”

“At least I’m good for fucking something, since you can’t even keep a roof over your girlfriend’s head without your little brother’s help, or show up to take care of our fucking father—”

Alexei punches him in the face.

And the thing is, Ilya fights for a living. His job centres around him having fast reflexes, and being able to see a hit coming. He’s the best in the world at his job.

He could dodge the punch, and he doesn’t.

Alexei’s meaty fist lands against his cheek with a loud, sharp noise that echoes through the room. He didn’t pull it at all; searing pain ricochets through Ilya’s cheekbone, the meat of his face. His eye aches in its socket, his ear rings. When he gets his hand in Alexei’s jacket and shoves him away, they both just stare at each other for a moment, panting, and they both know Ilya could hit him back, and they both see that Ilya doesn’t.

“So fucking tough, Ilyushka,” Alexei snarls at him, mocking. “Why don’t you just take your faggot ass back to America and leave us the fuck alone?”

Ilya picks up his empty plate from the table and hurls it at the wall behind Alexei’s head, watching it smash into a million pieces, the noise a deafening crash in his ringing ear; watching Alexei flinch and curse even though it didn’t come close to hitting him. Then Ilya storms out of the house, slamming the door hard enough behind him to rattle the frame.

He stops in a dark alleyway between two houses a few streets away, when he’s finally stopped feeling like his furious energy is going to explode out of his body and kill him if he doesn’t keep moving. He’s sweaty and panting and he falls back against a wall, something cavernous and dark aching in his chest. It’s warm even at night, the city air oppressive the way it hangs over him, like a body pressing down.

While he catches his breath, Ilya rubs at the sore skin of his cheek. He’s had injuries ten times worse from hockey, this season alone, but none of them have stung quite like this one seems to. He can feel the bruise coming up to the surface like it’s being dragged out of him by its teeth.

He squats on the ground with his back to the wall, lights a cigarette, and calls Sveta.

It’s early afternoon her time, but she still sounds sleepy when she picks up, must have had a late night. She’s happy for a minute, telling him about some famous rapper she met at work

last night who she charmed so swiftly that he's now begging her to let him buy her a car. Svetlana has that effect on people, especially with how much she loves saying *no* to rich men. She doesn't seem to notice something's wrong with Ilya until he's halfway through his cigarette and has barely said a word.

"Why are you calling? Is everything okay?" she asks. It's not a gentle question – more of a demand. Like it's obligatory that he spills his guts to her.

So he tells her everything.

Not in detail; not the cut-up gut-torn way he's feeling about it. Just the facts. The illness. The useless pills. Polina's terror, Alexei's anger. The fight.

"Ilyusha," Svetlana says; the tender way she only says it when she's feeling sorry for him. "If it's a fucking nightmare, you don't need to be there. Nobody is forcing you. Why don't you just come home?"

What a complicated word. Ilya describes his summers as *going home*. This is supposed to be that feeling; that he's in the place he's fundamentally supposed to be. That everywhere else is just a visit. And yet, despite the familiar embrace of the city, the way he aches for the language and the food when he's away, nothing about this feels like where Ilya belongs.

He doesn't give a shit about his apartment in Boston, but he doesn't want to be here, either. If there's anything he misses it's Sveta, and his team. Even if they are a bunch of idiots, at least he's never alone during the season. He wishes he was having a stupid video game battle with Marley and Connors. That they were at a team dinner making fun of how gross Dubek eats. That they were on the road and he was sharing a hotel room with Hollander, staring at him over the gap between the beds. Or in Hollander's apartment, maybe, sucking his cock. Or even just working out together, mostly silent, but giving Ilya something nice to look at.

He breathes out a shaky mouthful of smoke and taps the ash off his cigarette, watching it drift down to the floor. "I am home," he says.

"Don't be intentionally stupid, you know what I mean. Come back to America. You can stay with me if you don't want to be alone in Boston."

"You live in a one-room apartment," Ilya reminds her. She snorts.

"A *huge, expensive loft* apartment. I have like four couches, you'd find somewhere to sleep."

Ilya takes a drag of his cigarette and then rolls it between his fingers, thumbing at the filter.

"I shouldn't leave when my father is like this," he says.

Her voice is unusually tender, for her, when she says, "Ilyusha, I know you love him, because he's your father. But I also love you, and I don't like you torturing yourself like this. He's never going to give you what you need from him. It's only going to hurt. If there's nothing you can do to help, why is it so important for you to force yourself to be there? Let his wife

deal with him, let Alexei. You can go back for shorter visits to check on him – you don't need to imprison yourself there for the whole summer."

The idea of imprisonment has always been something Ilya associates with his father. Not just because of his job, though of course he talks plenty about all the criminals he's sent to awful places. But the house has always felt like a prison – impersonal, mandated, full of rules you have no decision over. And his father traps people there, with status and criticisms and high expectations rather than with handcuffs, people who don't know how to get out from him. His mother. Polina. Ilya. It never felt like somewhere he had the option to leave if he didn't have permission.

"You're so bossy," Ilya tells her, so that he doesn't say any of that aloud. It's always been a joke between their families, the way Sveta leads him around like a lost lamb even though he's supposed to be the cocky, tough, decisive one. He can be all that when he needs to be, but when Ilya trusts someone the way he trusts Svetlana, he finds himself startlingly eager to give over someone of his hard-won control. He trusts her enough that when he does what she tells him, he can believe he's doing the right thing. Ilya's never sure of that when he makes his own choices. Never sure if he's doing good enough.

"So listen to me, like you always do, and give yourself a fucking break."

After Ilya gets off the call with her, he smokes a second cigarette, and books a flight back to Boston on his phone before he can change his mind. He knows if he goes back inside and sees his father's face before he does it, he'll chicken out. But god. Svetlana's right. He doesn't want his entire summer to feel like this. He doesn't think he could stand it.

When the airport transfer drops him back off at his apartment, it's already late in Boston. His body had barely adjusted to Moscow time, so he doesn't anticipate that the change back will be any worse, but he's still tired and grouchy as he makes his way into his dark apartment. He'd paid the cleaning service to come while he was away, and he's only been gone for barely two weeks, but the place feels oddly abandoned when he steps inside. The air is still, the stark modern furniture clinically impersonal.

Leaving his shoes at the door, Ilya goes to the kitchen and drinks a coke. The fridge is empty; he'll have to order groceries tomorrow. For now he just wants to collapse. He tosses his bags into his bedroom and strips down – takes the world's quickest shower, just enough to get the grossness of the plane off his skin, then drags a clean pair of sweatpants over his wet thighs and collapses, sprawled, onto his bed.

The dark ceiling swims above his head. Moscow feels like a different universe from here.

Svetlana was right that there's nothing he can do there, but the guilt for leaving is hanging in his stomach anyway. He's said he had to return early for conditioning training, but he doubts his family believed it. Doesn't really need them to believe it, anyway. He's arranged to pay

for all the private doctors, given strict instructions to be notified about anything to do with his father's care; his father won't notice he's gone, and Ilya doesn't give a shit what Polina or Alexei notice.

The truth is, nobody else from the team will be starting to train for at least three more weeks, most of them still flung to the winds enjoying their rare time off. Ilya has startlingly little to do in Boston.

"Fuck," Ilya mumbles, as he feels his tired muscles sink down into the mattress. How can he still feel nearly as exhausted as he did after playoffs? He forces himself to take some deep breaths, something which seems difficult to do lately. His mind's a mess, constantly swimming with dark thoughts and anger and things he wishes he could say to his father, his brother. His mother. He holds onto her necklace for a moment, rubbing the gold with his thumb. Takes a breath in, and lets one out. Absurdly, he finds he's suddenly thinking about Hollander, who swears by this stupid deep-breathing he does during stretches before games.

The travel has him disconcerted, his body not sure what to do. He wants to pass out, but his brain is wired, thoughts spinning a mile.

He hasn't texted Hollander since he landed in Moscow two weeks ago. There hadn't felt like any reason to – the distance between them had never been more stark in Ilya's mind. Hollander was probably bird-watching and playing golf with his polite Canadian friends while Ilya was scratching the debauched depths of Moscow nightlife. Every time he'd opened his phone and hovered over their text thread, no words had come to mind, and everything else in Moscow was so large and looming and awful that Ilya hadn't wanted to taint his thoughts of Hollander's ass by trying to sext him in the middle of it all. From that distance, Hollander felt like he was from another planet. Like he wasn't even real. Just some fever dream Ilya cooked up to cope with his life.

Right now, no words are really coming to mind either. But Ilya figures it's just good manners to let Hollander know that he's back in Boston. What if there's an emergency at the apartments, or Hollander needs someone to water his plants or something? Ilya can at least give him a heads up that he's around.

He blames it on jetlag and not wanting to remember how to spell in English when he hits the call button instead of texting.

While he waits for Hollander to pick up, Ilya thumps the pillow into comfortable shape beneath his head, spreads his legs and lets his feet fall open in a way that makes his muscles relax. He's not waiting long before the call goes though.

"Rozanov?" Hollander says, kind of tentatively, like he doesn't know what energy to bring to the conversation. "Everything okay?"

It's weird hearing his voice and not seeing him. Ilya stares up at the ceiling and imagines the look on his face, which comes surprisingly easily – the furrow between his brows when he's serious and confused is an expression Ilya's extremely familiar with by this point.

“Why you think right away that I must be calling you with a problem?” he asks instead. His voice is a little sleepy. It’s the first time he’s said a full sentence in English in two weeks, beyond a couple *yes* or *no* or *here’s* to the airport staff and the cab driver. He can hear his own accent thicker in his ears than he likes it.

“Maybe because you’re a walking problem most of the time,” Hollander says, but he’s now back to his irritated voice, which Ilya considers his default state, rather than sounding worried. It’s an improvement. “But seriously, is there anything wrong? I mean, uh, it’s fine if there’s not. You just don’t usually call me.”

“Not really. I just felt like calling. What are you doing right now?” Ilya asks.

“Oh. I’m just driving. You’re on speaker, don’t worry, I’m not holding my phone. I got dinner with my cousins in Ottawa but now I’m on my way back to my parents’ cottage for the night. Kind of tired.”

“Wow, what a wild summer you are having. You know, I am having trouble sleeping, you want to keep telling me details? I bet I will pass out in two minutes, would be great.”

“Shut up,” Hollander says, but he’s kind of laughing. Then, a little more sincerely; “You’re having trouble sleeping? It must be super early for you. Where are you right now?”

Ilya spreads out wider in his bed, scratches his stomach.

“Home,” he says. “Bed. Want me to tell you sexy details?”

“Fucking do not, I just told you I’m driving. Hey, what’s your house in Moscow like?”

“Big and old,” Ilya says. “But I am not home in Moscow, I am home in Boston.”

There’s a second of silence on the other end of the line.

“You’re back from Russia?” Hollander sounds confused – Ilya can picture the confused little tilt of his eyebrows that he gets when he feels like he’s missed a clue. “I thought you were staying the whole summer.”

“That was the plan. Plan changed.”

“Oh. So you’re just alone in Boston?”

“How am I alone? Boston is city of a half million people,” Ilya says, rolling his eyes. “And half the team is still here.”

Not Marleau, who’s taken a new girlfriend to Hawaii to make his old girlfriend jealous, or Connors, who spends the summers in Maine with his family, or any of the Europeans on the team who immediately flee America when they’re allowed to. Not Hollander, obviously. Not Sveta, who’s in New York working her fancy new job. But some of the guys. Enough people that Ilya will have people to get dinner with and drag out clubbing for the rest of their free days, probably.

“Yeah,” Hollander says. “But. Like.”

He doesn't say anything else. Ilya wishes again that he could see his face – Hollander's terrible with his words, and Ilya's relationship with the English language is combative at best. But sometimes he feels like they're not horrible at communicating when they're face to face, because Hollander's eyes always give away everything he's thinking. He thinks he's a good liar but he's not – his face is so expressive and he doesn't realise it. If Hollander was here, Ilya would easily be able to pick him apart and tease him about whatever he's thinking in the silence.

“Like what, Hollander?” he eventually prods. “You are expecting me to be mind reader now too? I am already a hockey god, this is too many jobs.”

“Shut the fuck up,” says Hollander. This, at least, Ilya can read from his tone of voice – he says it enough that it's easy to imagine the irritated expression, that tiny twitch of his mouth that means he's secretly thinking Ilya's kind of charming and just refuses to admit it. “I was just thinking. Uh, you know, Dutton and Feller are going on a joint vacation with their families this summer? And Zev's gone to visit Heiky's family home for like two weeks, flew all the way to Finland. They said they were gonna do a lot of fishing.”

Ilya holds his phone still against his face, his breath pausing in his throat for a moment. Shane Hollander seems so unassuming sometimes, and then he comes out with these things that catch Ilya completely on the back foot.

“Wow, you are managing the whole team's personal calendars now?” he asks, around the strange, anticipatory lump in his throat. “Tell me, when is Marley planning to jerk off today, do you have this written down too?”

“Oh my god, shut up,” Hollander says, breathy. “Forget I said anything.”

“No, no, I want to know why you are stalking our teammates like paparazzi.”

Obviously, Ilya knows. Or he thinks he knows. Hollander's not as smooth as he thinks he is – or possibly he's under no illusions and doesn't think he's smooth, anyway. But still, Ilya holds his breath, one hand splayed against his stomach and the other gone loose around his phone, not sure if moving a muscle might break this strange moment.

“I just meant,” Hollander says. “If you're not in Russia, you could come and visit Canada, if you wanted. Just for a week or something. It's not weird. Lots of teammates hang out in the off-season. My parents would love me having someone to visit. And we could train together, right? Like, start upping our conditioning early. We could go swimming in the lake, and play soccer, and stuff? I don't know. You don't have to.”

Ilya takes a long breath.

“You are at your parents house?” he asks.

“Well, their cottage,” Shane says. “It's on a lake. We just stay here in the summer, for a few weeks each year. Their actual house is back in Ottawa. It's like an hour away?”

Ilya did not ask for a tour of the Hollander family real-estate holdings, but he finds himself nodding to his empty bedroom like this is a fascinating list.

“So you want me to come to your family summer house and, what, just sleep on your couch?”

“No. There’s a spare room,” Shane says.

Ilya blows a raspberry. “Hollander, I am trying to ask if I can fuck you in your parents’ house, or if you are going to be weird about that?”

“Oh – uh.” God, Ilya can picture his blush down the phone, the way he gets all blinky and red and worries his lip between his teeth when Ilya takes him by surprise. “I mean, maybe not when they’re in the house? But they go out a lot.”

“So that is a yes,” Ilya says. “If I come to Canada I can fuck you in your childhood room?”

“It’s not really my childhood room. There’s only a bit of my stuff from when I was a kid here – like I said, we only spend a few weeks here usually.”

“Oh my god, you are so hard to flirt with,” Ilya groans. He rolls onto his side and sighs like talking to Hollander is a great effort, although there’s the tight, near painful feeling around the corner of his lips that Ilya recognises as the start of an unwanted smile. “What, we could not take the one hour drive into Ottawa and go back to your actual house one day?”

“Uh. I mean, I guess we could? If you wanted to.”

“Mm,” Ilya says.

Shane says, voice crackly over his speakerphone; “So, does that mean you want to come?”

Ilya pretends to think about it, to himself. There’s plenty to do here in Boston. He has at least three regular hookups who’d probably be thrilled to spend a filthy week in bed with him. He could invite the part-time model he sees sometimes for an impromptu vacation to Hawaii to fill the time of his blank summer schedule and she’d probably agree. Or he could contact his summer trainer early, get more practice time in at the rink, dedicate himself to that dragged-out revenge of winning the cup next year no matter the cost. He could go to New York and crash on Sveta’s couch in her expensive studio apartment in Brooklyn, cramping her style at her promo events by hanging around, maybe watch her fuck some guys, maybe even join in, in a city where he’s less recognised and anonymous enough to risk it with an unknown man.

Or he could go to Canada and stay in the Hollanders’ guest room. There’s certainly no nightlife out by a random Canadian lake. Probably nothing to do except swim and eat Shane’s weird food. He imagines they have family dinners and do crosswords and all go to bed before 10PM.

“Sure,” Ilya says, and his heart thumps deep in his chest like a drum. “Why not. Like you said, lots of teammates visit each other in summer. I guess it could be fun.”

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: ottawa 

geez thanks sm for reading !! sorry this one was so heavy lmao i had to put them both through the torment nexus a bit but i promise we'll get some relief when shane and ilya are actually together again :) as usual pls leave a comment and rb [this fic on tumblr](#) if you enjoyed !

Chapter 15: flew like a moth to you, sunlight.

Chapter Notes

i would have loved to get this chapter up earlier, but unfortunately did not because:

a) i went away for the weekend to go watch my first ever irl hockey game for my birthday (it is not a popular sport in the uk so i've just watched the nhl for the last ten years from a distance) (it was so so so good in person even my partner had a good time and she hates sports!!)

b) shane hollander said sorry to your chapter plan but i need to get dick MULTIPLE TIMES in this chapter and it DOES need to be 13k words long. and i, much like ilya rozanov, do whatever shane tells me

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

Shane taps his thumb against the steering wheel over and over again, rolling his lips around the string of his hoodie and trying not to vibrate out of his skin.

The airport looms behind the car, a bustling humming ecosystem all to itself; Shane watches in the rear-view as people rush in and out of the doors, cars stop and start and honk in the pick-up lane, the ground hums as planes take off behind it. Everywhere's alive and busy and Shane feels as jittery as if he's holding every bit of that energy inside himself. Which is weird. Because he's got no reason to feel nervous.

It's like he said to Rozanov. It's not even weird for him to visit. If Hayden didn't have a baby and a newly-pregnant-again wife, Shane might have invited him to visit during the summer. Connors asked Shane to come down to Maine for a boat party next month and they're not even that close. Shane and Rozanov are linemates, teammates, the faces of their team; everyone knows they interact with each other. By all rights they should be friends.

So there's no reason to be nervous, except that Shane hadn't been expecting to have him visit. It's all happened so fast. It's only four days since he found out Rozanov left Russia early, since he invited him. It had been such a spur-of-the-moment decision that he can still hardly believe it. It had only been an absent daydream in the back of his mind sometimes, having Rozanov visit Ottawa – well, the fantasy was usually more about fucking him in Ottawa – and then Shane had just blurted it out.

Usually, Shane likes to have a solid few weeks' notice of any kind of social plans. He likes to work up to them, prepare himself, mentally plan out the day, make himself a list of things to talk about. Get himself in the right headspace. He's not sure he's in any kind of headspace right now for Ilya Rozanov to descend on his family cottage, with his sharp tongue and taunts and penchant for driving Shane crazy.

Shane jumps out of his skin when the trunk of the car opens.

He glances in the rearview to see Rozanov throwing his luggage in the back like it's his damn car, and Shane's heart rate spikes. He takes a quick forced breath in through his nose and out through his mouth, then turns to the right just as Rozanov opens the door and plops down into the passenger seat.

Shane says, "Hi."

"Hello," Rozanov says, grinning.

Rozanov's wearing a Boston Raiders t-shirt, of course. He's lucky he flew into Ottawa and not Montreal; he'd probably have been lit on fire at baggage collection. There's a percentage of the Ottawa population who now half-heartedly root for Boston when their own team inevitably doesn't make playoffs, because Shane's plastered over every poster in the NHL and always makes sure to talk about how much he loves his hometown in interviews. They'd rather he played for them, obviously, but there's a certain amount of town pride. Still. Rozanov could have worn *any* shirt.

"How many people recognised you in the airport?" Shane asks, resigned, while Rozanov's doing up his seatbelt. Shane waits to make sure he's buckled in before starting the engine again while Rozanov ponders the question.

"I dunno, not too many. Two people asked for pictures. A few more people were making angry faces at me where they thought I can't see."

"Only you would look happy about the fact a bunch of strangers were plotting your demise," Shane says, rolling his eyes. Rozanov slants a look at him, flicking his eyebrows up. Shane clarifies, "Demise means death."

He doesn't think about why he's familiar enough with Rozanov's expressions to know instinctively when he wants an English word translated. They move past it easily at this point.

"Is fun. I like being famous," Rozanov says. He sprawls out in the seat, his legs spreading wide, and Shane swallows hard and diverts his eyes back to the road as he pulls out of the airport.

"So I guess people know you're here," Shane says. The pictures will no doubt be all over twitter within the hour; Shane doesn't check social media, but there's apparently a whole page dedicated to following each of their movements based on what fans spot them out in the wild. That begins to feel claustrophobically invasive if he thinks about it for too long, so he usually doesn't.

"What, was it supposed to be a secret?" Rozanov asks, oh-so innocently. "Why? Is like you said. Teammates visit each other all the time."

His hand stretches across the console, and lands on the bare skin of Shane's thigh, below the hem of his shorts. Just resting there. Broad fingers curling into the sensitive underside of

Shane's knee, thumb stroking across the top of it, rubbing against the grain of his coarse leg hair.

Shane's breath catches. His hips twitch like he wants to arch into Rozanov's hand and he forces himself to stay glued to his seat.

"What are you doing," he says lowly. Like it's not obvious.

"I am not doing anything," Rozanov says. Shane keeps his eyes glued to the road, but out of the corner of his vision he can see Rozanov making a big performance out of looking offended. "Just need somewhere to put my hand. It is very tired after carrying my bag all over the airport. Need to find it a comfortable spot."

His fingers inch up, pushing Shane's shorts up a little. His hand is hot, rough. Familiar.

"Stop it," Shane breathes, like he needs to be quiet, like there's someone else in the car with them who might overhear. Really he thinks maybe he's worried more about saying it aloud, even to himself – that he wants it this bad. That a few seconds of Rozanov's hand on his leg is enough to make him in danger of popping a boner. "Don't start anything. My parents will be there when we get back. We can't right now."

Rozanov's hand hitches up further on his leg just for a second, further under the edge of his pushed-up shorts, rough fingertips rubbing hard against the sensitive inside of Shane's thigh – so close to his groin, to his dick, that Shane feels flushed from the top of his head, hot-and-cold like a fever. Then Rozanov's hand slowly pulls back down again, fingers dragging into Shane's skin, like it's hard for him to let go. Rozanov lets out a ragged, forced breath, so loud Shane can hear it.

"What about tonight?" he asks.

"I told you, we can't fuck in the house while they're there. The walls are thin."

"But something, yes?" Rozanov asks, voice low, a matter of urgency in the way he speaks. "When they are asleep. I can blow you, at least? We can sneak out if you want. Come to the car maybe."

A million objections build on Shane's tongue – the car will be parked in the driveway, directly under his parents' bedroom window, so that's absolutely out. And it's not like they're much quieter blowing each other than they are fucking, most of the time – Shane still refuses to hook up in hotel rooms because he knows they're stupidly loud sometimes.

But the feeling of Rozanov's hand on his leg. It's like being touched with fire. Shane's whole body is charged and buzzing and burning heat is coalescing between his legs, just from a touch. He's tense in every muscle just to keep his eyes on the road, hands on the wheel.

He swallows, his throat dry and gummy. "Yeah. We'll do something," he says.

The drive is torture.

It's hard to look at his family's cottage with fresh eyes – Shane's spent at least two weeks here every summer of his whole life. When he was a kid, it would be most of the summer break; at first with his dad's parents, and then, once they passed away, just with his mom and dad. The cottage has been in the Hollander family for three generations. Despite what he told Rozanov about not having many of his personal things here from when he was a kid, there are signs of Shane's childhood everywhere he looks – the dent in the wooden doorframe where he lost a tooth age seven, the stack of spare pucks that always sits above the fireplace, the faded children's books that read his dad to sleep decades ago and then read Shane to sleep fifteen years ago and have been on the same bookshelf all that time.

It's all another piece of home.

“So, yeah, this is it,” Shane says, as he grabs Rozanov's bag out of the trunk of the car. “We can say hi to my parents, then I'll show you around.”

There's not a ton to show in the actual house – it's pretty normal, set up for short stays, the bedrooms bland, most exciting part a kitchen they tore out and replaced when Shane was a teenager. The scenery outside of it is more impressive; Shane's never got over how gorgeous the lake looks, stretched out into the distance, surrounded by a towering huddle of trees. He's planned lots of things he and Rozanov can do together this week, and most of them involve the lake. Got out the spare kayak. Fishing stuff. Bought spare swim shoes, just in case.

Rozanov's looking around the entrance with an inscrutable look on his face. He's so hard to read. Shane finds himself abruptly nervous, wanting Rozanov to like the place, even though – what is there that Shane wouldn't already know? The house is simple but nice enough; the nature is gorgeous but probably boring to someone like Rozanov. Still, it feels strangely important he have a good first impression, even if he's bored out of his mind staying here.

When Rozanov wheels around what he actually says, “I can carry my own bag, Hollander.”

It's such a Rozanov thing to say that Shane finds himself grinning. “Sure,” Shane says, “But I got to it first.”

And then he dodges around Rozanov with the suitcase hoisted up in his arms, and races to the front door. His sneakers skid across the gravel and he's laughing as he hears Rozanov set off after him, a couple frustrated Russian words following him.

Shane reaches the door first – Rozanov crashes into his back a moment later, the heat of his body pressing close, the deep smell of him enveloping Shane's senses. Shane swallows. Slides slightly away.

“Not in front of my parents,” he mumbles, quiet as anything, just enough to be heard over the breeze. He feels Rozanov's hand trail across the back of his waist, a ticklish jolt going through his belly, before he pulls away completely.

“Okay,” Rozanov says. Shane unlocks the door.

He calls out as they walk in, “It’s Shane, we’re back,” because he always announces himself when he comes in. They’ve barely finished toeing their shoes off in the entrance before his parents are descending on them; a united front like always, his mom leading the charge, standing in the hallway with her hands clasped together in front of her face like she can’t quite contain her excitement over Shane having a friend over, his dad hovering behind her shoulder placidly.

“Oh, good, you made it! Ilya, how was your flight?”

It’s strange to hear her call him *Ilya* – maybe just because Shane had heard the spirited debate his mom had put forward at breakfast that morning, *we always call him Rozanov when we talk about him, but I suppose that’s rude. When we met him that one time at your building, honey, do you remember if he asked us to use his first name? He did? Oh, god, I better google how to pronounce it right, just in case.* Maybe also weird because Shane’s never done it. He glances sideways at Rozanov’s face and sees him looking oddly delighted.

“Uh, yes, it was good. Thank you,” he says. “And thank you for having me to stay.”

It’s so polite that it sounds like an alien might have replaced the Ilya Rozanov that Shane plays hockey with every day, who smokes in public and spits on the ice and tells anyone he doesn’t like that he’s fucked their girlfriend.

“Of course,” his dad says. “Any of Shane’s teammates are always welcome. We’re glad you could make it up for the week.”

His mom asks, “Have you spent much time in Canada before?”

“Ah, just for games,” Rozanov says. “So I have not seen many of the sights.”

“Well, it’s pretty remote up here in terms of landmarks, but the scenery’s gorgeous. We hope you’ll enjoy it,” Shane’s dad says pleasantly.

“I am sure I will, thank you.”

It’s the closest to *awkward* Shane’s ever heard Rozanov sound – he’s always so cocky, confident, nothing like this. He stands there in bare feet with his hands crossed in front of his body as if he’s trying to behave, and it’s kind of hilarious, or would be if Shane didn’t feel so much like he was going to die.

His parents had been surprised when he’d asked if Rozanov could come to stay. Not because it was unwelcome, exactly – they often asked him if he was going to meet up with anyone from the team during his breaks, worried about him having enough friends, and of course they were thrilled by the idea of him bringing a teammate to meet them, always happy to be involved in his life given how much of it Shane kept under careful key. But his mom had said, “Rozanov? Really? Are you sure you don’t want to invite Hayden?”

He’d reminded her Hayden had a one-year-old and a newly pregnant wife, like that was the reason. It wasn’t the reason, but they, for lack of any other context or reasoning, had seemed to accept it when Shane said that bonding with Rozanov more was helping their line during

the season. That he wasn't as bad as he seemed in the press. His mom would accept anything if it helped his hockey, so as soon as Shane attributed hanging out to their chemistry in the game, she'd been all for the idea. His dad had asked what kind of food Rozanov liked. That had been it.

Though he'd been mortified and nervous to ask them at the time, it was nothing compared to how he feels now – like his heart's going to jackrabbit out of his chest. For a moment, as they all stand there, Shane notices that he and Ilya are kind of mirroring his parents' position – stood shoulder-to-shoulder, two sets of two. He quickly moves through the entrance, separating from Ilya's side, clearing this throat.

"Uh, I'm gonna show Rozanov where to put his stuff, and then we might go down to the lake for a bit, okay?"

"Okay, honey. Ilya, the bed's all made up and we've put clean towels in your room – Shane will show you where the bathroom is – but you just let us know if you need anything, okay? And help yourself to anything you need while you're here, make yourself at home."

"I'm making spaghetti for dinner," his dad says genially. "Unless anyone has any objections?"

Everyone looks at Ilya, who seems completely baffled to suddenly have the undivided attention of three Hollanders.

"Spaghetti is great," he says, "My favourite ever."

Seeing him on the back foot is almost interesting enough to make Shane get over his own nerves, but also kind of makes him feel like Ilya needs rescuing.

"Uh, you can come this way to drop your bags," Shane says, and starts heading up the stairs.

Alone again, he shows Rozanov to the guest room. It's nothing special, the rooms in the cottage aren't huge or anything, but there's a nice double bed with comfortable sheets and a wardrobe he could hang his clothes up in if he wanted to – though from sharing together on roadies, Shane doesn't imagine he will. Rozanov puts his bags on the bed and then looks around the room with interest. Shane hovers in the doorway; doesn't shut the door behind them.

"Can I see your room?" Rozanov asks, when he's finally done inspecting the place.

"No," Shane says, decisively.

Rozanov makes a fake crying face, all screwed up and pouty. "Why not? You are so mean to me."

"Maybe I just like making you work for things." But Shane's grinning as he gives in and nudges open the door across the hall from Rozanov's. "I told you, they're not super personal. It's really just another guest room."

Except, of course, that if anyone else were to stay in this room Shane would feel intensely strange about it. This room had once held bunkbeds which he'd shared with his cousin Mikey, listening to their grandad read *The Famous Five* to put them to sleep. Then their grandparents had passed away and Shane's cousins ended up buying a different cottage about an hour away and this room had felt wholly Shane's, after that. The only furniture that's changed in the last twenty years was replacing the bunkbeds with a double. There aren't his posters up on the walls or hockey trophies displayed, but it's still his room.

Rozanov peeks inside and raises his eyebrows, half-mocking. "Ah, exciting stuff," he says. "Your parents decorate it? I see your boring blue sheets are a genetic choice."

"*Genetic*," Shane repeats, wondering why on earth Ilya knows that word. He stands in the doorway next to him, leans on the other side of it; there's scant space between their bodies like this. Shane's gaze drops down, for a second, to Ilya's mouth.

Ilya catches him, of course. Grins, all lazy and slow, and tries to lean in.

In an instant, Shane's dashing out of the doorway and back into the hall, clearing his throat. He glares at Rozanov behind him.

"Just one," Rozanov whispers, in a tiny hushed voice. He reaches out and tugs on Shane's belt, trying to reel him back in.

"Not here," Shane hisses. He can hear the muffled sounds of his parents moving in the kitchen downstairs. It's all he can cling to – the outright refusal to do anything while his parents are in the house, even a kiss. Because this is a slippery slope. One kiss from Ilya sometimes makes Shane lose his mind. Who knows what stupid situation he might put himself in.

"So take me somewhere," Ilya breathes.

With a shuddery breath, Shane squeezes his fingernails into his palms for a moment. Then he plasters a blank look on his face, steps out of Ilya's grip, and jogs back down the stairs. He can hear Ilya following a couple steps behind him. Downstairs, Shane points out the living room, the pantry, and the kitchen to Ilya in a loud voice, before poking his head around the kitchen door.

His dad's simmering something on the stove while his mom checks her emails at the counter; the radio's playing some irritating top-forty hit low in the background.

"Hey, I'm just gonna show Rozanov the trail down to the dock," he says, aiming for casual, no idea how he's actually coming off. He's always been awful at lying to his parents, but maybe they'll think he's just excited to hang out with a friend. His heart beats a relentless pace in his chest, as Rozanov hovers in the doorway behind him.

"You two have fun," his dad says. "Don't fall in!"

"*Dad*. We're not kids." Shane rolls his eyes, while his dad laughs. It's weird having Rozanov staying so quiet behind him; usually he'd make some joke about pushing Shane in, probably.

It's so impossible to think of him as being on his best behaviour. He doesn't do that with the coaches who sign his paychecks or the media who could ruin his whole career, but he's acting polite here, now? "Okay, well, we'll be back before dinner."

He turns and goes to get his sneakers before anyone can come up with a reason to stay. Shane's pulse is out of control. He doesn't want to look at Rozanov – his golden-brown curls and bowed lips and wide shoulders are too captivating, drive Shane to distraction when he gets a single glance. Even without looking, Shane can smell the woody scent of his cologne when he leans in close behind Shane to put his shoes on.

"It's this way," Shane says, the second they're out the door. He sets off at a brisk pace, leaving Rozanov to catch up. Makes sure they're walking at least a meter apart while they're in view of his parents' windows.

The edge of the lake rolls up against a rocky border close to the cottage, but you have to walk five minutes along a dirt path, through a thick copse of trees, to get down to the dock itself. The treeline leads up the hill into a forest proper behind the property, isolating them from other cottages nearby, cutting it off like they're in their own world.

As Shane leads Ilya along the rough dirt track into the shadowed cover of the treeline, Ilya says dubiously, "Are you taking me out here to murder me?"

Shane huffs over his shoulder. "That'd be a stupid plan. You let a million people take pictures of you at the airport, they'd all know it was me."

He slows his pace a little, and lets Rozanov catch up. Now, there's truly nobody around. Rozanov's hand drifts to Shane's back and knots in his t-shirt; Shane pauses where he's stood, closes his eyes. Takes a breath of warm summer air. They can't hear anything around them but the rustle of bushes and croak of birdsong. He can't feel anything on his skin except Ilya's breath at the back of his neck as he gets closer.

"Are there other houses around here?" Ilya asks, as his body comes up to press along the line of Shane's back. His lips dance over Shane's neck, where the summer heat is making him sweat. One of his hands sneaks around Shane's body and pushes under his t-shirt, thumbing roughly at the broad muscle of Shane's stomach.

Shane's voice comes out choked when he says, "Not close. Another family uses the dock as well but they're like, twenty minutes the other direction. They wouldn't come up the path to our place."

"So we are alone?"

It's obvious what he's asking. Shane feels like the under-layer of his skin is vibrating, all over his body; something humming and urgent in his cells. It's sort of like being full of bees. He could take off from the ground.

"Let's get off the path, just in case," he mutters. He grabs Ilya's hand out of his shirt and holds onto it, dragging him into the copse of tall fir trees. It's cooler in the shade here; they're

completely covered up. Shane crunches over branches and errant leaves for a minute until the path is out of their view, nothing but dense tree cover on every side of them.

Then he wheels around and pushes Ilya's back into the nearest tree trunk, and collapses into him.

"Oh, god," Shane mutters, as he opens his mouth and presses it against Ilya's. It feels like a million years since they kissed, though it's really only been a month. Shane can't explain why he's so desperate for it – they've gone longer than that, in the time since they started this weird ill-advised thing. But right now it feels like he's going to die from the waiting. He's been missing this since the day he left Boston after the ill-fated finals. He's been thinking about it all the fucking time, spiralling up here with nothing else to do.

Maybe Ilya's not here at all – maybe Shane's hallucinating all of this out of desperation. If he is, he doesn't want to wake up.

Ilya's hands fly around him, gripping so tight at Shane's hips and around the back of his ribcage that it's nearly painful, while Shane presses their bodies together and coaxes Ilya's mouth open. Their tongues press together messily, pushing back and forth between the open caverns of their lips; it's sort of like Ilya's tongue is fucking him, the way he forces it in and out. Shane's knees feel weak. He doesn't even care that there's bugs around them and a tree branch nudging his shoulder.

Ilya's mouth is so hot and wet and Shane's dick is hard before he can help it, before he even knows what's happening. He rolls his tongue over the soft, sensitive skin inside Ilya's lower lip and then shoves his hands up Ilya's shirt, grabbing at the thick ridges of his chest, scraping over his nipples. A bird tweets above their heads. Shane breaks away from his mouth for a second, panting and crazed, but Ilya pulls him back in by a tight fist in his hair, doesn't let him away.

It's rough and frantic when Ilya goes for Shane's zipper, getting it down just enough to shove his hand into Shane's shorts. Shane leans all his body weight into him and mutters, "Oh, fuck."

"You should be quiet," Rozanov mumbles lowly into the bitten-raw skin of Shane's lips. "We are outside. Can you do that, Hollander? Can you stay quiet?"

He's barely breathing the words and yet they ring through Shane's ears like a shout. Ilya's hand closes around his cock, rubbing at the tip of it a little too hard, making Shane buck and gasp. He puts his face in Ilya's neck and bites his shoulder over the rough fabric of his t-shirt, just to keep himself quiet while Ilya starts jerking him quickly, no grace or finesse, just rubbing it inside his shorts and forcing his hot hard body into Shane's and panting into his ear. They both know they don't have much time. That it's so stupid and dangerous to be out here, but they're far enough off the path, and nobody would be out here anyway, and oh, god, Ilya uses his other hand to squeeze Shane's balls through his shorts, and it's so much better than it should be.

He takes his teeth out of Ilya's shoulder to say, "Oh, shit, I'm gonna-"

“Push my shirt up,” Ilya says urgently, low into Shane’s ear, his lips dragging over the skin and then sucking at Shane’s earlobe for a second; “Get my shirt, do it on me, fuck, Hollander.”

Shane barely manages to push Ilya’s shirt up into his armpits before he’s coming, stifling his choked noises in Ilya’s throat. Only the tip of his cock is outside of his shorts and he looks down between their bodies to watch as a hot splash of milky cum lands on Ilya’s bare stomach. Ilya keeps rubbing at him while he comes, a couple more spurts trickling out, then squeezes roughly at the head to work out one last drop.

“Now clean me up,” Ilya says, while Shane’s panting wetly against his neck. He uses one hand to push at Shane’s shoulder; raises a meaningful eyebrow when Shane dizzily looks his way.

Jesus. He’s come-dumb enough that he doesn’t even question it, in a way he’ll hate himself for later – does whatever Ilya asks of him. He doesn’t want to get on his knees on the forest floor and come back with bruises and scrapes that his parents will probably notice, so he just bends at the waist and pushes his face into Ilya’s stomach, sucks his own cum off the warm skin there, uses his fingers to help where it’s caught in the rough hair that trails from Ilya’s stomach down to the bulge in his shorts.

“Suck my cock while you’re down there,” Ilya tells him in a low whisper. “I am close, won’t take long.”

So Shane squats on the ground and shoves Ilya to lean further back on the rough bark of the tree, bringing his dick down to the right height to be able to suck it like this without Shane kneeling; he tugs Ilya’s basketball shorts down with shaking hands, just enough to pull his cock out. Shane’s mouth waters the second he looks at it, hard and flushed-purple and jerking in his grip. That turned on just from making Shane come. A light breeze whips through the trees, sending leaves rustling; it almost sounds like muttering voices surrounding them, but there’s nobody here.

He opens his mouth and puts Ilya’s cock on his tongue, rubbing it up and down for a moment, before he closes his lips around it and starts sucking. Shoves one hand into Ilya’s shorts and tugs on his balls. Smacks the other hand against Ilya’s stomach and the sticky residue of his own cum when he starts to make little noises up above him. Ilya’s hands work into Shane’s hair and tug, hard enough to hurt, but Shane’s still so dizzy, head-ringing, from his own orgasm that he can ride the line from the pain right back to the deep satisfaction left over in his body.

Ilya doesn’t warn him before he comes, which is kind of rude, except that Shane doesn’t mind. He can tell it’s about to happen because Ilya goes tense all over and starts snapping his hips needily into Shane’s mouth, forcing him to take more of it, and sure enough a second later his mouth is full and Ilya’s making a choked noise above him. Shane looks up at him for a moment before swallowing – thick and salty-sweet. Shane wants more. He wants to choke on it.

Ilya’s face is red, his eyes glassy. He runs his hands through Shane’s hair a few times, pushing it out of his face, rubbing his thumb around Shane’s temple in little circles.

Working a shuddery breath out of his lungs, Shane lets Ilya's cock drop out of his mouth and pulls his shorts back up for him. He feels like he's forgotten how to work his legs, but Shane is nothing without a vicious control over his own body at all times, so he forces himself to stand up, pressing his palms into the rough bark of the tree to support himself. Ilya drags him in for a kiss, though it's more like just rubbing their lips together, the soft skin of his mouth pressing into Shane's and working up and down.

"Fuck, that was so stupid," Shane mutters, into Ilya's mouth. "I swear I was not planning to do that out here."

"Why not? It was hot," Ilya breathes back.

"Shut up, asshole. You know it's not a good idea. Just because there's nobody around doesn't mean someone *couldn't* decide to walk past, fuck, that could have been awful."

"You think too much." One of Ilya's hands squeezes the side of Shane's head, like he's trying to push the thoughts out. "You are supposed to be welcoming me to Canada. That was a pretty good welcome, no? So you are just doing your job."

A laugh cracks out of Shane. "Shut up," he says, shoving Ilya back into the tree a bit, then wiping the corners of his mouth, self-conscious of anything left there. "You're welcome for the hospitality. Come on. I better actually show you the lake, so I wasn't lying."

"Ah, yes, god forbid perfect Hollander tells one lie to his parents. Were you never a teenager? I would have told my father I was going to space if it meant I could sneak off to get my dick sucked."

Shane doesn't dignify that with a response. But there's something to be said for the syrupy, relaxed feeling in his limbs as he leads Ilya back out towards the path.

They make it back to the cottage just in time for dinner.

"Shane, you have a twig in your hair," his mom says in fond bemusement, brushing her hand through his hair. "You both look like you were dragged through a hedge. What the hell were you doing out there?"

"We played some soccer," Ilya says, innocent as anything, while Shane tries to melt through the floor.

His mom laughs. "Honestly, you two must play everything like it's a hockey match. Checking and all. You'd be red-carded in two minutes of soccer."

"I like contact sports," Ilya tells her cheerfully. "Playing with the whole body, you know?"

Shane stamps on his foot the next time nobody's looking.

Ilya's polite at dinner – well, polite in conversation, if not table manners. He houses two plates of pasta and talks with his mouth full, rips the bread apart with his hands, gets parmesan on his fingers and then licks it off. But he also asks Shane's dad about his job, and his mom about what she did before she was Shane's manager, and compliments them on the cottage, and thanks them for having him more than once.

Shane can see his parents being charmed before his eyes. His mom's the bigger catch, of course. His dad never really has strong opinions about anything, but Shane's mom had been the one ranting about Ilya Rozanov long before even their first draft year. And she'd been so worked up the next year when Shane got put on the same team as him, after everything. She'd constantly asked if he was behaving, in that first year; sent Shane links to interviews where she thought Rozanov sounded like a dick; brought up rumours about him getting traded like she was hoping for it. The next year she'd mellowed a bit, as Shane talked about him more as a teammate than a rival. But even now, Shane wouldn't have expected to see her smiling at Ilya cross the table, openly flattered by his compliments about her knowledge of hockey or her past work in advertising. All with parmesan on his thumb.

After they've eaten, Ilya and Shane stack the dishwasher together, bumping their hips out of sight beneath the counter. Shane stands on Ilya's foot. Ilya drops all pretense and gets Shane in a headlock, makes him laugh until he yields.

From the other room Shane's dad calls out, "No injuries, boys! Save the wrestling for the ice."

It's a good night.

When it gets dark, Shane takes Ilya out to the porch to look at the stars. There's so many in the sky out here – you can see right into the heart of the universe. It's nothing like Boston, where the night sky has a filmy yellow haze over it at all times, and the only light that cuts through is the red blinking of airplanes.

He kind of expects Ilya to light a cigarette while they're out there, but he doesn't. Shane hasn't actually even noticed if he brought a pack with him; he doesn't really smell like it.

After a while of stretching out in the wooden porch chairs and feeling the night air turn cool against their skin, Ilya rolls his head sideways to look at Shane and guesses, "So, you are still depressed about losing the cup?"

Shane slants an irritated look at him.

"I wasn't, until you mentioned it," he says, but he's joking. Kind of. Mostly. Shane really does live mostly in the present, or worrying about the future, rather than regretting the past. "No, I'm okay. It just means we have to train twice as hard for next year. It's actually pretty good motivation."

“Jesus,” Ilya says. “If you train twice as hard as you did last year, you will have no time left to sleep and we will find you dead on the ice by pre-season.”

“Not true,” Shane says quickly, “Because good sleep is *part* of training. You’d know that if you were ever in bed before 2AM.”

Ilya blows a raspberry at him, and Shane, despite himself, laughs.

At eleven, his parents poke their heads out the door to say goodnight. Shane listens to the sounds of them retreating up to bed and then glances over at Ilya. Ilya raises his eyebrows. Shane mouths, *no*.

This time, he really does stick to it. By midnight he delivers Ilya to the guest room. Of course, Ilya stands in the doorway and reaches out to grab Shane’s waist; rubs his thumb across the waistband of Shane’s shorts. Wets his lips.

As quiet as he can possibly breathe it, aware of the thin walls and his parents just down the hall, Shane says, “Seriously, not tonight.”

“We can go somewhere again?” Ilya replies, just as quiet. “Back to the lake?”

“Not at night,” Shane hisses. “There are wild animals out there!”

That makes Ilya laugh; Shane puts a hand over his mouth quickly to stifle the noise. But he can still see Ilya’s sparkling amused eyes, and feel the wetness of his breath on the palm of his hand now.

God, it would be so nice to break. Find somewhere – maybe out in the car, in the backseat, if they could keep out of view – and just let Ilya fuck him. Shane had him a month ago, but before that they’d barely touched for the whole stretch of the playoffs. One time getting fucked by Ilya Rozanov in the last three months is just not enough to sustain himself on anymore.

But they can’t, really, not right now. There’s nowhere private enough for Shane to be able to let go. He’d be all in his head, tense, he wouldn’t enjoy it – he doesn’t want to put that into sex with Ilya. It’s the only consistently relaxing thing in his life.

So Shane shudders out a breath and puts his face so close to Ilya’s for a second, just breathing in the scent of him, before forcing himself to pull back.

“Tomorrow,” he whispers. “Goodnight, okay?”

There’s no light but the moonlight filtering through the windows; it’s still bright enough to catch on Ilya’s eyes, the way they’re watching Shane so intently.

He says, “Goodnight, Hollander.”

So Shane goes to bed, and thinks all night long about how Ilya Rozanov is just through the wall.

The next day, they go on a hike with Shane's parents.

Ilya's still being very polite when they're in the room, but seems wildly skeptical of how fun this will be whenever he and Shane are left alone. Still, he lets himself be sprayed with bug spray and instructed on which sneakers to wear, and they pack some lunch and all set off into the wilderness.

Shane loves the landscape around here; the earthen wildness of it, familiar yet always so new, alive, a mystery. Whenever he spends time here in the summers he runs along the woodland trails every morning, no music or anything, just taking it in. Today they're at a slower pace, with his parents chatting as they walk. Shane brings up the rear – partly so he's sure Ilya's not having a terrible time and isn't left out of the conversation, and partly to watch his ass in tight gym shorts bouncing through the woods.

"So, Ilya," Shane's mom asks, while they're paused to drink water and letting his dad try and figure out what kind of birds are roosting in a nearby tree. "Did you spend any time back in Russia this summer? I imagine most of the team go home in the offseason, right?"

"Mom," Shane says lowly. "You're being nosy."

"I am not, I'm making conversation!"

Ilya laughs a little, shakes his head, but Shane can't help but feel he was a second late to his reaction.

"It is fine. I spent a little time in Russia, yes. Now I will spend the rest of the summer in America. I have a good trainer in Boston, easier to do summer conditioning there than in Moscow."

"Oh, that makes sense," his mom agrees. "Shane uses a trainer in Montreal so he can stay close to home in the summers."

"I imagine the Metros are not happy about that," Ilya says, with some amusement. "Having best trainer in the city poached by somebody on another team?"

"It's not like I take up *all* his time," Shane says, rolling his eyes, although honestly, he does do a lot. "Dad, can we go yet?"

His dad turns around with his dorky little binoculars still held up to his nose. "Did you see that, boys? It was a ruby-throated hummingbird!"

Ilya looks at Shane, flicks his eyebrows up. Shane can hear the chirp without Ilya even having to say it. Boring. *Genetic*.

They hike for three hours and then end up back down by the lake. Ilya eagerly strips off his shirt without saying anything to anyone and dives in, just wearing his shorts and sneakers. It's a warm day, not record-breaking hot but enough that they're all sweaty and pink-cheeked – Shane watches Ilya's strong back disappear beneath the water and feels something tense and urgent clutch in his stomach.

"Come on, Hollander! The water is great!" Ilya calls out when he emerges, dark-honey hair plastered to his grinning face, as he treads water. He splashes out towards the shore; cool droplets of water splatter all over Shane's front.

"Asshole!" Shane calls back.

"Shane, don't call your guest an asshole," his mom says admonishingly from behind him, where she's spreading out a picnic blanket on the rocky shore.

"You always call Rozanov an asshole, it's like your nickname for him," Shane grumbles at her. She shushes him, glancing over like she doesn't want Ilya to hear that. The way he's charmed Shane's parents so immediately is wild.

"Are you coming in?" Ilya calls out again, pushing himself onto his back and bobbing along the water. The sunlight dances across the droplets clinging to his body, makes him nearly gleam in the light.

Shane gets in the lake.

Even though they're all worn out, sore in the good-muscle-work kind of way that Shane loves, his dad insists on grilling that evening. Shane tries to help him make burgers, but he hates cooking with his dad – his dad never follows a recipe, will just say *oh, maybe it needs this* or *I feel like adding something today* and then Shane doesn't know what he's doing and gets stressed out. He needs clear instructions in the kitchen or it all feels terrifyingly unstable. Cooking food wrong can kill you. So, of course, Shane's eventually herded away from the grill before he gets too anxious.

"You cannot cook," Ilya says, sounding kind of delighted, when Shane joins him back at the table. Ilya's got a beer half-drunk already in his hands and he's sprawled out, the picture of ease against the sunsetted backdrop. He reaches out and prods Shane with the cold glass of his beer bottle. "That is brilliant news. Here, I thought you were good at everything."

Shane rolls his eyes. "Like you're one to talk. I *know* you get takeout every night."

"Eh, I am rich, I can afford it."

It'll be even more true come next season. Ilya's rookie deal just ended, now that he's three years into his career, and he's signed a record-breakingly expensive new contract with

Boston. It was all anyone talked about on Sports Center for weeks. Shane knows his agent has already been making plans to try and exceed the deal when he comes off his own rookie contract next year, but Shane isn't all that competitive about the money, as long as they keep letting him play.

"That doesn't mean it's healthy," Shane points out. Not that he's one to preach about cooking. All his food is sent via a meal service carefully approved by a nutritionist – he just puts it together and heats it up.

Ilya asks kind of mockingly, "So you are a master chef, are you?"

"Don't let Shane fool you," his mom suddenly says, emerging out of the sliding doors with a glass of wine and her glasses on. She comes over and stands behind Shane so she can ruffle his hair. "He's an expert in one thing and one thing only. We tried to get him into cooking when he was younger – oh, all sorts of things, cooking classes, violin lessons, Japanese school – he wasn't interested in any of it if it wasn't hockey. We had to give up pretty quick. Anytime we took him anywhere that wasn't the rink he'd just dig his heels into the floor and throw a tantrum."

"Stop exaggerating," Shane says, ducking his head into his ginger ale, embarrassed mostly because it's true. He remembers the hot panic that used to flood him whenever his parents tried to drop him off at a club or class he'd not been to before – it felt like the world was going to end. It was always this burning feeling, running through his body, that made him refuse to move, just stand there and squeeze his hands into fists and sometimes cry. He felt burning hot and scared and he just wanted to be at the ice rink, where it was nice and cold and soothing on his senses, and he got to play hockey, which his brain understood.

So they'd let him just play hockey and now that was all he wanted to do for his whole life. Shane thinks it worked out, even if he can't speak Japanese to his aunt on the phone, or play violin. Or make burgers without a recipe.

"I can imagine it," Ilya tells Shane's mom conspiratorially. "Probably how he still looks when somebody try to give him a different kind of stick tape on game-day."

Shane hits Ilya's arm. "That is *not* true. I just know what the best tape is."

"Is tape, Hollander, it is all the same."

Luckily, his dad comes over with the burgers before they can descend into a brawl.

As they eat, making light conversation about the Raiders' season over the table, Shane feels something weird and tight curling up in his stomach. His parents keep easily smoothing over the edges when he and Ilya rile each other up. They're being perfect hosts. They're feeding Ilya and telling him stories about Shane as a kid and asking him questions about his life. Sure, his dad's kind of silly and his mom's way too intense and asks questions like a reporter, but Ilya seems comfortable enough. It's been such a nice day.

Shane's never had a friend over like this before. He doesn't, despite his big talk, actually know if this is a normal way for teammates to spend the summer together. If Ilya's supposed

to fold into Shane's domestic family shit with so much ease.

The discomfoting part is just how comfortable it feels. Shane has no idea how to reconcile that, so he keeps quiet, and eats his dinner.

On the third day, Shane wakes up late. This is so unlike him that he's kind of startled, even though he has nowhere to be, and rushes through his morning routine, brushing his teeth in the shower and getting dressed with his hair still wet. By the time he's made it downstairs, it's not even 9, but it feels wildly late to Shane.

So he's definitely distracted when he emerges into the den and finds Ilya and his father sat at the table together – doing a fucking crossword puzzle.

Ilya's got this furrow in his brow, staring intensely down at the little paper book as he parses the English words. His dad's got reading glasses on. When they spot Shane, Ilya says, "Hollander, this little book is evil."

"Wait until we get to the cryptic," his dad says pleasantly. "You might renounce the whole English language."

"It is an awful language," Ilya moans, dramatic as anything, putting his head in his hands and slouching down along the table. They have matching mugs of coffee. A second later, Ilya's head shoots back up again and he shouts, "Tuxedo!"

"Huh." Shane's dad peers down at the book, marks something in pencil. "Good one, kid, that fits."

Ilya says something in Russian, so celebratory that Shane has to imagine it translates to *fuck yeah*. It's just how he sounds when he scores a goal. Shane briefly revisits the idea that this entire trip has been a hallucination, because he can't quite reconcile this image of Ilya – at the sun-dappled table with Shane's boring dad doing crosswords at nine in the morning while the Canadian wilderness rustles outside – with the Rozanov he knew this time last year. The rude ruthless party animal goal-scoring machine who treated the world like his personal chew-toy.

"Hollander, today we will go out in the kayaks, right?" Ilya asks, looking up at him when Shane stands there a moment too long. "We can race? David said he will time us."

"Sure," says Shane, light-headed. Hearing Rozanov call his dad by his first name is definitely a sign that Shane's slipped out of reality, but he figures he might as well embrace it. "As long as you're prepared to fucking lose."

Shane sticks true to his word of not hooking up with Ilya outside again; unfortunately, that doesn't leave them with a lot of options. A couple of times in the first few days of Ilya's visit, Shane gives in to sneaking into Rozanov's shower, while his parents are out by the lake and he and Ilya have just finished a run together. Even then, there's no time or space to do anything beyond a frantic handjob beneath the spray, which is nice in the moment but ultimately leaves him more frustrated, hot all over whenever Ilya leans close to him for the rest of the day, restless and a little sick in the pit of his stomach.

Shane honestly, truly, just wants to get fucked. He wants to be in a bed. He wants his ass sore. And he wants it here, in his hometown, feeling a thousand miles away from hockey for one rare moment of his life.

On the fourth day of Ilya's visit, Shane says to his mom, "Mom, is it okay if we take the car today? I was gonna drive Rozanov into Ottawa, show him some of the city and stuff."

His pulse is hammering in his chest as he even asks the question. He practiced the exact wording of how he was going to ask, how casually he would be able to present it, in the mirror last night before bed, but he still can't help but feel like he must be obvious as hell. He wonders what she'd think if he did seem suspicious. Maybe that they were going to get drunk? But they're both twenty-one, it's not like that's scandalous. Maybe she'd assume they were going to meet some girls in the city. Shane can hope.

But his mom just says, "Of course, honey. That's a nice idea. Oh, while you're in the area, will you stop in at the house and pick up any mail?"

Which stops Shane from even having to offer his second excuse for taking the house keys.

Not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth, he swiftly sets about ushering Ilya out to the car, while Ilya calls over his shoulder, "Goodbye Yuna, goodbye David! Have good days!"

As soon as they're out the door, Shane shoots him a look.

"Stop sucking up to my parents."

"Why? Is a crime to want them to like me?" They get in the car, and Shane does appreciate that Ilya makes sure the doors are closed before he says, "Just in case they ever find out I am sucking their son's cock, I figure it does not hurt for them to think I am a nice person."

Shane's whole body floods with dread at even the suggestion. He pauses with the keys in the car ignition, his breath caught stickily in his throat.

"They are *never* going to find that out," he says. "Jesus. Don't even say that."

Rozanov looks over at him, but Shane doesn't meet his eyes, feeling panic rise in his chest. He can't even imagine it. He doesn't want his parents knowing anything about his dick, first of all. Knowing anything about him being with a man – he can't even think about it, can't begin to delve into the murky waters of imagining their reactions, their disappointment, how much they've given up for the career that his sexuality could ruin, how proud they are of the

version of him in their heads. It being Rozanov specifically might make everything even worse.

“I know,” Rozanov says, in a slower voice, lower, more careful. “Nobody will find out, Hollander, I promise.”

Shane lets out a shaky breath. The sudden thought of this is almost enough to make him want to abandon this whole plan, but he didn’t spend a terrified thirty minutes this morning douching in the shared bathroom to *not* get fucked today. Ilya’s only here for three more days – this might be their last chance to fuck all summer. So Shane forces down his panic, and starts the car.

They mostly don’t talk while they drive; Ilya grabs the aux and puts on some weird Russian rap that Shane doesn’t exactly enjoy but doesn’t force him to turn off, because at least it breaks the silence. He hasn’t said it in so many words to Ilya – *we’re going to fuck today* – but he’d said he wanted to show Ilya the house in Ottawa, and Ilya had made a face like he knew what that meant. So. Even if Ilya doesn’t keep creeping his hand on Shane’s thigh this drive, the tension’s kind of building.

The house Shane grew up in is on the outskirts of the city, in a quiet suburb. It looks like all the other houses around it; grey shingles on the roof, white plastered walls, a curved driveway up to the garage bordered by hedges and flowers. It’s not really anything special, though of course Shane will always love it for being his childhood home. He felt safe here for a long time. He still does, of course – there’s some difficult memories, but he can ignore those.

“Well, this is it,” Shane says, putting the car into park in the driveway and then hovering with his hands on the wheel. He glances kind of sideways at Ilya, bites his lip. Ilya’s staring back at him with raised eyebrows.

“Yes, it’s very nice. Are we going to go inside, or we just look at the walls all day?” he asks.

Shane says, “If you want to come inside, you could try being a bit nicer,” and then realises what that sounded like, and abruptly leaves the car. Ilya’s laughing as he follows.

They go in through the front door, take off their shoes. The second they’re inside, Ilya steps up close to Shane’s back, puts an arm over his shoulder and down across his chest, trapping him like a cross-check. He doesn’t immediately start anything, though. Instead, Shane feels Ilya’s head turn away from him – looking around the living room they’ve entered into.

From an outside perspective, it’s actually slightly embarrassing. There are pictures of Shane on every wall. Baby Shane in the bath, Shane barely standing in his first pair of kiddy skates, Shane with no front teeth in a yukata with his obi tied all wrong and his grandmother fussing over him. His childhood jerseys are framed on the walls. Trophies on the bookshelf. This is only the first room of the house.

He abruptly doesn’t want to show Ilya the office, where the full trophy wall is sat – he’ll have chirping material for life.

“Come on, you don’t need the full tour,” Shane murmurs, and reaches up to scratch his nails over Ilya’s arm. “You’ve seen houses before. You only want to see my room, right?”

“Mm, I want to see lots of things,” Ilya says. He puts his face in Shane’s neck for a moment and bites at the join of it, then lets go. “But we can start with your room, yes.”

So Shane leads him upstairs. His heart’s thundering in his chest, the hot-cold flush of anticipation already working its way through his system. Part of him thinks, *this is becoming a problem*. Shane entered his first year in the NHL telling himself the one thing he wasn’t going to do was think about other men – now he’s driven to distraction if he’s not getting fucked enough. And ‘enough’ seems to keep changing. He’s getting more and more desperate for it, and he can’t seem to stop the descent. It’s the only thing in his entire life that Shane’s not been able to correct in himself through sheer willpower, determination and self-control.

He’s almost worked himself up into quite a fit of anxiety when they step through the door to his childhood room. Then, abruptly, Shane realises he has more pressing problems.

Shane drops his backpack to the floor and turns around to stop Ilya coming in, but it’s already too late. His face is lit up with glee and he hip-checks Shane out of the way so he can burst into the room, giggling like a kid. Shane had been thinking of the whole *can I fuck you in your childhood room* thing as a bit of flirty banter on Ilya’s part that mostly only amounted to the idea of them having an empty house and a lockable door for a few scarce hours this summer. He hadn’t actually stopped to think about his own bedroom, as it was. After all, he was a boring kid. What could be so interesting about it?

He forgot who he was dealing with.

“Hollander,” Ilya says, sounding delighted. “*Hollander*.”

“Leave me alone,” Shane tells him, mortified. Ilya crosses the room and flings himself down onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling with unrestrained glee. Shane follows and tries to pull the poster down, like he can crumple those shirtless-hockey-player-abs right out of existence, but Ilya tugs him down onto the bed instead, pinning his arms awkwardly to one side so he can’t get free.

“Hollander, there is a naked hockey player on your ceiling. And your parents really do not know you like men?”

Ilya tilts his head back into the pillow and laughs for a second. Shane wrestles free of his grip and slaps his stomach, hard.

“Shut *up*, ” he says. “It wasn’t for *that*, I just really liked hockey. I’m not even, like – you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Raising one eyebrow judgily, Ilya rolls onto his side, staring Shane down. “I don’t? What don’t I know about? How much you like dick? I am attached to the only dick you seem to like this much, unless you have forgotten.”

“Who says you’re the *only* dick I like?” Shane grumbles. It’s – well. Not untrue. He watches porn and gets turned on. He finds random guys hot in bars or on the street. He sometimes thinks about hot celebrities when he jerks off. Or, well, he used to. Maybe more as a teenager. The problem is that acting on it with anyone other than Rozanov has always seemed so insane and ill-advised that he thinks he’s maybe forgotten how to want to do that. Ilya’s offered him the only semi-safe outlet to his sexuality Shane’s ever imagined, given they both have the same amount to lose if anything ever got out. It would be stupid to even try it with anyone else, at this point. And his brain’s clocked onto that, which is why he never really thinks about it anymore. That’s the only reason – safety.

Unfortunately, Ilya’s got the self-confidence of a Greek god, because he just laughs.

“I say. Feel free to tell me next time you get someone else’s dick, though. Send me pictures, too, I bet it would be hot.”

“You’re so annoying,” Shane tells him earnestly – his worst nightmare is receiving a picture of Ilya with one of the women he fucks, so he’s not about to give into that bait. “Do you want to fuck me today, or not? Because I’ve got other places I could be.”

“Oh, you are such a bad host you would leave your guest all alone in a scary new city and go do other things?”

Ilya rolls over, on top of Shane, pressing the whole hot length of his body down on him. Crushing him under the weight. Even if hockey didn’t exist, Shane thinks dedicating his life to his gym routine would still be worth it to be able to take Ilya’s weight like this, the dense mass of his muscles and his broad form, warm and heavy and pressing down on Shane everywhere he can feel.

Then Ilya says, “Be honest. You jerked off to that poster, yes?”

Shane kicks up with his legs and wrestles Ilya to the side until Shane’s the one who has him pinned, his knees around Ilya’s hips, Ilya’s hands forced into the pillow, and he says, laughing, “I said shut *up*.” And then, after a few panting breaths and Ilya’s soft eyes settling on him; “I mean, obviously. He was really hot. And his slapshot?”

“Maybe it’s not men you like after all, you are just only attracted to hockey players,” Ilya says, teasing.

Shane’s actually considered that possibility before, maybe more recently than is smart, but doesn’t admit that. He doesn’t like to talk about what he is or isn’t attracted to – doesn’t really like to think about it. It’s enough to know that this, having his knees dug into Ilya Rozanov’s strong waist and his ass pressed on the bulge between Ilya’s legs, is on the list.

“Maybe you should stop talking and fuck me, before I go jerk off to some other hockey player,” Shane suggests.

Ilya’s eyes go dark.

The whole day's felt like a low simmer, the reality of sex barely creeping into the edges among all the logistics and nerves. That disappears abruptly. Suddenly, all Shane can think about is their bodies – the way he's sat over Ilya. The way he can feel Ilya's panting breaths reaching the bare skin of his arms. His bare feet pressing into Ilya's thighs below the hem of his shorts, toes scratching at the rough leg hair. The strain of muscle it's taking to keep Ilya pinned, that good ache. And Ilya, there, looking up at him, mouth a little open so Shane can see the pink of his tongue between his teeth.

It feels like the first moment of swinging yourself over the boards onto the ice. There's this second where the sharp blades hit fresh ice and you're taken by the momentum before your body can do anything about it – swept away on a force so inescapable that if you don't throw your body into it, you'll crash and fall.

Shane throws his body into it. He falls down into Ilya and grabs his jaw, kisses him hard, feeling the rasp of his stubble under his fingers and the heat of his mouth where their lips meet. Ilya makes a rough noise and then grabs at Shane; one hand holding the back of his neck at the scruff, the other sliding down to grasp at the joint of Shane's thigh, right under the crease of his ass. A stiff noise works out of Shane's throat.

He wants it so bad he doesn't know how to be patient, even though they technically have all day. He doesn't want to drag it out when he could have it *now*. Shane rips their mouths apart and sits up, pulls his shirt off in one tug. He leans back to drape it over the end of the bed, then turns around, feeling the saliva pool in his mouth.

Ilya's sprawled on the bed, red-faced and glassy-eyed. He says, "Fuck, Hollander."

Shane generally knows to take this as a compliment by now.

"Take your clothes off," he says, scrambling off the top of Ilya so they can both do that. Ilya seems as frantic as he feels, pulling his shorts and underwear down together, tossing them across the room with abandon. Shane nearly falls over stepping out of his shorts, only folds them once before putting them on top of his shirt. He grabs his backpack off the floor and fishes out the bottle of lube and strip of condoms that he'd rolled up inside a sweatshirt in case anyone checked. The second he has them in hand he crawls back onto the bed and puts his hands in Ilya's curls, falling on top of him again, this time nothing but uninterrupted skin.

Immediately, Ilya works a hand around Shane's jaw and drags his head to where he wants it, strains up from the pillow and kisses him open-mouthed, wet, frantic. His lips roll across Shane's, tug and pull at them, his teeth bite, bruise; he keeps making these noises like he can't get breath except out of Shane's mouth, and Shane feels crazy. His head stops working, the world starts spinning, the room outside Ilya Rozanov's burning mouth ceases to exist. Shane finds himself rocking into Ilya's body without knowing he's doing it, his cock flushed and swollen between his legs where he's forcing it into the crease of Ilya's hip, desperate to be touched.

"I cannot believe you made me wait four fucking days for this," Ilya groans, and grabs Shane's ass hard with one hand, uses the other to flip them over, throwing Shane hard into the mattress, knocking the breath out of him.

“What, you’re saying it’s not worth the wait?” he pants out, as he pulls one of Ilya’s curls, hard. Ilya tilts his head back and lets out a moan. Shane thinks about telling him to be quiet, and then remembers they don’t fucking have to. There’s nobody around. They have the house all to themselves.

“Is always worth the fucking wait with you, that is the problem,” Ilya says, his voice muffled as he buries his face in Shane’s neck. He bites down on Shane’s neck, sending a sharp pain-pleasure through him, then sucks at where he’d bitten.

Shane doesn’t know what Ilya means and now’s certainly not the time to examine it, so he doesn’t. His head is swimming; his whole body feels white-hot and feverish, his cock heavy and aching like a bruise. He drags Ilya down and kisses him, shoves his tongue into Ilya’s wet mouth and worms his hand down Ilya’s body to grab at his cock, roll the foreskin between his fingers to hear the needy noise that Ilya makes.

“Please fuck me already,” Shane gasps out.

Ilya closes his eyes and moans something in Russian against Shane’s skin. His hands span Shane’s thighs, pulling them up around his hips, like he’s testing the position. Then he drops one and scrambles for the lube Shane had abandoned on the bed.

He always fingers Shane open so carefully, like he thinks Shane doesn’t know how to take it. He’s still careful now, but there’s an edge to it, a needy look in his eye as he gets his fingers wet and rubs lube around Shane’s hole. Shane pulls his knees up to his chest and closes his eyes for a second just to remember how to breathe, forcing air in and out of his lungs to the rapid pace of his heartbeat. It turns out that not looking is worse – the sensation boils over to a thousand when, suddenly, one of Ilya’s fingers slips easily inside him, prodding around the tender flesh of his hole. Shane lets out a throaty gasp and then clenches his jaw around the rest of the sounds he wants to make. He adjusts his grip on his own thighs, pulling his legs a little wide, and Ilya swears.

Then there’s a mouth on the inside of his thigh, sucking hard and frantic at the crease just where his leg meets his dick. Shane’s eyes fly open. He hitches one leg higher and abandons the other one so he can work a hand into Ilya’s hair.

“Hurry up, oh my god,” Shane tells him, because he feels like he might die if Ilya’s cock isn’t inside of him in the next ten seconds. Ilya works his finger in and out and then adds a second one, pauses for more lube, goes back to sucking a bruise into Shane’s thigh and opens him up more, until Shane’s squirming and his dick’s leaked a puddle of sticky precome into his own belly and he’s nearly ripping Ilya’s hair out, and, finally, Ilya sickens up and scrambles for a condom.

He’s got too much lube on his hands to open it. Shane grabs it off him and tears it open, pinches the top, presses it to the swollen head of Ilya’s dick and works it down – it takes a few tries to roll it all the way down, Ilya’s so hard.

“You want it, Hollander?” Ilya asks, while he drags one of the pillows – those stupid navy pillowcases just like the ones Shane has at the cottage and back in Boston, that Ilya had made

fun of him for, of course – and pushes it under Shane’s hips, raising his ass up where Ilya wants it.

Yes, Shane wants it. He wants it even when he feels mortified like this, spread open with his ass on display, no part of him hidden, nowhere he could escape to. He wants Ilya to take him and use him and not think about how much Shane *wants* it, because the answer is: too much.

“Come on, fuck me,” Shane says. “Don’t you want to fuck me, Rozanov?”

The room’s sweltering, the sheets already tangled up around them on the bed. Shane didn’t even remember to put a towel down. Sitting back on his heels between Shane’s legs, Ilya grabs the lube and squeezes it from the air, letting a few long, fat globs of it fall right onto his cock. Shane feels sweat pooling in the small of his back. He hooks his knees around Ilya’s ribcage and drags him forward, grabbing the back of Ilya’s neck, kissing him.

“Ah, fuck,” Ilya groans into his mouth, then pulls away, glancing down for a second, holding onto his dick to push it against Shane’s ass – “Hang on, hang on.”

It takes a second for him to press it in right, but as soon as he does, the whole world shuts down. It’s so big – bigger than Shane remembered, even just the tip – and for all Shane talks a big game, it’s not like he’d ever use a dildo outside of his own apartment with all the doors locked, so he hasn’t had anything inside him all summer, and holy shit, how is it always so good? Ilya buries his face in Shane’s neck and makes a wounded noise, like he’s in pain. Shane puts his lips to Ilya’s ear and gasps and sucks at his earlobe.

“Is it okay?” Ilya pants out. “I can keep going?”

“Yeah, yeah, oh my god, please –”

Ilya pushes in all the way in a few sharp thrusts and Shane’s full of him, stuffed with his cock, feels like it’s shuffling his internal organs around to make itself fit – good, because he wants to be made into the shape of Ilya’s cock, he wants it to leave a permanent imprint inside him – Shane grabs at Ilya’s ass with one hand, pulls him in deeper, then rocks his hips back and forth into the pillow. His dick jumps on his stomach and Shane shoves his other hand down to grab at it, just holding on, not even jerking off because he knows he’ll come in two seconds if he does and he wants this to last, at least a little.

Ilya tries to go slow at first, but Shane sees the moment he loses control. He’s flushed all the way down his strong chest, pink beneath the scratch of dark hair, and his mouth is dropping open kisses onto every part of Shane he can reach as he starts fucking him properly – hard, fast, one hand spreading Shane’s thigh so wide it aches, the other pinching at his nipples and squeezing his chest. Shane rocks his hips fast, back against Ilya, feeling the hard slap of his balls against his ass and the raw spot where their bodies meet. Ilya kisses him, messy and wild, mostly just rubbing his open lips into Shane’s mouth as they move. His saliva pools between his lips, gets the sides of Shane’s face wet.

“Open your mouth,” Ilya grunts.

Their eyes meet, interrupted only by the frantic movement of their bodies, by how Ilya's hips are shoving Shane up the mattress. One of Shane's hands flies up to bracket against the headboard and without thinking about it he does what Ilya says, lets his jaw hang open, tongue sticking out, still looking into his blown-wide eyes.

Ilya opens his mouth wide above Shane and lets a long, fat string of saliva fall into Shane's mouth. A frantic noise works out of Shane's throat but he doesn't close his mouth. Ilya pauses a moment, then purses his lips, and spits a full wad of spit onto Shane's tongue. It's the way he spits on the ice – disrespectful, nasty. Shane feels filthy.

He closes his mouth and swallows it all. Ilya breaks their eye contact at last to press his face to Shane's neck – says a long string of Russian words that Shane has no hope of retaining, and then starts sucking on his collarbone, hips snapping faster, losing pace, all his finesse gone as he humps into Shane's ass and moans against his sweaty skin. The whole room smells like filthy sex and Shane's ears are ringing and his ass is sore and inside him is lit up with wild nerves and his cock is so hard he feels like he's going to explode.

He doesn't even know he's about to come until he's doing it, taken by surprise, shouting, "Oh, fuck!" as his orgasm hits just from his cock being rubbed against Ilya's stomach, just from the sensitivity of being stuffed full inside of Ilya – Shane's head snaps back and the whole world goes white and he's holding onto the sweaty expanse of Ilya's back hard enough to bruise as his cum spurts between their bodies. Ilya gets a hand around him just in time to work out the last few drops of it, squeezing so hard around the swollen head of his cock that it hurts.

After, Shane goes limp-bodied on the mattress, gooey and loose and too rapidly exhausted to keep himself propped up; Ilya keeps fucking him frantically, makes a needy noise until Shane pets the back of his hair with one tired hand, and then suddenly Ilya tenses and groans and comes inside Shane's body.

They lay together for a while, panting and burning hot and sticky and sweaty. Their breath kind of trades off – Shane can tell by the way they're pressed belly-to-belly, that Ilya's rises when his falls. It's an odd sensation, but Shane doesn't want Ilya to get off him yet, so he doesn't mention it. Ilya keeps kissing his shoulder, over and over in the same spot, like he doesn't even realise he's doing it.

They catch their breath for a long time without saying anything.

Eventually, they do have to separate. Ilya pulls the condom off and then looks at Shane with a raised eyebrow, like he wants to know where he can put it without Shane freaking out – obviously he's not going to leave it in the trash *here*. Shane pulls a wad of tissues out of the box on the nightstand and drops the condom into them to deal with later, wrinkling his nose at the idea of touching it now that it's off Ilya's body, when suddenly the cooling cum pooled inside the latex seems disgusting. Ilya laughs at him.

Shane lays back down on the bed. They'll have to clean up, but it's not like they're in a rush. They have the whole day.

After he's caught his breath, Ilya gets up, naked and shameless, and walks around Shane's childhood room. He picks up old kid-league trophies from the bookshelf and reads the inscriptions. Peers at the photographs on Juniors teammates stuck to the cork board. Thumbs over the titles of high school textbooks, and fumbles with the couple of model planes Shane was once talked into building with his dad. He looks at it all with the air of a museum curator, curiously detached but oddly serious. A museum curator with his cock swinging between his legs.

Shane lays sweaty in the bed and tries not to think about what might be going on in Ilya Rozanov's head. It never gets him far.

Chapter End Notes

next time: ottawa, ilya edition 🍁

thanks so much for reading !! this chapter was honestly hard to write so please do let me know your thoughts - i really hope it struck a good balance of emotional progression between them as well as ilya with yuna and david. they're at such a weird place right now that i'm trying not to move too fast or too slow, bc frankly they consistently do both at once?

also. when they use first names vs last names in internals is very intentional at this point which i'm having a lot of fun with O:)

[fic post on tumblr](#)! i also post on there if chapters are gonna be late n stuff so if you ever care about keeping up with that my tumblr is the place to check lmao

Chapter 16: you know better, babe, than to hold me like that.

Chapter Notes

me getting proud of myself for 'keeping this chapter short' and it's still over 7k. i'm possessed

i want to say a blanket HUGE thank you to all the comments on the last chapter  i really try to respond to every comment but it was getting to the point where i had to pick between replying to comments and actually Writing The Fic and i figured yall would prefer i did the latter lmao, so sorry if i haven't replied to u yet but i still read them all and am insanely motivated by them !!

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

It is apparently very important to Shane that they don't actually lie to his parents, which means they have to go out in fucking Ottawa and see the sights to justify having driven ninety minutes just to fuck in a house alone. Ilya's legs still feel jellied and his spine warm in a way that doesn't really make him want to go out in public, but he can't figure out a way to say that which doesn't make him sound like a pussy, so he drags his clothes back on and helps Shane clean up and agrees.

Really, Ilya should be craving some city sights after several days let loose in the boring Canadian wilderness. Ilya's always been a city kid. They didn't take rural vacations when he was young, nothing like that – he's never camped, or roughed it in any way. And quiet grates on him; Ilya likes being surrounded by people and things to do. Slow days and the pervasive sound of birdsong along a backdrop of silence is enough to drive him insane, he thinks, if he were staying much longer.

So why is he so pissed off about spending a day out in the city?

Maybe the problem is with Ottawa. It's not exactly New York or Los Angeles. Ilya comforts himself with this derisive judgement as he slouches along the street behind Shane, his hands shoved in his pockets.

“Wanna get food? There's a good sushi place on the next block,” Shane says, turning over his shoulder; the summer sunlight glints through his hair, turning the black hue a hypnotic russety brown in its rays. His freckles are stronger on his cheeks than they were in the winter, lit up by his golden tan. “Or if you're not hungry yet I could show you the Rideau Canal? It's a shame you're not here in December – did you know it's the world's largest naturally frozen skating rink, in winter? But I guess it's cool when there's boats and stuff on it too.”

Ilya resists the urge to suggest that he comes back for Christmas. He truthfully is pretty hungry, but there's something itchy under his skin that doesn't particularly want to sit down

in a restaurant and make polite conversation while they eat. He doesn't really want to be out in public with Shane at all. He wants to eat lunch with Shane in a locked apartment, or the middle of the Siberian desert, or possibly on the moon. Somewhere without any eyes.

"I could eat," he says, since they can't go to the moon. Ilya's plenty accustomed to not getting things that he wants.

Suddenly, there's noise on the street in front of them.

"Oh my god!" a jostling group of dudes are saying. "Aren't you Shane Hollander?"

Shane turns around all awkward, like he's not used to being recognised, despite the fact that half of Canada probably has posters of him on their walls and everyone in Boston who's ever watched a hockey game wants to suck his dick.

When Ilya peers around his shoulder, the guys just about lose their minds.

"Holy fucking shit, I never thought I'd see Ilya Rozanov hanging out in Ottawa! Dudes, can we get a fucking picture with you?"

Ilya likes the attention that comes with hockey – it's not like being a movie-star or even a football player in America, where you get recognised all the time, but if he goes somewhere that cares about hockey, he knows they *really* care about it. And he and Shane have been plastered on just about every bit of league promo for the last two years. They may play on an American team, but probably more people know them in Canada than anywhere else in the world. This is usually fun and flattering and Ilya will take plenty of pictures with people, sign jerseys, flirt with women who recognise him on the street because he likes the attention. Right now, a fleck of irritation sparks up in his chest that he can't explain.

"Uh, yeah, of course," Shane says for both of them. They squish into a selfie and Shane lets these random guys chat his ear off about the last Boston-Buffalo game before Ilya finally says they're in a hurry and drags him away.

Another fan finds them in the restaurant, comes up, squeals about how much she loves Shane. She asks, "It's so nice you guys hang out in the summer together! Is there an event going on or something?"

After she leaves, Ilya can see Shane biting at his lip, his carefree fucked-out attitude from earlier being folded back into the rigid confines of his self-control. He sits up straight in his chair; his hands knock his chopsticks into the edge of the table over and over, an irritating little drumbeat.

"Why are you fidgeting?" Ilya asks, spearing his sushi with the fork he'd had to ask for specially. Whenever he tries to use chopsticks he feels like a clumsy child, and being a child

again is Ilya's worst nightmare.

"I'm not," Shane lies, immediately going back to his plate. Ilya waits him out. It doesn't take long. A few seconds later – "So that's, like, three pictures out today? Do you think anyone else took any while we weren't looking?"

Ilya says, truthfully, "Yes."

It's not like they're being papped or anything, but a few random fans are bound to have taken blurry shots of them on their phones to text friends and say *wait is this those hockey players??* or *what are the raiders doing out of boston!* People who don't want to come up and actually say hello, but need that little gram of proof that something special happened in their day. It's whatever. Kind of privacy invading, but Ilya wouldn't be a professional athlete if he couldn't handle people looking at him. Usually he kind of likes the attention, though today it's niggling at him in a way it usually doesn't for reasons he can't quite explain.

"I guess it'll be all over Twitter that we're hanging out," Shane says, after a few more quiet moments.

Ilya shrugs. "Sure. But like you keep saying, that is normal."

"Yeah," Shane agrees. He taps his chopsticks on his plate and then takes a sip of his drink. "It's totally normal."

They don't talk much through lunch.

After they leave the restaurant, Shane lists off a few more attractions in central Ottawa that they could go look at, but it seems like his heart's not really in it. He's not meeting Ilya's eyes, stood a good metre and a half away from him, hands shoved in his pockets.

"Maybe we can just go back to the cottage?" Ilya suggests, once Shane gets into listing the directions to a children's science museum. "It's warm today, we can swim in the lake before dinner if we are back early enough."

Shane lets out a breath from between his teeth, and finally meets Ilya's eyes again. There's something in his deep brown eyes – a well of understanding. Maybe he's grateful, or maybe he just understands where Ilya's coming from.

A trio of girls walk past them, glance over their shoulders, and then break into huddled whispers immediately. One of them's wearing a Metros cap.

"Yeah, let's just go," Shane agrees, and they quickly head back to the car.

The mind-altering orgasm he had a few hours ago now seems lifetimes away. Fucking Shane in his childhood bed, like a fantasy out of Ilya's deepest porn searches or something, could have happened a year ago. While the pleasant ache in his body is still there, none of the high that Ilya remembers feeling afterwards has stuck around. Shane's body seems so far away, his mouth impossible to replicate in Ilya's memory.

If nothing else, Yuna seems glad to have them home early. She puts Ilya to work lifting some boxes down from high shelves in the garage-turned-gym, while she cuts up a big bowl of fruit; sliced oranges, halved grapes, thin slices of Asian pear, and small chunks of some juicy bright orange thing that she and Shane call kaki when they point it out in the bowl. Ilya's never had someone cut up fruit for him before. If there's an apple or banana around and he's hungry, he'll eat it, but he can't say he's put much more thought into fruit in his life than that. Yuna puts the bowl between him and Shane out on the deck when she's done, and then ruffles the back of Shane's head.

"Thanks, mom," Shane says routinely, like this level of care is normal. Something's itchy under Ilya's skin, prickling around his eyes. He wonders if he's allergic to whatever kaki is. Scoops a piece out of the bowl with his fingers and shoves it in his mouth.

God, it's like the best thing he's ever eaten. Super soft and sweet as nectar. He can't believe he's never tasted one before.

"Where the fuck is this fruit from, is it magic?" he asks, remembering only a moment too late his resolve not to swear around Yuna. Luckily, she only seems amused by him, letting out a dry snort of laughter as she settles on one of the deck chairs across from them. And, Ilya has to remind himself, she's sworn up a storm several times since Ilya's been staying here – she's clearly where Shane gets his dirty mouth from.

"Asia, usually," she says. "They grow them other places now too, obviously. They were one of my dad's biggest homesicknesses from Japan. He'd buy them whenever we saw them in the store here and then complain that they didn't taste as good as the ones in Japan in the winter."

Ilya nods, fishing out another piece of it from the bowl. Shane tries to bat his fingers away, and Ilya dodges him just in time.

"I understand. I can never find any good vodka in America either."

"I'm really not sure that's the same thing," Shane says, dryly. Then he pushes Ilya's hand away again with a – "Dude, stop, you can't just pick out the bits you like and leave me with just the fucking grapes!"

"Why not? Seems pretty easy to do," Ilya taunts him, dropping another chunk of kaki into his mouth from above, and winking Shane's way. Shane grabs Ilya's hand, sticky with syrupy fruit, and abruptly bends his fingers back so hard it hurts. "*Ow!* Asshole, that is my hockey playing hand. What, you want me with a broken finger so we never win the cup?"

"It's still the offseason, what do I care if you break your finger? Plenty of time to heal," Shane grumbles. Yuna shoots him a stern look across the table.

"Shane," she says – just that, his name, in a low, warning voice. Shane sighs and pulls back before Ilya can think of a way to explain to her that he likes it when Shane is kind of mean to

him, actually. There's no way he can think to phrase that which wouldn't sound exactly as scandalous as it is, so he leaves it alone.

Ilya remembers his own mom's stern voice. She hadn't sounded anything like Yuna. Rather than dry disapproval, she would yell when she got frustrated at them, which was pretty often, given she was barely in her twenties and left alone with him and Alexei most of the time while they ran rabid. She wasn't scary when she yelled, not like his dad – usually she'd just make Ilya feel sad, and he'd stop misbehaving because he wanted her to stop shoving her hands to the roots of her long curls and pacing around the room like she didn't see a way out of it. After he calmed down, she'd calm down, too, and usually pick him up and hold him to her chest, where she was warm and he could hear her heartbeat; tell him that he was a good kid, call him her baby. Until the next time she yelled again.

Yuna says, “Well, I'm gonna go sort through those boxes. Neither of you break any bones when I'm gone, okay?”

“Yes, Yuna,” Ilya promises quickly. She looks at him, a little amused, before she heads back inside.

“You're still sucking up,” Shane mutters, once she's gone. He takes a bit of kaki and puts it in his mouth, then sucks the juice off each of his fingers. Shane hates sticky things; this, Ilya knows from experience. He watches Shane's fingertips disappear between his pink lips one by one and come back out shiny with spit.

It's been maybe five hours since they fucked. Is it possible to feel like he's dying for it again already?

After a couple of minutes, Shane says out of nowhere, “Have you checked Twitter since we got back?”

Ilya hasn't even opened his phone since they left Ottawa earlier. He's bound to have texts waiting from him – the Raiders group text is constantly going off, Sveta wants to know where he's disappeared to, his manager and his trainer are scheduling in the rest of his summer without consulting him much. He's been ignoring Alexei's calls since he got back from Russia; hopefully there's not another message waiting from him when Ilya opens his phone again.

“No,” he tells Shane truthfully. “Why?”

Shane shrugs. “Nothing, really. I searched our names. One of those pictures we took today got posted, but it only has a few likes.”

“Okay. That is fine. We weren't hiding that we were out in Ottawa, anyway. Is all fine.”

“Yeah,” Shane agrees quickly. “It is, obviously, it's fine.”

“Hollander.” Ilya looks to the doorway. Yuna's disappeared inside, and David's out fishing with a buddy. There's nobody around; the porch stretches off towards the woods, warm

summer air bathing them, nothing but wildlife looking their way. Ilya takes a piece of orange between his fingertips, and raises it to Shane's mouth. "You are freaking out again. Stop it."

He presses the fruit to Shane's lips. Shane's eyes go wide and glassy and he opens his mouth like it's an instinctive response; no hesitation. Stays silent in case his mom can hear them inside, even though she probably can't. They're so alone here.

Ilya pushes the orange right onto Shane's tongue, and Shane keeps quiet for him so well, and closes his mouth around it, and sucks the juice off Ilya's fingers like he did to his own a second ago, his saliva mixing with the sweet juice of the fruit in his mouth.

The shivery-sweet feeling runs through Ilya's whole body and settles like a heavy weight in his crotch. Shane's staring right into his eyes. Ilya takes his fingers out of Shane's mouth, shuddering, and puts them into his own. Sucks them. Tastes the fruit and the inside of Shane's mouth on his own skin.

"Fuck," Ilya mutters.

"Shut up," Shane says lowly, around his mouthful of orange. "My mom's just inside."

Ilya slumps down in his deck chair, and groans.

In a tiny hidden moment down at the dock, before they're planning to go swimming, Shane darts nervously over to bury his face in Ilya's shoulder for a second and mutter, "You don't smell of cigarettes right now."

"Yes, obviously, because I haven't fucking smoked all week," Ilya says.

Despite what Shane would argue in his pissier moments, Ilya doesn't smoke all that much anymore. He couldn't play hockey at the level his pride demands and be on a pack a day. He can go long stretches of days without a cigarette; usually, now, he has one or two when he gets drunk, maybe one after a bad loss. He usually craves a smoke after sex, although less lately, he's noticed. Or, well, he'd smoked mere minutes after fucking the last girl he was with in Russia – but hasn't wanted one after fucking Shane for a while. Ilya's not sure what the distinction is. Maybe Shane's guilt-trips really have just worked to the point where Ilya can't imagine it being sexy to smoke in his general vicinity, for all the nagging he'd get. Shane usually doesn't let him up for a while after they finish fucking, anyway. Ilya doesn't get a chance.

So it's not insane that he hasn't smoked all week. What's insane is that he didn't even bring a pack with him to Ottawa. Didn't consider it an option, when he was going to be staying with Shane. And, honestly, has barely thought about it.

Shane smiles at him.

“Canada’s good for you, see,” he says.

Ilya pushes him off the dock.

When Ilya thinks the word *cottage* – Коттедж, a refreshing cognate with Russian – he imagines the rundown dachas of the Russian countryside, with odd protrusions of hand-built extensions, wooden-beam walls and sheet metal rooves pitched at strange angles. Rough and homey. The Hollanders’ cottage is not like that.

In fact, Ilya can’t seem to figure out anything that distinguishes it from a normal house, except for the fact that it’s built at the edge of a lake. It’s not huge or particularly modern – Shane said it had been in his dad’s family for a couple generations, though it’s clearly had a few updates inside in that time. But it’s nice. It’s a three-bedroom house with a porch, a small garage full of workout equipment, power and running water.

There’s only one thing Ilya can think of that they’re lacking at the cottage – sex.

Ilya’s last day at the cottage comes too soon. Though they’d called it a week, it was really six days and two of them involved travelling, so weren’t full – while he was impulsively booking his tickets, that had seemed like an invasive and uncomfortable amount of time to spend at someone else’s family home. Now that he’s at the end of it, Ilya feels the urge to board himself up in the crawlspace and refuse to leave.

He doesn’t think he’s relaxed this much in his life. They’ve done remarkably little, actually; spent most of their days outside, swimming or kayaking or hiking, or just enjoying the cottage. Ilya’s learnt several American board games. Done crosswords with David and moved some furniture for Yuna. It would sound mind-numbingly boring if he described it to himself, but it hasn’t felt that way – in fact, the time has flown.

So, yes, the one thing they haven’t done to Ilya’s satisfaction is fucked. Two secretive blowjobs, three silent handjobs standing up in the shower, and that one fuck in the other house in Ottawa, a two-hour drive just to get his dick wet, have barely been enough to tide him over. The fact that he went two months without fucking Shane during playoffs seems insane, now, and it was only a few months ago; Ilya can’t remember how they did it.

And now it’s his last night at the cottage and they have no privacy and Shane’s not going to let Ilya fuck him again before he leaves. And they won’t both be back in Boston until the end of the summer.

Ilya tries to take deep breaths, and ends up just pissing himself off.

Of course, Ilya's last night is a family affair. David insists on grilling burgers for his last dinner there, so they light up the grill and sit outside at the wooden picnic table, beneath the glowing orange bug zapper, while the sun lowers in the sky.

“Thank you again for having me stay this week,” Ilya says, while they eat. The burgers are great - David's a good cook, and clearly used to cooking for hockey players, because the portions are huge. “It has been fun.”

“You’re welcome anytime, Ilya,” David tells him, voice as even and calm as ever. Ilya doesn’t think he’s ever met a man as calm as David Hollander. He heard that David used to play hockey, but it’s hard to believe – imagining him checking someone or dropping his gloves is nearly laughable. He seems so steady all the time. So relaxed. It scares Ilya a little bit. He can’t quite understand how there’s no buried, simmering rage beneath all that tranquility.

“Of course, anytime,” Yuna agrees. “We’re glad you and Shane have become so close. It’s nice to know he has a real friend on the team.”

“Mom, don’t make me sound like I’m completely anti-social,” Shane complains, while Ilya grins around his burger.

Yuna is easier to understand than David. Honestly, she reminds Ilya a little bit of Sveta. She’s deeply in charge, and competent, kind of bossy in a way he can tell rankles Shane; there’s also this deep well of care within her that she offers up easily, practically, and with no fuss. He hasn’t seen her give Shane any extended hugs or long strings of praise, but she ruffles his hair and tells him she loves him every day and cuts up fruit for him when he’s had a busy day. She doesn’t care if he swears and she insults all the hockey teams that he plays against and she wants to meet Shane’s friends, even if they’re someone she hated a few months ago. Ilya’s not under any illusions about that.

No wonder Shane is the way he is. Gaping heart just leaking out of him, even as he tries awkwardly to cover it up.

Part of Ilya wonders if this idyllic Hollander holiday should be making him ache with jealousy. Truthfully, it’s so far away from his own family experience that the idea of even beginning to compare them just makes him laugh. He can’t be jealous, because this is like an alien experience – he wouldn’t even be himself if he’d grown up in a place like this.

“He is pretty anti-social,” Ilya tells Yuna and David, in an exaggerated whisper behind his hand. Shane shoves his shoulder and Ilya pushes back into him while he keeps whispering, “But don’t worry, I will beat down his door and drag him to team parties if he tries to turn into a true hermit.”

“In that case, we’re glad he has you looking out for him,” Yuna says wryly. Ilya shoves half his burger into his mouth in one go to stop himself saying anything else. He’s dipping into the range where his brain is wanting to say things that he absolutely cannot get away with in front of Shane’s parents. Staying on the down low isn’t something Ilya’s ever had a problem with before – he’s not quite sure why here, this week, it’s felt so much harder not to flirt with

Shane wherever he is, not to shout out to the whole world that he and Shane have shared each other's beds.

And before Ilya knows it, they're finishing dinner. He and Shane clear the table and load the dishwasher, and then he's talked into a fucking board game, because that's the kind of family the Hollanders are. It's something Ilya's never played before, with complicated rules and lots of little plastic pieces. He tries his best to keep track, but there's something itchy under his skin and he keeps glancing at the clock as the sky gets dark outside, and rules are hard to learn in English anyway. After a while, Yuna apparently wins, and Ilya happily concedes defeat for once.

It's after ten o'clock. David says, "Alright, that's enough for me. I'm gonna head to bed. We'll see you boys in the morning before you head to the airport."

"Mm, I'll head up with you," says Yuna. She goes to the kitchen to wash out her wineglass. Ilya hears the rush of the tap, the squeak of the sponge on glass; David puts away the board game. And Ilya stays sat at the dining table, trying not to look at Shane.

"Goodnight, boys," David says, a handful of agonising minutes later – it feels to Ilya like it could have been years.

"Goodnight," Ilya forces himself to say, while Shane's trading a quick comment with his mother. And then Yuna and David head upstairs. And Shane and Ilya are alone, in the warm-lit space of the cottage's living room, facing each other across a table.

Shane looks at him and says, "Are you tired yet? I could stay up a bit longer."

He sounds innocent about it, but something guts Ilya's stomach. He flicks his gaze over to the stairs, up towards the ceiling. The vague sounds of feet on floorboards and the cut of water in the bathroom are still audible – they're not truly alone. Ilya has no idea how long it takes Yuna and David to fall asleep.

"I leave tomorrow morning," Ilya says.

"Uh, yeah. I remember. I mean, I'm driving you to the airport."

"Yes, Hollander, I know that." Ilya rolls his eyes, sprawls back in his chair a little. The low, warm lamplight of the cottage makes Shane look even more golden than usual, a shine catching the dark well of his eyes. "I guess you will be very bored for the rest of the summer. Nothing interesting to do here when I am gone, right?"

"Fuck you, Rozanov," Shane huffs. "You've had so much fun this week and you know it."

"Eh." Shane throws a stray board game piece at Ilya's head and Ilya laughs, dodging, throwing his hands up. "Okay, okay. You got me. Maybe a few things have been fun."

"Yeah. I think so." There's a pause for a moment. The sound of a door closing upstairs. "And you'll enjoy the rest of the off-season down in Boston, I guess. Half the nightclubs in the city would probably go bankrupt if you stayed up here any longer."

“Mm, you have done my wallet a favour, then, by trapping me up here at this abandoned lake with nothing to do.”

“Your wallet doesn’t need any favours. I’ve seen your new deal.”

“Oh, true.” Ilya grins, happy to be reminded. It’s not like he’s forgotten the number of zeroes he’ll be walking into in the new season, but the reminder that *Shane* knows – that Shane knows how valuable he is, how valuable the team thinks he is – makes him feel syrupy and a little meanly satisfied. He got his contract a year before Shane did, after all. “Maybe I will buy a whole club, then I will always have somewhere to drink.”

The warm glow of lighting suddenly dips a little from behind them – the upstairs lights being turned off.

“God, you’d be so annoying if you owned a club. I bet you’d be there every single night. Sat in a stupid little VIP booth making people bring you drinks.”

“What is annoying about that? It sounds perfect to me,” Ilya grins. “I would make them keep boring ginger ale on tap for you, don’t worry.”

Shane gives him a flat look. “I would *not* come to your stupid club.”

“Oh, you definitely would. I bet it would not even take me two nights to convince you.”

“It would take a million nights because I would know that it would be the grossest club on earth, and also your taste in music sucks. I remember New Year’s.”

Ilya drops his voice to barely a whisper, and says, “No, you would come. I would just have to tell you that I would fuck you there.”

Shane’s jaw hinges open a little; he casts a frantic glance to the stairs, hisses, “Shut *up*, Rozanov.”

“Maybe there is a private office for the owner,” Ilya continues, like Shane didn’t say anything at all. “I would tell you that I would take you back there and fuck you over desk, and you would already be on your way.”

Shane stands up in a squeak of chair legs. Rounds the table with a glare simmering on his pretty face; looms over Ilya, like he’s trying to be angry. The heat of his body is palpable even from a few inches away. He smells like smoke from the barbecue outside, water from the lake. Like this whole ridiculous idyllic place is in his pores. Ilya reaches up, and slides one finger through Shane’s belt loop.

“I leave tomorrow,” Ilya repeats lowly, finally back around to where he wanted to be in this conversation to begin with. “Let me fuck you one more time.”

It’s all he’s been thinking about. One time this week is not enough. Once, and it wasn’t even here, at the cottage; it was all the way back in the Ottawa suburbs. Seeing Shane’s childhood room had been fun and a bit sexy, but Ilya is still craving this – doing it *here*, in this special, isolated place. Summer Shane. Cottage Shane. This relaxed, cosy, loved version of him. He

feels as syrupy sweet and novel as the new fruit Ilya tried the other day; an unbelievable new delight on the senses.

“We can’t,” Shane hisses. “I told you all week. Not when my parents are here – I just can’t.”

Ilya buries his face in Shane’s stomach; pushes at the hem of his t-shirt to ruck it up, rubs his jaw against the hair that leads from Shane’s navel down to his crotch. Shane’s breath catches. He puts a hand in Ilya’s curls and pulls, hard, to tug him back; it’s insistent and harsh, but when Ilya looks up, he sees nothing but flushed desire on Shane’s face.

“We can do it quiet,” Ilya promises, still whispering, as if to prove it. “Go outside or in the car, I don’t care.”

“Oh my god, not outside. It has to be a room with a door that fucking locks.”

Ilya puts his face back in Shane’s stomach and heaves a deep breath, like he’s getting high on the scent of Shane’s skin.

“So that is a yes?” he asks.

The hand in his curls tightens again. He can feel the tension running through Shane’s body like an iron beam; hovering on-edge, ready to rip apart from Ilya at the slightest hint of sound from upstairs. But Ilya knows when Shane wants to be pushed and when he doesn’t, and right now, this is a Shane who wants to be pushed. His skin is flushed beneath Ilya’s face. They’re barely touching and his lips are hanging open, wet saliva on the bottom lip where his tongue keeps flicking out against it. He wants it as bad as Ilya does. Shouldn’t it be impossible, to want it this much, when they’ve already slept together so many times in the last couple of years? Shouldn’t Ilya be getting bored?

“Come up with a better idea for where,” Shane murmurs.

Ilya’s whole body flushes with heat. That’s a yes – he just has to make his brain work. He mouths at the rough hair on Shane’s belly for a moment and reaches up to squeeze his chest over his shirt, just to keep him interested while Ilya thinks. Shane sucks in a breath, grabs Ilya’s hand with his own.

The downstairs of the cottage is all open-plan, so unless they want to fuck standing up in the pantry, there’s nowhere with enough of a door. The upstairs bathroom is right by Yuna and David’s room, so that’s a no. The guest room where Ilya’s been staying is across the hall and a door down from theirs; the furthest bedroom away in the floorplan.

“Guest room,” Ilya suggests. “We can take blankets off the bed, do it on the floor. Much quieter than in the bed.”

Shane doesn’t reply for a moment; when Ilya looks up, he’s got his lip caught between his teeth. Not a good enough option, then. Ilya desperately casts around, thinking of the only place he hasn’t suggested yet.

“Or the garage. Is more like a gym anyway, not so weird. You can lay on the yoga mat, it will be comfortable.”

The garage here is barely big enough to fit one car in, so the Hollanders instead park their Land Rover outside and have the garage filled with storage shelves, a weight bench, a treadmill, a yoga mat. Another way that Shane’s parents have clearly worked his career into their lives, accommodated his schedule and routine in every way they can. Ilya hasn’t seen either of them use the gym equipment this week, but Shane’s been in there every morning, keeping fit. Of course, Ilya’s appreciated it too, even if it’s cramped and feels more like a shed than a gym or garage. But it’s a concrete box separated from the rest of the house by a door. It’s not a wall away from Shane’s parents. They’re low on fucking options, and Ilya’s desperate.

“That’s so gross. It’s probably got spiders,” Shane says.

Ilya is aware that his voice sounds inches away from begging when he says, “*Hollander*. Please. Fucking anywhere, I do not care where, just pick a place.”

He watches Shane swallow; his throat bobs, the jut of his adam’s apple moving up and down. Ilya wants to bite him there. Instead he puts his hands beneath the hem of Shane’s t-shirt, just an inch or so, and digs his fingers hard into the top of Shane’s hips, pressing down on the bone.

Shane says, “You better be *so* fucking quiet, Rozanov, I swear to god,” lets out a shuddery breath, takes Ilya’s wrist, and drags him tiptoed up the stairs.

Ilya barely dares to breathe in case it ruins things. He follows up the stairs a couple behind, watching the strong line of Shane’s back, his glowing tanned arms and the backs of his thighs beneath his shorts, so thick Ilya wants to die with them wrapped around his head. His heart’s racing as they cross the hallway in front of Yuna and David’s room. The floor doesn’t creak, nothing makes a sound. Shane leads him to the guest room where Ilya’s slept all week, and closes the door tight behind them. Grabs a towel off the dresser and wedges it in the crack below the door. Takes the blanket off the bed and puts it down on the ground on the other side, below the window, as far away from the rest of the house as they can get.

Then he turns, and looks at Ilya. Ilya nearly falls to his knees right there.

Instead, he forces himself to cross the room on shaky legs and falls into Shane’s body, finally dragging him into a scorching kiss. Every time they do this it’s like kissing Shane gets hotter, and Ilya doesn’t understand how, because it already feels like it’s gonna fucking kill him every time. He feels starving hungry, an unfillable pit in his stomach. He tugs Shane’s lip between his teeth and then sucks on it, hard, against the imprints of his own canines. Shane makes a weak noise and shoves Ilya’s shirt up and Ilya rips it off before he can change his mind.

Ilya wants to speak, but Shane looks at him and presses a finger to his lips, warningly. He’s so strange and paranoid. Ilya’s sure they won’t be heard, like this, but the secrecy of it is kind of hot. Maybe that’s why kissing Shane feels so scorching right now; maybe Ilya likes being

his dirty little secret. He does, at least, like that Shane sometimes acts out this intense aversion to being bad, and then does it anyway.

They haven't even turned the light on. Ilya can barely make out the dim shapes of him in the room as Shane takes off his own clothes and folds them at the edge of the bed, then crawls, naked, down to the floor.

The moonlight dancing over them is all Ilya can see by. He scrambles in his bag for lube and a condom, then gets on top of Shane, presses naked against him from head to toe, kisses him hard enough that neither of them can make any noise at all.

They fuck like that, so, so carefully; sloppy kissing, Shane's knees around Ilya's hips, Ilya's hands braced on the floorboards, rocking into Shane in tiny, careful movements. They have to go so slow. It's like torture, not being able to shove himself into Shane's hole and pound him until the headboard shakes, like usual. Instead he rocks his hips into Shane's perfect ass just an inch at a time, while Shane scrabbles at his back and makes tiny, bitten-off breathy noises into his mouth. Shane tenses up every time they make even a tiny creak of a sound; his hole gets so tight when he's nervous that Ilya feels like his dick is going to explode. At first it feels hard to work up to an orgasm with how slow they're going – then, abruptly, Ilya finds himself right on the brink, his cock on fire, his balls tight and full up against his body, his tongue in Shane's mouth, Shane's hands pulling his hair hard enough to hurt.

Ilya likes the hurt. He breathes near silently into Shane's mouth, "Pull it harder." Shane does, opening his eyes to glare at Ilya in a warning to keep quiet. The sharp sting against his scalp zips right through Ilya's body to his dick. He pinches Shane's nipple. Shane chokes on his own saliva, throwing his head back against the blanket on the floor.

So Ilya pinches him harder and grinds his hips in tight frantic circles and muffles his breathing against Shane's throat, and Shane comes, hot and wet where his flushed cock is wedged between their bodies, his cum getting caught in Ilya's pubic hair. And Ilya goes a little too fast for a couple of seconds and the floor does creak but he's already coming so he doesn't care. While he's shooting off in Shane's ass, Ilya briefly wishes he would die right now, in this moment, so he never has to feel anything other than this ever again.

After he pulls out and rolls the condom off his aching cock, they catch their breath nervously, tucked together in the scrunched up blanket on the floor.

"Do you think they heard anything?" Shane asks quietly, sounding mortified. Ilya pinches him again, in the side this time, watching his skin darken in the dim light to match his abused nipple.

"Hollander, they are fast asleep and we were fucking silent. Stop panicking. Why does your brain always imagine the worst thing that could happen?"

"I don't know," Shane mutters. It sounds as honest as Ilya's ever heard him.

Ilya gives in to the absurd desire to wrap his arms around Shane. He's tired and he just came and this week has been so, so strange – so outside of anything Ilya has experienced in his whole life before. He doesn't think it's a crime that he finds himself putting his head on

Shane's arm, tucking his face into the space just below Shane's armpit, draping a leg across his lap. For once, Shane doesn't act like it's a crime either. He lets Ilya lay there, for a little while, and kisses the top of his head.

Fuck.

It hits Ilya in the fucking face, as he lays there, his lips pressed to the side of Shane's tit – not even kissing, just resting there against his chest, giving into his body's desperate need to be joined together. Ilya doesn't get like this when he fucks other people. He sometimes likes to be held, after, but it feels more desperate and impersonal and upsetting than this. He never gets what he wants after sex with strangers. Never feels particularly safe or comforted by the aftermath. Not even with Sveta, who he loves and has had great sex with, but who has little patience for babying him.

Shane's hand runs through Ilya's curls, rubbing at his scalp. He pushes Ilya a little closer into his firm chest, lets Ilya's mouth press next to his sore nipple. He makes no move to get up, or move his arm; his chest keeps rising and falling at the same even, steady pace. His skin smells so clean, even when he's just been fucked, a little sweaty. He's warm all over. Ilya is pressed into his body from head to toe, his soft cock nestled in the groove of Shane's hip, his toes pressed to the bone of Shane's ankle, just listening to Shane breathe.

It hits Ilya in the fucking face like a high-sticking penalty. A bad one. A five-minute major; intent to harm.

He wants to have Shane like this forever.

Ilya's never wanted anything like that before in his whole life. And he can't have it.

The next morning, Ilya wakes up alone in his guest bed; blankets perfectly replaced before Shane had snuck off to his own room the night before, of course. The bed's only a standard double, way smaller than the king mattress Ilya has at home, but it feels empty. Cold.

Ilya squeezes his eyes tight shut for a moment. Tilts his face to the ceiling. Thinks, *fuck this*.

He shoves his stuff into his bag haphazardly, not bothering to fold or sort. All his clothes will be getting tossed in the laundry service when he gets back, anyway, and the housekeeper will sort them all out after that. Shane would hate the way Ilya packs, but Shane hates a lot of things Ilya does. Who gives a shit. When he's dressed and has all his stuff sorted and has made sure the room is nice – no incriminating evidence or mess left behind – he grinds his molars together, and heads downstairs.

David's making breakfast, because of course he is.

“Shane’s just working out. You know him, no rest days. He’ll be out in a minute,” David says. “Wanna finish up that crossword before you have to leave?”

Ilya feels slightly hysterical as he says, “Sure, yes. Okay.”

So he sits there and drinks coffee and tries to think of stupid fucking words in English even while his head is aching. Because he wants Shane’s parents to like him. Because he wants Shane to have some kind of reason to keep him around.

His flight’s before noon. They have to leave early. Shane comes out of the garage-gym all sweaty and pink-faced, and Ilya puts his head down to the crossword book and pretends not to look. Shane goes to shower. Yuna asks Ilya if he has plans for Thanksgiving.

“That is a fake American holiday, I am pretty sure,” Ilya says.

“Excuse you, that’s a fake *Canadian* holiday, up here,” she tells him, amused. “Well, if you have the day free, you’re always welcome to join us. And we’ll see you guys when the season starts! We’ll fly down for the first game, of course.”

“Of course,” Ilya agrees. He can hear the shower upstairs. He feels dizzy, like he’s in some kind of alternate world. “You are both very good parents.”

Even kind of losing his mind, he sees Yuna and David exchange a look.

“That’s kind of you to say,” Yuna says.

David tells him, “You’re a good kid, Ilya. Shane’s enjoyed having you around. You’re welcome back here any time.”

Ilya swallows. It feels like there’s tar in his throat. Absurdly, his eyes are kind of sore, the deep ache of holding back tears. But Ilya doesn’t cry.

“Thank you.”

They don’t talk for much of the drive to the airport. Ilya puts on Russian rap music and Shane makes an irritated, pinched face but doesn’t complain.

When they arrive, Shane says, “See you next month, I guess?”

The thought of Boston stretches out like an icy frontier in Ilya’s mind. He feels like he’s never been there before in his life, even though he has plenty of friends in the city.

“Yes. Enjoy your summer, Hollander.”

“You too, Rozanov.”

Ilya gets out of the car, and doesn't look back as he walks away.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: alternate captain 

thank you as Always for reading !! please do comment if you enjoyed, i can't say enough how much i appreciate every comment :) also u can [reblog this fic on tumblr](#) if ur so inclined

Chapter 17: there's no honest way out.

Chapter Notes

take me back to december when work was quiet and i could write on the clock. now i've had the work week from hell and shane's been throwing a tantrum inside my head the whole time that i wasn't paying enough attention to the start of his fictional hockey season. my guy Please calm down you're literally words

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

The rest of summer drags like hell.

Shane always gets itchy in the off-season with no hockey to play, but he appreciates the other parts of it; less media, less pressure, and being home in Canada, with his parents, at the cottage or in his hometown. The inbuilt familiarity of places he's spent so much of his life is innately soothing to Shane. His raw anxiety takes a back seat for once, and he uses the summers to let himself breathe. The last couple of years, these breaks between seasons have been like a balm to him. Not just healing bruised ribs and sprained ankles from the season, but resetting the play on his anxiety and overall sense of looming dread, too.

So it's strange that this year he finds it so difficult.

Even once they leave the cottage and he's back at his parents' house in Ottawa, working on conditioning with his trainer every day and preparing for the season, time feels slow and murky. He's never had this much trouble getting his head in the game. He spends long hours in the gym and sports therapy rooms, listening to hockey podcasts and an audiobook about the 1924 Winter Olympics, just like usual, but he keeps checking his phone while he's there. He scrolls Instagram, which Shane doesn't even have downloaded and usually solely leaves to his publicist to update with professional photos and captions about his sponsors. He still doesn't post anything, but he logs on and checks Ilya's account occasionally. Tries to see if he's up to anything in Boston. Ilya doesn't post on Instagram much either, but there are a few shirtless selfies from the gym buried in his account that Shane scrolls down to see on multiple occasions.

His twitter is more interesting. Shane has also never made a single tweet, but Ilya seems to like arguing with people under their team's posts, sending lewd emojis to fans with cute profile pictures, and riling up players on other teams by tweeting his own stats when they play badly and tagging them. Some of his tweets are in Russian, which Shane runs through Google translate to find random song lyrics from music Shane doesn't listen to and unfavourable movie reviews.

When Shane's not scrolling through months of Ilya's socials, they do also text. Mostly about their training, comparing bench weights and mile times; sometimes Ilya sends dick pics and

Shane nervously returns a few shirtless selfies with his face cropped out. They call a couple of times when Shane's parents are out and he's alone.

Not much beyond that. The weeks crawl along his calendar on their hands and knees, gasping for air.

Shane ends up changing his flights and getting back into Boston over a week before pre-season starts. He feels good about his conditioning, and he wants to get back on the ice in Boston, re-familiarise himself with the training rink, check in with the coaches about plans for the season. His parents are a little surprised when he says he's going back early, but they understand that it's for hockey.

He knocks on Ilya's door the first night he's back.

Coach Magner calls Shane into his office on Shane's first day back. He'd been warming up on the bikes so he's pink and sweaty as he perches in a chair and stares across the sleek modern desk at his round-faced, balding coach. Coach's office is just off the locker room; it's full of that pervasive hockey-smell of old sweat, dirty gear and new plastic – the disgusting scent of home, to Shane.

Magner says, "Okay, Hollander, no surprises here, but we're giving you the A this season."

It's maybe not a surprise – Shane listens to enough hockey podcasts to have heard people saying *Hollander and Rozanov are the future of this team, why isn't one of them captain already? If the Raiders are rebuilding around this duo, give them something to build on.* He doesn't internalise things like that too much. Shane's been captain of pretty much every team he's been on. He doesn't love being captain of anything when it comes to the social side; the locker-room side, the pep-talks and press and looking out for rookies. He likes it on the ice, when you're the one talking to the refs and taking charge of the hockey.

Either way, alternate captain is an honour to wear. The Raiders haven't had an actual captain since Shane joined – they've spent a few seasons with three alternate captains instead, rotating who takes charge each game. It's been pretty clear that it wasn't a permanent system. Boston have been floundering for a rebuild since before they drafted Ilya and Shane, and now that it's looking like the line with the two of them is going to work long-term, Shane knows the franchise is desperate to lock them both down.

"Is Rozanov getting captain?" Shane asks Coach. It only occurs to him afterwards that he didn't actually say thanks for the A, but two seasons deep into his time here, he figures Coach has to know what Shane's like; he can't be expecting pleasantries when there's hockey to discuss.

"No, we're keeping him as an alternate, too. We want you splitting things pretty evenly for most of the season, alright? Feller'll keep the third A, but he knows he's on the back burner

for press and ice.”

Shane’s brow furrows. It’s always the question, when there’s two players with as much attention as him and Ilya on the same team – if you’re looking at keeping your team strong for the next five, ten years, who makes captain? They’re so evenly matched on the ice. Ilya scores more goals but Shane’s a better playmaker. Shane’s more famous, but Ilya’s more popular in the locker room with the guys. The press loves both of them. They’re both in basically every promo the league puts out.

But Shane’s sort of been assuming Ilya would make captain. He has one more year on the team than Shane, and he already does a lot of leading; organising team bonding and hangouts, pumping them up before games. His methods are a bit chaotic, but the guys all love him.

Having both of them as alternates sort of feels like they’re auditioning for the title. Another thing they have to compete for.

“Okay,” Shane says. Coach leans back in his office chair, the mesh back of it creaking, and gives Shane an evaluating look. Shane says, “Thank you. I’m excited to step up.”

They start pre-season with the usual exhibition games. It’s fun – so fun, being back on the ice. Summer felt like a million years away to Shane, even though he’s been training hard, skating as much as he can. Nothing’s like real hockey, the sweet sting of competition. Even in games that don’t really count, where the coaches are playing with the lines and Shane and Ilya don’t get half as much ice time as they will when it matters, it’s fun.

The team slide easily back into their routines from last year. They have a couple of new trades and one rookie, but nobody who makes a major splash in the locker room or immediately fucks with the team dynamic. Barbecues are at Feller’s house, parties at Marleau’s, smaller hangouts at Ilya’s, and everyone’s dragged out clubbing whenever they have a couple free days in a row. The guys are rowdy but nice, close, always around.

Shane and Ilya fall easily into last year’s routines as well. They skate together at practice, play together on the ice, argue at team events, and fuck in the privacy of their own homes. There’s nothing different than last year in what they’re doing, so Shane can’t figure out why he feels a little restless as they tip into the start of the season. Pent-up, like there’s something he’s not getting.

After their first couple games of the season proper, it feels like they’re in a good groove. It’s a training day, most of them heading into optional skate while the rest of the team hit the gym, when Marleau decides it’s apparently the perfect day to get to know the rookie in the locker room.

“Alright, kid!” Because Marleau has all the subtlety of a an untrained pitbull, he leaps on the rookie from behind and gets him in a headlock. “Heard coach is dressing you for the game tomorrow, you are oh-fucking-ficially *in*. You're gonna party with us this weekend to celebrate. Important question before we hit a club - you got a girlfriend?”

Jannik Krause, a hulking eighteen year old defenceman from a German town Shane’s never heard of, immediately goes bright pink. He’s got the kind of blonde-haired-blue-eyed complexion that can’t hide a thing.

“Um, not really,” he says, his accent thick and voice muffled by Marley’s bicep. “She just dump me. Does not want to do distance.”

A couple of guys give sympathetic grunts. Marley lets the kid out of the headlock to sling an arm around his shoulders instead, patting the side of his chest so hard it sounds like a slap. Marleau kind of doesn’t know his own strength, except when he’s on the ice, when he definitely knows.

“That’s too bad, dude. But hey, you don’t need her holding you back. You’re a fuckin’ hockey player! Tell you what, you come out with us, we’ll get you a rebound, okay? You’ll feel better in no time.”

“Do not take his advice,” Ilya warns, across the room. He’s halfway into his gear – not shirtless, but his UnderArmour clings to every plane of muscle on his body, so he might as well be. Shane’s sat across the room. Glances over at him, feels his mouth fill with saliva, and quickly averts his gaze, while Ilya calls out, “Marley is terrible with women, you will learn this very fast.”

Shane’s not exactly the best judge of these things, but he believes it – Marley has a new ‘serious girlfriend’ every six months, always gone before long, and he’s usually fighting on the phone with them or begging for forgiveness with expensive gifts in the meantime. Shane's confused their names more than once. He has no idea how *he’s* supposed to remember that Marley's gone from a bottle-blond model called Amelia to a bottle-blond dancer called Emma in the space of a fortnight.

“Fuck off, Roz,” Marley shouts, and throws a stick of deodorant at his head across the room. Ilya catches it; blows a raspberry, like the little kid he is.

“You fuck off,” Ilya calls back. “You are the one who begged me to go out last night and you did not even score! Don't give the rookie false hope.”

“I’m getting him over his breakup, dude, come on!”

Krause is now beet red from his hairline down to his clavicle. Shane briefly debates going to save him, but then Connors is walking up behind them, waving his rank-smelling shoulder pads everywhere as he gestures Ilya’s way.

“Nah, dude, ignore Marley. You wanna rebound, you better get *this* guy to take you out. Roz is the fuckin’ beautician of Boston. You shoulda seen him last night – we were only in the club five minutes before he’d found the hottest girl in there, I’m talking a *ten*, some famous

fuckin' model, and had her hanging off his arm letting him buy her drinks. Five fuckin' minutes!"

Something sinks low in Shane's stomach. He's been ignoring the whole thing, mostly, organising his locker, comparing the curve on a couple new sticks he's going to practice with today. It's not his kind of locker-room talk and he usually stays out of it. He has no explanation for why a cool flush runs through his body now, something spiking in the pit of his guts that he can only identify as a similar feeling to the start of an anxiety attack, but without the adrenaline. Just that unpleasant dread.

"Conny," Ilya says. His voice gets low, kind of stony. It's nothing like how he usually sounds when they're messing around. "Shut up."

Absurdly, his gaze flicks to Shane for a moment; it's awkward, their eyes meeting, Shane sat in his cubby with Rozanov across the room, and Shane can't figure out why, or what the weird look on Rozanov's face is.

"Oh, what, you don't want the rookie stealing all the hotties away from you?" Connors laughs.

"Face like his, I don't think that will be a problem," Ilya says, right back to his usual cocky self like nothing happened. The way his voice reverts is startling and obvious, to Shane, the charming veneer slipping over it like a mask. He wonders how nobody else notices how fake it sounds, but clearly nobody does, because they're chatting or laughing as Rozanov turns back to the rookie. "Don't let Marley fool you, he is only telling you this so you will not know he spent last night crying on the phone to his ex from the corner of the bar. I buy a three thousand dollar bottle of Stolichnaya vodka for us and he's that embarrassing, can you believe it?"

Shane takes his two new hockey sticks, puts his head down, and leaves the room.

Rozanov finds him in the equipment room a little while later, where Shane's focusing intently on testing two different kinds of tape. Ilya comes up beside Shane, leans in. Shane doesn't turn, but he can feel Ilya's gaze at the side of his face.

"I didn't sleep with that girl at the club," Ilya mutters. "Just flirt, you know. Not actually fuck."

Something weird clutches inside Shane; a tight squeeze, like a hunger pang.

"Okay?" he says, focusing on taping his stick. Damnit. He lines up wrong and has to peel the tape back off, picking at it in frustration with his fingertips. "Sorry if she turned you down or whatever. I'm sure you'll find another girl."

Rozanov seems like he might say something else, but the door swings open and a couple of the team staff come in, chatting with their arms full of equipment. Rozanov lets out a frustrated huff, bumps Shane with his elbow, and leaves.

It's a weird practice. Shane pummels the net with pucks for an hour and still feels restless afterwards; irritated, like he didn't do enough.

Shane's done a lot of commercials in his career. Rolex commercials where it's all black and white and he's supposed to act like James Bond. Commercials for athletic clothing brands where he's barely wearing any clothes at all. Energy drink commercials where they intercut shots of him standing awkwardly against a neon background opening cans with him doing staged trick-shots on the ice.

This might be the silliest one he's done yet. Some bright mind at Dunkin Donuts had decided it would be the ad of the century if they made a bunch of hard, fake plastic donuts the same size as hockey pucks and had him and Ilya compete to see who could shoot more into a giant, terrifying fake mouth that hinged like a marionette.

Shane's going to be having nightmares about that plastic jaw crunching at nothing for weeks. Ilya seems delighted and keeps asking if he can take the donut-pucks home with him.

"This is so dumb," Shane grumbles to Ilya, on a break while the production team are resetting the cameras. He leans against the boards and takes an idle sip of water, mostly for something to do; they're hardly working up a sweat. They've been at it for an hour and only made like twenty shots.

"Not every commercial has to be serious sexy man stood in a weird empty room with wind blowing from nowhere," Ilya says. He's sprawled on the bench, and eating a donut; this shoot's idea of craft services is apparently entirely self-catered. Ilya has pink frosting on his thumb, which he licks off. "This is fun. Lots of people will buy donuts."

"Great, so we're contributing to the diabetes rates of the greater Boston area?"

Ilya rolls his eyes. "You are so boring," he tells Shane – the sound of him saying it is so familiar by now that Shane can hear the intonation of his vowels in his sleep. "Live a little, Hollander. When was the last time you ate a donut?"

Shane casts his memory back, and comes up blank. "Not that long," he says. Maybe Juniors? A birthday party, sometime before that? "I don't even really like them. The frosting's too sweet and the dough's always disappointing."

"Don't say that too loud, they will fire you from the commercial and give me all your money instead."

Ilya grins. Frosting on his crooked front teeth as he leans forward. Shane puts a hand into his face and shoves him away roughly, while a couple PAs linger at the edge of the bench with headsets and water bottles, glancing their direction in case they need anything.

“You don’t fucking need it,” Shane says. He slides his skates back and forth on the ice a couple times, hanging onto the boards so he’s not going anywhere, just treading in place. When he glances back over, Ilya’s started a second donut. How he has that body is a mystery to Shane. “Figured out what you’re gonna spend your first paycheck on, yet?”

His exorbitant new deal is still being talked about in podcasts and sports analysis shows, but so far this season, Ilya seems to have been proving that he’s good for the cap hit – it might be early in the autumn but he’s already outpaced himself from this time last year. It’s pretty impressive, Shane allows himself to think in the privacy of his own mind.

Shrugging like he couldn’t care less and mostly focused on his donut, Ilya says, “Maybe another car. I will buy a house probably this year, too, but, I don’t know. I still like my rookie apartment.”

Their eyes meet across the bench.

Last night, Shane texted Ilya at 11Pm, *home?* and Ilya was knocking on his door ten minutes later. They’ve hooked up three times this week. Five times last week. Shane still finds it risky when they’re on roadies, but at home, they have all the time and freedom they could need. Even if it’s just quick, last-minute, late. Sneaking into each other’s beds and back out again before sleep hits. They’re only a floor away from each other.

It’s working out great for Shane – he still hasn’t figured out a way that he could have sex with anyone other than Ilya without it being an insane, stupid risk. Like this, he gets to keep his libido under control and he’s more relaxed than he’s been in his whole life, which feeds into his hockey. He knows it’s not a problem for Ilya to find other partners, but there has to be some benefit in it for him too, if he doesn’t want to move out of the building. Convenience, maybe. If he wants to find a woman he at least has to download an app or go to a club, put in the work, build up, flirt, convince. Shane’s a sure bet. Maybe Ilya likes that it’s easy.

“Well, you’ll have to move at some point,” Shane says. His stomach kind of churns; hungry, maybe, since he won’t eat the donuts here. He looks back onto the ice, at the huge, gaping mouth in place of the goal. “The guys’ll think it’s pretty weird if you stay in that same apartment forever.”

“The fuck do I care what they think?” Ilya asks. “They are all stupid anyway. Our building is close to the rink, easy if you’re lazy like me.”

Shane raises an eyebrow his way. *Lazy* is not the first word he’d use to describe Ilya Rozanov, a generational athlete who moved to a foreign country age eighteen by himself and took the entire national league by storm. And did it without letting the pressure crush him. Shane can’t imagine.

“You could buy a whole apartment building behind the rink, bulldoze it, and build your own house for what you’re making,” Shane points out. “And our apartments are cramped. You could have your own gym. A sauna for steam therapy. A practice rink in the basement.”

A box of donuts is suddenly being waved under Shane’s nose. He shoves it away, irritated, and looks back at Rozanov, who’s fixing him with an unimpressed gaze.

From behind them on the carpeted section of ice where the cameras are set up, a director calls out, “Okay, boys, we’re ready for you back for the next take.”

Ilya closes the donut box, licks his fingers, and then hops over the boards. As he crashes onto the ice next to Shane, he says, “Or I could buy a house outside Boston for time off and also keep my apartment for whenever the fuck I want to stay there.”

“Yeah,” Shane says. A little lighter, suddenly, he skates back out into the centre ice behind Ilya, lining up with the stupid plastic donuts again. “I guess that could work, too.”

He’s at the Pike house when his publicist texts him. The text is just a heads up, nothing alarming, but Shane immediately checks his phone, finds the tag, starts scrolling and reading every single tweet.

“Dude, why are you bouncing your leg so much? Someone didn’t spike you with half a drop of coffee or something, did they?” Hayden asks, laughing as he smacks Shane on the back and settles down at the dinner table opposite him.

“Shut up, I drink coffee,” Shane says, but he clamps down on his leg to stop it bouncing. He hadn’t realised he was doing that. He wedges his thumbnail into his mouth instead, and glances back at his phone beneath the table. Nothing scary yet, but you never know –

“What’re you looking at?” Jackie asks, suddenly behind him. For a woman seven months pregnant and wearing heels, she sure moves quietly. Shane startles, turns his phone down against his leg.

“Uh, nothing, really,” he says. He takes his thumbnail out of his mouth, but then starts chewing on his lip. When Hayden and Jackie share a look, Shane quickly clarifies, “It’s actually nothing important. My publicist just let me know that there’s something about me and Rozanov trending on Twitter.”

“Ooh, another rivalry moment for the ages?” Jackie asks, with her *unrepentant gossip* voice. She takes the third seat and puts the baby monitor down in front of her plate – it had been a full hour of her trying to get Ruby to sleep while Hayden looked increasingly stressed and Shane awkwardly hovered in their kitchen feeling glad he didn’t have children – then turns to Hayden, says, “Babe, can you serve?”

“Sure, babe,” Hayden says. Shane resists the urge to balk. He loves Hayden and Jackie, he does. They’re just very – *mushy*. Like a couple from a TV family with a bad script.

While Hayden dishes out brown rice and fish onto Shane’s plate, Jackie turns back to Shane and says, “So, what was it this time? You beat him in a game at practice and the social team put it online again?”

“No, uh, nothing like that.” Shane glances at his phone beneath the table. Refreshes to the top of the tag. “It was just, like, an old picture? Kind of old, I mean. I guess not that old. From the summer, when we hung out in Ottawa? I guess a fan took a picture of us at a restaurant and like, it only just got posted. I don’t know why people are tweeting about it so much.”

He really, honestly doesn’t. The picture is basically nothing. Him and Ilya, eating sushi, opposite sides of a table. They’re smiling. There’s nothing scandalous in the picture, and people don’t even really seem to be suggesting there is. Shane knows for a fact they didn’t do anything in public that day that could have been misconstrued – he’d been on the knife’s edge of tension all day, making sure. He was *media Shane* the entire time they were out in the public eye, even while he could still feel the imprint of Ilya’s cock inside of him. Thankfully, since nobody has x-ray vision into Shane’s asshole, that wasn’t obvious to anyone seeing the picture. The thing people are talking about really is just that they look happy to be hanging out.

Most of the tweets are things like: *rivalry WHO those are best friends!!! or so all it takes to crush a generational beef is one near-winning cup run? or get you a linemate who looks at you like this!* A few people who actually care about hockey are asking if there was a camp in Ottawa that nobody heard about over the summer, or theorising about a joint sponsorship. It’s all very innocuous, and, Shane knows from experience, it’ll be forgotten by the end of the week.

The hashtag trending with it is what Shane keeps looking at. #rozhollzdate. He doesn’t know why they had to choose that word, out of literally every option. It’s inaccurate, for one thing. It implies things that Shane doesn’t think anyone has any business implying. And he feels a little sweaty.

Hayden makes a face at just the mention of Ilya. “I still can’t believe you hung out with him in the summer. You couldn’t pay me a million bucks to have voluntary bonding time with Rozanov.”

“Babe,” Jackie says, admonishing, thwacking Hayden’s arm with her napkin. “Don’t be rude about your teammate.”

They pause for a moment while Hayden and Jackie close their eyes and say grace, which they always do before eating, while Shane sits there awkwardly and refreshes his phone again under the table. When they’re done and they’re all digging into their food, Hayden pipes back up, “Seriously, why is some random pic of you guys even trending? I mean, I hate the guy, but we still eat dinner together like four days a week. It’s team shit.”

Shane finally locks his phone and slides it back into his pocket, but a jittery feeling shudders through his limbs. He takes a sip of ginger ale.

“Yeah,” he agrees blandly, turning his glass in his hands a couple times, watching the amber bubbles tilt this way and that. “I guess it’s just because still people play up the whole ‘rivalry’ thing between us. So they’re surprised that we were hanging out.”

“That’s died down since last season though, hasn’t it?” Hayden asks. “I mean, during playoffs all anyone was saying was how insanely you guys play together. I think they wanna bill you

as some dynamic duo now instead.”

Shane shrugs, uncomfortable. “We are still pretty competitive with each other. It’s not like we’re perfect linemates either.”

“Nobody knows what to make of you guys,” Jackie says. She tones it like a joke, but it sinks down to the core of Shane’s stomach. That’s the problem right there.

“Yeah, count me as one of those people.” Hayden laughs. “I still don’t really get how you guys are friends. I mean, what do you even talk about beyond hockey? Does Rozanov give you rundowns of all the chicks he’s banging any given week? ‘Cus that’s all I ever hear him talking about in the locker room.”

A rush of warm nausea overpowers Shane's body for a moment. He sucks in a quick breath between his teeth. He hopes the rice isn’t bad – he really doesn’t want to be out with food poisoning this early in the season. Shane swallows around the feeling and it calms down, if not completely dissipates.

“He’s not *that* bad,” Shane says. “It’s not a crime that women like him.”

If Jackie weren’t sitting right there, Shane might posit that Hayden sounds a bit jealous of the playboy lifestyle Ilya’s devoted his early twenties to, while Hayden’s got a baby and one on the way before he can legally rent a car; of course, Jackie *is* there, and Shane would never say something that rude in front of her, so he bites his tongue. Hayden’s probably his closest friend on the team, and Shane really appreciates having him. Having someone else around in Boston who isn’t interested in partying all the time, who’s more chill, and who doesn’t treat Shane like a freak of nature for being awkward. He just wishes Hayden and Ilya could get along more. Then Shane wouldn’t feel so caught in the middle of something that only he and Ilya even know is a thing to be caught in.

“Let’s change the subject,” Jackie suggests. She’s got one hand on her swollen belly as she leans back on her chair, rubbing little circles over it. It kind of freaks Shane out to think that there’s a whole human baby inside of there. Moving around inside her; doesn’t it feel gross for her? He averts his gaze, as Jackie says, “Shane, you know who me and Hayd were just talking about earlier? My friend Beth. It’s such a coincidence, but she’s a sports nutritionist, *and* she’s super into hockey! I was thinking maybe I could show you her Instagram?”

There was a time in his life where Shane might not have recognised that social cue: bringing up innocuous facts about a woman he’s never met and then suggesting he look at pictures of her. Unfortunately, this is a pattern that Shane has long since become familiar with by now, so he knows what she means.

“Um, I’m sure she’s great, I’m really not looking to meet anyone right now,” he tells Jackie, as politely as he can muster. “This is a really important season for us. We have a really good chance at a run for the Cup. I don’t need any distractions.”

Hayden and Jackie share a look, but Shane ignores it. He’s bouncing his leg beneath the table again, he realises; all this pent-up energy in him, and it has nowhere to go. He wishes he

knew where it was coming from. It feels like he's cresting right on the edge of something big, but he just can't reach it.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: checking 🦷

thanks so much for reading, i love yall, please do leave a comment (i read and appreciate deeply every single one even tho i am behind on replying) 💚 can also [rb on tumblr](#) if u love me!

Chapter 18: you need to take this rough medicine.

Chapter Notes

brought to you by the pure stress and heartbreak that team canada inflicted upon me today :(((if you have any complaints about this chapter you can blame infant child macklin celebrini's sad little face crying on the bench

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

Six weeks into the new season where the Raiders are on a five-game win streak, and one day after a delicious game in Montreal where Heikky didn't let a single goal through, Ilya flops down onto his bed with a groan. Afternoon sunlight pouring through the vast windows of his bedroom, he stretches his body along the sheets, feeling the cooling sweat along his naked back. He's still breathless, a little dizzy, as he raises his arms above his head for a moment to ease out his shoulders. The stretch in his muscles is delicious, same as it feels after a game or a tough workout; like he's buzzing from good, hard work.

The thing Ilya's been working hard on for the last hour lays next to him, panting. Ilya rolls to his side, watching the tan expanse of Shane's chest rise and fall, and dances one hand along his chest.

"I think you killed me," Shane says, turning his head halfway on the pillow. There's this crooked little smile on his face, perfect white teeth gleaming at Ilya.

"Don't say that," Ilya says. "Whole hockey world will be after me wanting to rip my head off if I kill their poster boy."

"Shut up." Shane lets one of his hands flop over and smack Ilya in the stomach. Ilya lets out a little *oof*, exaggerated, acting like Shane's injured him for a moment. Shane leaves his hand where it falls, palm-up against the soft, heaving plane of Ilya's belly.

He teases, "What? It's true. Six weeks into season and you're already breaking records, media will not shut up about it."

Ilya knows his own worth as a player. He's the only person in the league who can keep up with Shane; everyone talks about it, and he's plenty proud and shameless about his own achievements. But there's no denying that Shane is the golden boy of the NHL, the name that random non-fans who can only name one hockey player would know, and that he's fucking good enough to deserve it. Sometimes, it's worth taking a break from stroking his own competitive ego to compliment Shane instead; the way Shane goes pink all over and dodges eye-contact when Ilya compliments his hockey, even when he's used to it from everyone else in the world, is a little addictive.

Sure enough, Ilya watches as Shane squirms in the sheets, looking away from him again. He doesn't actually make any moves to escape Ilya's bed, though, which says a lot. Letting himself be naked in the afternoon sun, lube still sticky on his thighs and his soft cock nestled in the crook of his pelvis, he's absurdly enchanting.

"Not any important records."

"I think they are probably important. That ESPN spot thinks so."

"That same reporter did a half-hour on different kinds of skate laces last week, they don't know shit."

Shane rolls his eyes. Ilya leans over and puts his face to Shane's arm, flexes his jaw, locks his teeth into the thick muscle of Shane's bicep and bites down for a moment. When he pulls away, he can see the imprint of his teeth in Shane's skin.

Stroking the little indents as they fade, Ilya says innocently, "Oh, so you don't think you're good?"

Suddenly, there's a hard body rolling on top of him. Even still fucked-out and sleepy, sticky with lube and cum, Shane's strong when he gets competitive; he pins Ilya's hands above his head, pushing them hard into the mattress, while Ilya lets out a delighted laugh.

"I'm very good," Shane says, eyes narrowing. Ilya tries to buck him off; Shane pushes him down harder, shoves a bare knee into Ilya's waist. "I just don't need bad reporters to make up niche records like *most lifetime goals scored by an Asian-Canadian forward* to tell me that."

There's some amount of genuine tension in Shane's tone, which is interesting. Ilya hadn't paid much attention to what they actually said in that one ESPN spot, only idly scrolling past it and amused when he'd seen Shane's angry little game face appearing on his giant TV – there are plenty of legitimate reasons to get excited about Shane's season thus far. He's currently leading the entire league in goals, and Ilya's fighting him for it, but he doesn't mind seeing Shane in the top spot for a bit. Shane often sounds a bit unhappy when the media around his career is brought up, but he's never told Ilya about it in so many words, and Ilya's never dug that deep into why. Usually, when he's with Shane, there are other things on his mind.

He pencils the thought in for another time.

"You are very good," Ilya agrees. He goes loose, lets his body relax under Shane's grip. Half-lids his eyes, and watches Shane's mouth. Runs one of his fingers along the inside of Shane's wrist, where he has Ilya in his grasp. He sees the moment he gets Shane on the hook; the moment his eyes dark and he gets distracted by his wanting. "Second best in the league, for sure."

Ilya rolls up hard and wrenches his wrists out of Shane's grasp in his moment of distraction, pushes him over, pins him down instead. Shane's spluttering angry, but he doesn't try that hard to get out of Ilya's grasp. He never does.

“Asshole!” Shane tells him. “Fuck off. Let me up, I need to shower now anyway.”

“Mm. True. I got you very messy,” Ilya says, grinning down at Shane. He meets Shane’s big brown eyes and falls into them for a moment. Captivated, Ilya leans down for a kiss, teasing Shane’s lips a few times, tugging at them with his own mouth. Shane puts up with it for a minute before pushing him away.

“Seriously, Rozanov. We’ve only got a couple hours before we’re supposed to be at Marley’s place, I need to get ready.”

Big team dinner tonight; they’ve promised not too late or too wild, and Shane’s agreed to come, even though usually when they meet up at Marley’s it turns into a 2am shitshow kind of event. Ilya likes when Shane comes out with the team for more than just training or meals. It’s fun to have him around everyone, needle him and get the team teasing them over being too competitive, or ignore him and know he’s simmering with frustration across the room. He convinced Shane to come over and fuck beforehand with a series of wheedling texts about having nothing to do in the rare free time before the party, hoping he could roll it into spending the entire afternoon together.

“Okay, fine, fine.” Ilya rolls off, mourning the loss of Shane’s hot, hard body beneath him; missing the smell of his sweaty skin already. “We drive together?”

Shane sits up on the bed, back turned to Ilya as he fishes his underwear off the floor. He’s not looking at Ilya as he says, “No, let’s take separate cars. I don’t want them to think we, like, planned to go together.”

“We are teammates. We did plan to go together, that is the whole point.”

“You know what I mean.” Shane finally slants a look back over his shoulder to Ilya, jostling the bed as he lifts his ass to pull his underwear back on. “They’re still chirping me about that fucking twitter tag from the summer, and Hayden won’t let it go every time I have a fucking hickey. He thinks I have a *girlfriend* and doesn’t get why I haven’t introduced them.”

“Okay, so, Pike is an idiot, who cares what he thinks?”

Shane sighs. “He’s my friend, shut up. We need to be more careful, Rozanov.”

It’s not that Ilya doesn’t know the need to be careful. It’s that Ilya’s not a long-term thinker. He’s always deeply focused in the moment; he’ll destroy his body chasing a puck across the ice when it’s in his line of sight, because he wants it, and has to go get it. He’s the same with Shane. In Moscow, it was easy to think he should probably break things off with Shane, or imagine they were never anything at all. When Shane’s naked in his bed, competitive and sharp-tongued and golden and letting Ilya piss him off, it’s hard to remember there’s any reason not to bury under his skin forever.

“Is a waste of gas to drive separate. Bad for the environment,” Ilya points out, but he’s not really arguing. Ilya rolls over to his side, grabbing his phone off the nightstand with a sigh as Shane stands up and collects his clothes from their neatly-folded pile on the dresser. The moment’s broken, the more distance there is between them. With Shane across the room and

Ilya still naked in the afternoon sunlight, they could be on two different planets, an icy chill separating the room.

As he's checking his twitter notifications and ignoring Shane's appealing thighs disappearing into a boring pair of black sweatpants, Ilya's phone starts ringing. *Papa* appears at the top of the screen.

Ilya swallows an unpleasant knot, and sits up, swinging his legs off the bed. He pads naked across the room.

"I have to take this," he tells Shane. "You are showering at your place?"

"Yeah, that was the plan." Obviously, since he'd been getting dressed rather than heading for Ilya's luxurious waterfall shower. "Uh, no worries, you can go answer it. I'll let myself out."

"Okay." Ilya wants to kiss him one last time before letting him out the door. But his father's ringing out on the line.

Ilya doesn't kiss Shane. He walks into the bathroom, shuts the door behind him so his voice won't carry to the bedroom, takes a deep breath, and accepts the call.

They're having a great season so far. Everyone's talking about how close they were to the cup last year, and hoping they'll keep it up – obviously, the whole team is desperate after coming so close and having it ripped away. Even now, barely into the meat of the season, the Raiders are playing like they have something to lose.

They take on Edmonton in November, and play a gritty, scrappy first period that Ilya feels every forty-five seconds of like it were an hour.

"We're doing good out there," Shane says to them all in the locker room between periods, while they guzzle down Gatorade and knead at their bruises. "But we need to play harder on offence, focus on getting the puck to the net, okay? Pass up the ice when you can and trust that me or Rozanov will make space to receive."

Ilya likes when Shane gets like this. *Captainy*. He's not the most social in the locker room, and doesn't have many close friends beyond Ilya – heavily disputed in definition – or Pike, the most boring player on their team, so it's sometimes hard to remember what a leader he is. But this is where he shines. He barely seems exerted while everyone else is already pushing hard for their second wind. He's not turned his mind to a single other thing since the game began, and that doesn't change when they're between periods; he'll be like this until the final second of the third. Focused, locked in. Paying attention to every guy in the room, aware of what they've been doing and what they need to improve.

Coach tells them, "Listen to Hollander, you got it? Get back out there, give them hell."

The team shout, rally, bump Heikkilä's helmet for luck, and pour back onto the bench with renewed fight. Coach sends their line out first. As they slam their skates down on ice, Ilya knocks into Shane's shoulder from behind. Shane taps Ilya's leg with his stick.

Shane takes the face-off, and wins. Sends the puck right to Ilya's stick.

The crowd roar, an amalgamous beast in the background, voices one deafening throng; down on the ice, among the sharp cold puffs of breath and slam of bodies, it's loud in a different way, where Ilya can hear his own breath in his ears and the shouts of his teammates and the frantic calls between Edmonton's line as they slam into each other, chase, and Ilya pummels his way down the ice. He gets into their zone a second before their defence catch him, passes to Marley, but then one of the Edmonton guys crashes into Marley and there's a scramble for the puck against the boards. Ilya slams himself over there and tries to scoop it out from between their skates, manages to pass it out of the scramble of limbs, but then it's chipped back away from the goal, no chance to shoot.

Ilya's pushed hard into the boards by a player in orange, doesn't see his face, just feels the slam of his body into his pads and grits into his muscles to push back. Escapes the hold. Sprints down the ice.

The catch in his lungs and scream of his muscles lets him know he must've been out on the ice for nearly a minute. He crashes into the bench just before Shane does, the next line already hopping the boards to replace them. Ilya collapses and squirts water into his mouth, spits some down onto the ground, catches his breath. Shane's two guys down from him. Ilya looks, but Shane's not looking back, of course; he's laser-focused on the ice, calling out to their teammates, yelling and groaning when the puck is sent back up towards Boston's goal, gesturing with his stick as Pike gets it and pelts back to centre ice. He's chewing on his mouthguard, the clear plastic dangling out of his pink lips.

Ilya drinks more water. They're back in, they play hard for forty-five seconds, they're back out again. They try and change with their lines, but Shane has better endurance on the ice than anyone and could keep going for over a minute – Ilya hates to admit it, but sometimes his lungs feel the count of every cigarette he's smoked in his life by that fortieth second of sprinting. He's deafened by the crowd. The jumbotron is flashing 2-1 to Boston by the time there's three minutes left in the second, but the points aren't coming easy.

Coach taps Ilya's back with his clipboard, and Ilya hops the boards just as Pike returns to the bench. The puck's whizzing his way and Ilya gets it on his stick the second his skates hit ice. A blur of bodies are immediately on him, and Ilya pushes his burning thighs into a sprint, dangling the puck on his stick as he chases it towards Edmonton's goal.

There's only a split second of warning as a face is suddenly an inch away from his helmet, and Ilya recognises Edmonton's biggest defenceman, Angevin, a hulking player who barely ever touches the puck but is happy to go throw his stick and his elbows or go to the ice at a moment's notice.

Ilya barely has time to react. He shoots the puck wildly towards the goal, no idea if it'll land or not, hoping Hollander's there to scoop it home; it's barely left his tape before Ilya feels a

shoulder colliding with his, and the splintering impact of a hockey stick slamming into the front of his chin.

The buzzer sounds for a goal and Ilya barely hears it over the blood rushing through his head as the pain sets in.

It hurts like a motherfucker, sends him sprawling back into the boards, though he thankfully avoids falling on his ass. A ref's whistle blows insistently, somewhere behind him. Ilya squeezes his eyes tight shut for a second, drops one of his gloves to clutch at his jaw. Taking stock. There's a rooted ache spreading along his chin and his bottom gums.

A coppery taste fills his mouth. Perking up a bit, Ilya spits onto the ice. Blood.

"Blood!" he points out quickly, to the ref. "I am bleeding, give him a fucking major!"

Some of the guys crowd around him, slapping him on the back, checking on him. Ilya tells them, "I'm fine. Look, though, blood."

"You look like a fucking vampire, it's dripping down your chin," Marley tells him.

Ilya wipes his chin with his hand and looks expectantly to the ref. It's a funny part of hockey – hoping something bleeds if you do get hit, so the penalty's worse.

He grins as the ref gives Angevin a double-minor. Four minutes of power play. Skates off the ice with his hand to his jaw as someone comes out to clean up the blood before play can resume. There's only forty seconds left in the period.

"Hey, you scored," Shane's voice suddenly says, hovering behind Ilya's as they come back onto the bench. The medic's at the edge of the boards, waiting to look at him; Ilya waves her off for the moment, turning Shane's way. Shane says, "Jesus, are you sure you're okay? Your lip is completely busted."

"Hurts like a bitch," Ilya says. "I am fine."

"Go checked out anyway, okay? We don't need you for the next forty seconds. Get your lip patched up so you can come back and be some when we start the third on a power play."

He's using his captain voice, but there's something in his eyes as he looks at Ilya over the bench. His gaze flicks to Ilya's jaw a few times, watching the thin, sluggish trail of blood spew out between his lips; Shane's brows are furrowed.

He's worried, Ilya realises suddenly, with some degree of confusion. As far as hockey goes, a bit of high-sticking and a bloody mouth is nothing to write home about. It's not like he took a hit to the skull, has a concussion or even fell down after the hit. Ilya's played on a broken foot bone before. He's ignored bruised ribs for a month. Played with a fever and threw up in the locker room between periods. They all do it. It's hockey.

"Hollander," Ilya says, as the medic hovers around his shoulders. "I am fine."

“I know you’re fucking fine,” Shane snips, suddenly looking away from Ilya. “Just go let them look at your jaw so you don’t hold us up next period.”

He’s *worried*. Ilya smiles, delighted, with his bloody mouth, and is still riding the high as he lets himself be bullied back down the tunnel to be looked at properly. While the medic’s shoving gauze between his lip and his gums, Ilya keeps thinking, *Shane’s worried about me*. It’s the kind of attention a guy could get drunk on.

They win 3-2. The win feels good, but it’s wrung out a bit with what a tough game it was. It feels like they skated a marathon with how much the puck travelled up and down the ice. The front of Ilya’s jaw hurts like a motherfucker by the time they pile, exhausted, into the tunnel; a dull ache in the bone. The medic puts some gauze in there and gives him a couple painkillers. The bleeding stopped quick enough that he’s not worried about it as they cool down, shower, get changed.

Shane won’t meet his eyes in the locker room; Ilya keeps trying, and Shane just turns away and talks to Pike.

Nobody’s in much of a mood to linger, and most of the guys head out as soon as they’re changed, with a few fatigued exchanges of *good game*. There’s a handful of players left by the time Ilya slings his jacket on. Shane’s one of them, even though he’s been dressed for ages. He tries to be the last one out of the room, now that he’s got the A; usually a captain would do that, and since they don’t have a permanent captain, Shane’s taken on that part of the role. It’s sweet, how serious he takes it. Ilya’s only real attempt at captaincy has been taking the new guys on the team out to clubs and buying beer for their underage rookie. Team bonding shit.

When Pike finally disappears back to his hoarde of screaming babies – Ilya imagines it apocalyptically unpleasant at his house – Ilya lets himself sidle up behind Shane’s shoulder. Not too close; they’re not alone. He puts on his best pout.

“Hollander,” he says. “They gave me painkillers, I cannot drive. You have to give me a ride home.”

Lie. But a fun lie. A couple of Advil and a bruise won’t stop anyone driving, but it’s more fun if he makes Shane take him places, because Shane gets annoyed about it, and also looks hot behind the wheel.

Shane turns around. Looks at Ilya’s jaw. Ilya’d looked at himself in the mirror after his shower - his lip is split, a faint bruise beginning to spread below his mouth, but it doesn’t look too grizzly. No more blood, no major swelling. No real excuse for why Shane seems to be staring at it like he’s never seen a bruise before.

“You can get a cab,” Shane says, snippily. Something flutters in Ilya’s stomach. He loves when Shane’s a bitch for no reason.

“We are going to the same fucking place.” Shane rolls his eyes; a bit of a show, maybe, for the couple of guys still packing their shit across the room or the equipment manager scooping up sweaty gear. Ilya pulls out his trump card: “A good captain would drive his poor injured wing home.”

Shane narrows his eyes. Ilya blinks innocently. Waits him out.

After three frustrated seconds, Shane says, “Ugh, fine. But we’re leaving in five; if you’re not ready to go, I’m not waiting.”

“Thank you, captain,” Ilya says, just to watch Shane go a bit pink.

Shane drives them back to their building, and when he gets out of the elevator on his floor, Ilya follows him. Shane slants a glance over his shoulder, pretending to be irritated, but he doesn’t say anything, so Ilya grins and keeps following. They’ve done this enough times by now that he knows when Shane actually wants to be alone – which is increasingly rarely, and certainly not now. He follows Shane right through his door, takes off his shoes and his suit jacket, pops a couple more buttons on his shirt.

Shane pretends not to look at his chest. “I’m making a shake, do you want one?”

“I hate your shakes,” Ilya grumbles. They all inhale protein powder and meal replacements, of course, no way to keep your energy up at their level of hockey without it, but Shane’s got all this organic probiotic shit that tastes like grass. Ilya likes full-fat milk and sugary chocolate powder in his shakes.

“You don’t *have* to be in my apartment,” Shane says. Ilya immediately throws his hands up and turns on the puppy dog eyes.

“No, no, you are right, please make me a very gross shake, I need it or I will pass out. From the pain.”

“You’re not in pain.” Shane rolls his eyes, but he does give one more look at Ilya’s jaw before turning to his kitchen. While he fusses with his blender, Ilya looks at himself in the hall mirror. The bruise below his mouth is redder, now. The front of his mouth is starting to ache and throb a lot more than it was an hour ago, but it’s hardly the worst thing he’s ever felt.

They drink their gross shakes standing in Shane’s kitchen, Ilya pulling faces at the taste, Shane ignoring him and talking about things he wants to look over in the tape from tonight’s game and times they gave up easy scoring opportunities. He doesn’t seem that pleased with the game.

“Hollander, we fucking won,” Ilya reminds him, when Shane starts talking about the curve of Fellers’ new stick and how it could have ruined everything. Shane gives him an irritated look.

“Just because we won, doesn’t mean we played our best. If we’re gonna take the cup this year we have to make every single play deliberate, not just hope we luck into it through the other team’s mistakes.”

“Ugh, you are so boring,” Ilya groans. He looks at the empty shake cup in Shane’s hands. “Are you done with that?”

Shane glances down at it like he didn’t even remember he was still holding it. “Oh, yeah.”

“Okay, good.”

Ilya takes it out of his hands, puts it on the counter, and kisses him.

His split lip stings sharply as he presses his mouth into Shane’s, but Ilya couldn’t care less. Shane’s mouth is warm and immediately goes pliant under him, letting Ilya suck on his lip, which makes it incredibly easy to ignore the throbbing pain in his mouth. Ilya slides his hands under Shane’s shirt at his hips, digs his thumbs into the warm flesh. Slides one down inside Shane’s sweatpants, cupping his ass, squeezing the muscle. Shane makes a noise into his mouth like he’s choking.

Ilya pushes his tongue into Shane’s mouth, ignoring more sharp pain as he licks at the roof of Shane’s mouth. Shane’s hands find Ilya’s stomach, quickly, clumsily, the way he’s always so eager when he’s turned on. He flits around, pressing one of his palms against Ilya’s crotch, squeezing his soft dick through his pants. Heat floods Ilya’s gut. He rolls his cock into Shane’s warm hand, pushes Shane further back against the counter so he’s leaning back, Ilya over the top of him, bearing down.

With a needy sound, Shane grabs the back of Ilya’s head, a painful grip in his curls, and crushes their mouths together, forcing his tongue into Ilya’s mouth. Ilya’s jaw throbs, the more they kiss, but Ilya can’t bring himself to pull away. Shane’s so fucking delicious. He growls and lets Shane move faster and more frantically, kneads at Shane’s ass and wonders if Shane will let him inside it tonight even with how tired they are after the game – even if it’s just slow fucking, or even just a little bit, Ilya wants it, desperately, doesn’t think his cock will be happy without it – and he tries to pull away to ask, but Shane yanks him back, kissing him so hard their teeth clash.

Suddenly, a flash of sharp pain, and Ilya feels something on his tongue. Not a fun sexy kind of thing on his tongue. There’s something small and hard rolling loose in his mouth, and the coppery taste of blood pooling around his gums –

Shane makes a noise and pulls away, like he tastes the blood the same time Ilya does, and Ilya cups his hand in front of his mouth and spits.

A tooth lands in his palm, in a pool of blood-pinked saliva.

For a second, they both stare at it.

Then Shane puts his hands over his face and crouches down on the floor and lets out a muffled scream into his own palms. “Oh. My. GOD!” he says. “I just knocked your tooth out.

I just knocked your fucking tooth out, oh my god, what the hell.”

Ilya prods at the hole in his own mouth with his tongue, feeling the sore wound where his bottom left incisor was a minute ago.

“You did not knock my tooth out,” Ilya tells Shane soothingly, ignoring the tingling pain in his gums in favour of patting Shane’s head with his clean hand. “Fucking Angevin knocked my tooth out, it was just – what’s the word – delayed response.”

“It was still in your fucking mouth before I started mauling you!” Shane groans. Ilya doesn’t know this word – *mauling* – but if it means kissing very hard, he likes it. Shane buries his face in his knees where he’s crouched at Ilya’s feet; then, suddenly wrenches himself up again and puts his hands around Ilya’s face. He pulls Ilya’s lip down with a gentle thumb and balks at the sight, his soulful eyes shiny and wet.

“It was in my mouth, but it hurt already. I think it was broken and I just did not move it until now.”

“I knocked your tooth out by being too horny,” Shane groans. This is immediately one of Ilya’s favourite sentences he’s ever heard in English.

“Is just a tooth, you can calm down,” Ilya tells him – gently, trying to sound soothing, though that’s not exactly his specialty. He strokes Shane’s arm. His other hand is still holding the tooth, not sure where to put it. “Feller has only three teeth left in his whole mouth. This is just hockey.”

Shane narrows his eyes, a glare, even while he’s still cupping Ilya’s jaw with gentle hands. “Well, I don’t make out with Feller, do I!”

Delighted, Ilya says, “Oh, so the making out is the problem? What, you don’t like me anymore? The missing tooth is not sexy?”

He opens his mouth and runs his tongue over the hole. Honestly, Ilya thinks he has Shane Hollander down to a science. It’d be a pretty hard sell to guess cold that anyone else in the universe had a kink for missing teeth – but Shane? Shane, who likes weird sex and rough masculinity and the Canadian national sport of hockey above all else in the world? Ilya’s not surprised at all when Shane’s eyes track down to his jaw and flutter for a second.

“That’s *so* not the point,” Shane says, but Ilya’s already delighted. “Come on, put your jacket on, I’m driving you to the emergency dentist.”

The team has one on standby, of course. Ilya’s never visited them before – he has a couple of crowns from a puck he took to the face as a teenager, but they rarely bother him and Ilya honestly couldn’t care less about his own teeth. He wrinkles his nose, groans.

“It can wait until morning,” he says. He wraps his free hand around Shane’s waist, while Shane tries to bully him away. “Come on, we can still fuck.”

He manages to press one sloppy kiss to Shane's neck. Then Ilya notices that he's left a large, nasty smear of blood behind on Shane's skin.

Okay. Maybe the dentist.

Shane does some frantic googling on his phone and makes Ilya put the tooth in milk while he calls the emergency dentist, which to Ilya sounds like the weirdest old babushka's tale, but is apparently actually a thing. The dentist tells Shane on the phone that if the root isn't broken, they might be able to splint the tooth back in, if Ilya comes in as soon as possible. This becomes Shane's personal mission in life and he has Ilya bundled up in the car with his mouth full of gauze from Shane's home first-aid kit before Ilya knows it.

At the dentist, Shane paces awkwardly in the waiting room while Ilya's taken in. He's really not particularly stressed about whether they get his tooth back in or not. If he needs a replacement he thinks it would be fun to get a gold one. And Shane's stress is charming, so even if Ilya would rather be fucking him right now, this is a pretty novel evening either way.

While he's in the chair, the dentist prods around every inch of his mouth carefully, inspecting all his other gums as well as the missing one.

"So it was a hockey stick, hit you right on your lower gums?" Dr Prakash asks.

"Mmfh," Ilya says, around his rubber gloves.

Dr Prakash shakes his head, looking pissed. "Why they don't make you guys wear a proper helmet I will never understand."

"Nmhfn," Ilya says.

"Okay, I'm just having a look at the rest of your mouth for any additional damage. Hm. You have some ruptured blood vessels on your upper palate. Probably nothing to worry about, but it doesn't seem like it would be from the stick."

"Whmnt?" Ilya asks.

Dr Prakash finally takes his hands out of Ilya's mouth, and says, "That can be a symptom of strep throat. Have you had a sore throat at all this week? Noticed any swelling in your glands or general feelings of unwellness?"

"No," Ilya says truthfully. "I feel fresh as a cucumber."

"Right. Well, I want you to keep an eye on yourself and let your team doctor know if you feel so much as a tickle in your throat, okay? It's probably nothing, but strep throat can be nasty."

"There is nothing else that causes this? Just the throat illness?" Ilya checks.

“The other thing we usually see it for is intense suction,” Dr Prakash tells him. Then, a little conspiratorially, dropping the air of judgemental professionalism he’s had the whole appointment, he tells Ilya lowly, “Honestly, we usually see it on people who’ve been performing oral sex on men. Obviously, I know that’s not the case with you! That’s why I want to keep an eye on you for strep.”

For a second, Ilya’s head rings like he’s just been hit in the skull. He’s swiftly glad Shane waited outside, or they might be dealing with a freakout on levels never seen before.

Even Ilya feels a little dizzy as he says weakly, “I drink very hard from my Gatorade in games, maybe that’s it.”

“Mm. Well, let’s keep an eye on it just in case,” Dr Prakash says. Ilya nods like he’s taking this seriously and not about to burst out laughing so hard he passes out. “Now, let’s see about that tooth.”

In the last week of November, they face Vancouver for the first time since the Stanley Cup finals. Shane's a ball of tension with a face like a sucked lemon all day before the game, which Ilya watches from a distance, not really able or trying to do anything about it, just interested in his anxiety. He warms up like a maniac and then, as soon as they get out on the ice, Ilya watches his face go blank, the tension melt out of him, his whole physicality change.

They win.

After, Shane's pink and pleased in the locker room, suddenly happy to chat with the rest of the team and joke around like he hasn't been all day. Ilya watches Pike sling an arm around Shane's neck, and then Ilya turns to the rest of the team and announces, "Fuck it, we are going out tonight. I will buy everyone's drinks. Nobody is allowed to say no, fuckers."

This last part is directed at Shane, though Ilya's facing away and not looking at him. Instead, it backfires immediately, because Pike says, "Fuck yeah, Jacks has taken the kids to her mom's for the week, I can actually go out tonight."

Ilya wasn't trying to convince *Pike*, but he supposes he'll take it, since if Pike's coming Shane has no excuse to duck out. So he tells everyone, "Fucking yes. Marley, you pick the club. Text group chat."

They're all still high on the win and adrenaline, even if their bodies are bruised, battered and run to the bone, by the time they descend on the club. Ilya grabs Marley and Connors and leads the charge inside, securing the VIP booths with a brandished wad of cash, which are raised off the dancefloor and separated by hip-high swinging doors which remind him of a hockey rink. Ilya's proud of himself for only glancing at Shane a couple of times as they enter. Of course Shane's at the back of the group, awkward with his hands shoved into the

pockets of his hoodie, glued to Pike's side. But even seeing him under the flashing club lights is a treat.

Ilya summons a bartender with a bright smile and orders everyone shots. He likes this feeling — being at the helm of an event, bathing in the laughs and jibes from the other guys. The handful of players younger than him, the new trades, and even a few of the bottom-line vets, look a little in awe of Ilya when he takes them out, when he splashes his exorbitant cash, when he acts like he owns whatever room they've walked into. Ilya loves it. He likes the attention and he likes to piss people off with it and he also likes to feel like he could take care of any guy on the team, like they're his brothers. Usually, Ilya's version of taking care of them is buying alcohol, but he likes that too.

Shane passes his shot to Hayden. Ilya leans over the table and says, “Hollander, don’t be a pussy, you can have one drink.”

“Don’t push it, Rozanov,” Shane says. His voice is a little raspy, from the volume he has to reach to be heard over the thumping club music, and the leftover strain from yelling calls and plays and cursewords during the game. All his command and authority has melted off him now he's not on the ice, but Ilya knows it's still in there; this awkward Shane hiding in his hoodie and wincing at the bass of the speakers is the same Shane who skates up to the refs to argue about penalties and calls over the ice for his backliners like an army general. “I’m not messing up our season by drinking. And I’ve got to be in bed in an hour.”

“You are so *boring*,” Ilya tells him, meaning something else.

Marley, who Ilya’s leaning halfway over and nearly sloshing his beer on in order to reach Shane, elbows him. “Dude, can you get out of my fucking lap?”

“You wish I was in your lap, Marley,” Ilya says, throwing his middle finger up and then licking it rudely as he rights himself in his own seat.

“Hoping for a repeat of that New Year’s kiss?” Connors laughs. Ilya grins, too, sharp, with his aching front tooth. The dentist had managed to get it back in and attach it to the teeth either side to hold it in place, but he has to go back in a couple weeks to have the splint removed, and then hope it holds. He’s been told to play with a full cage and avoid getting hit until it’s absolutely healed – he hasn’t been.

“I can’t believe you let them put that fuckin’ tooth back in, man,” Marley says, as he pours more beer out of the pitcher on the table. “You do know you play hockey for a living, right? Shoulda got a falsie, it's just gonna get knocked out again.”

“You can look like shit because nobody cares, Marley, but they put fifty-foot posters of me on the front of the arena that whole of Boston can see. I will keep my teeth as long as I fucking can.”

A couple of the guys get up to go dance – or hit on the girls on the dancefloor – and Pike and Shane get shuffled further across the booth in the process of letting them up. Suddenly Shane’s cute, uncomfortable face is right across from Ilya, oddly coloured beneath the blue-white lights that cut through the dark room. The table smells like sticky vodka and spilled

beer, and Ilya imagines Shane smelling like that when they leave later, an unfamiliar accompaniment to his usual coconut shampoo and unscented soap.

Marley says, “Your teeth are nasty as hell, you should get them all ripped out and get fuckin’ veneers.”

“Don’t encourage him,” Shane grumbles from across the table. “On the way to the dentist he kept saying he wanted a gold tooth. Like he’s a pirate.”

“I would look so good with gold, don’t pretend,” Ilya says. “It will match all my medals.”

Marley laughs and shoves him and calls him an asshole; nothing unusual. But across the table, Hayden Pike is making a face like a five year old trying to solve a quadratic equation.

“Wait, why did you go to the dentist with Rozanov?” Pike asks. “Wasn’t it like, the middle of the night?”

It’s not like it was a *secret* that Shane was the one to drive him, but Ilya had glossed over it when he told the tooth story to everyone in the locker room. He’d embellished quite hard on how his tooth had just spontaneously fallen out that night, not mentioning that he was hooking up at the time. Still, it’s not like it’s overly weird, given that they’re teammates, given where they live. Ilya thinks they have a lot of plausible deniability to do pretty much anything short of raw anal in public without most people realising there’s anything going on between them.

Unfortunately, Shane doesn’t agree. Ilya watches as his eyes go startled, like a deer in lights; caught in a moment of frozen stillness as he doesn’t know where to move. Trapped.

Ilya says, loudly, “He lives fucking downstairs from me, why do you think? I was going to drive myself with blood falling out of my face?”

“If you tried waking me up at midnight after a game to drive you to the fuckin’ dentist I’d have knocked out a couple more teeth,” Marley – reliably oblivious Marley – says, laughing, cutting the tension that maybe only Ilya and Shane are aware of.

“You could have called a fucking Uber,” Pike says. “Stop making Shane drive you places all the time just because he’s a good person.”

“It wasn’t a big deal,” Shane says, but nobody is listening.

A crowd of giggling women pass by the VIP booths, glancing over their shoulders, muttering between themselves beneath the loud cover of club music. Marley is instantly distracted again, couldn’t care less about Ilya’s teeth, nudges Ilya and points the girls out. His drink wafts beside Ilya’s face as he gestures, a little drunk already, the sweet scent of whiskey pouring off him.

“They’re hot, bro. Let’s get their numbers.”

Ilya looks at the girls, who’ve now posted up right outside their booth, pretend-casual, clearing angling for attention. They’re definitely hot. Any other time, he’d go over and charm

them, try and take one or more of them home.

It's just – well. Ilya's all pent up from adrenaline from the game, that red-blooded feeling of victory, high on his own prowess. He loves fucking when he feels like this; it makes the sex into a victory lap.

Shane's right there, and he played the same game Ilya did. All Ilya can think, in that moment, is that it'd be a shame to waste his victory fuck on some random woman who doesn't care about hockey when he and Shane could work out their adrenaline together. It's better that way – keeps the hockey in the sex in a way that makes Ilya horny for victory and obsessed with his own game. Plus, if Ilya went home with someone else, Shane probably wouldn't, and then he'd be leaving their first-line centre pent-up. That's bad for the team.

Ilya's not doing something insane like being exclusive with Shane. He's *not*. He hasn't fucked anyone else this month, but he's not writing off the idea – he just hasn't felt like it. In fact, every time he meets any flirtatious stranger these days, Ilya seems to find himself profoundly and unambiguously uninterested. One of the women outside their booth adjusts her low-cut dress, squeezing her own full breasts in her hands right in front of him, and Ilya's cock doesn't even warm up.

He says to Marley, "Mm, not tonight, I just want to drink and go home. You go and make a fool of yourself on your own."

"You have become so fucking boring this season, bro, you know that?"

"I am doing you a favour, Marley. Neither of them will be interested in your ugly face if I'm there too."

Marley shoves him half out of his seat with a shoulder-check as he stands up.

"Fuck off, toothless," he says, rolling his eyes as he leaves. Connors goes off with him to hit on the women instead. Ilya, as subtle as he knows how to be, slides his gaze across the table.

Shane's not looking at him. He's sipping the can of ginger ale a bartender had brought over for him, playing with the tab, gaze down to his lap like he's avoiding looking at anyone on purpose. Pike's texting, oblivious, probably checking in on his boring family. The booth either side of Ilya is empty, the rest of the team all occupied either dancing or trying to get laid or playing a dumb drinking game on the other table.

The club is loud, the drinks are strong, the taste of victory is still on his tongue. Ilya feels great. And he feels the emptiness all around him like the void of outer space. Caught between all the ways he knows how to be, and the tight knot tied in the middle of them that he can't quite cross – the loose playboy that his teammates know, the secret side of him Shane knows. The open wound at the centre of him that he tries not to show to anybody. Where the fuck does it all meet in a way he can sustain?

Ilya stands up, knocking the table with his knees and sending a cluster of shot glasses rattling. A few pairs of eyes flick over to him. "Bathroom, I need to piss," he says, and walks away.

What he really wants is a cigarette, but he doesn't have a pack with him. He usually lets himself have one when he's out partying, but tonight had been impulsive. Instead, a little jittery off the lack of nicotine and he's not sure what else, he goes to the bathroom. It's an expensive club – the bathroom's all black shiny tile, cologne samples at the sinks. Ilya pisses and then washes his hands because he's trying to waste time. He stares at himself in the mirror. He looks sexy as hell with his hair pushed back like this. His jaw's still sporting a fading bruise and there are dark circles under his eyes.

When Ilya leaves the bathroom, he turns away from the rest of the club, and lets himself out a fire escape into the alley.

He's sort of hoping he'll find another smoker to get a cigarette off, but this clearly isn't where people go to smoke; the alley's dark and abandoned, bitter in the autumn chill. He doesn't have a jacket, but he's Russian, so he's hung out in colder temperatures than this in a t-shirt.

Ilya leans back against the wall, letting the rough bricks scrape at his back, and takes a shuddering breath.

It's not like him to duck out of a social event. Ilya loves being out with the team. He loves partying. Loves clubs, the louder the better; he likes music, dancing, alcohol. All the sensory victories of life. Ilya's always been sensory. He's always liked the feel of expensive fabrics, the taste of rich food – bitterly salty or cloyingly sweet, as long as it's intense – and as much sex as he can possibly get. It's like his nerve endings work on time-and-a-half compared to most people's. This is something Ilya's always considered a good trait. That he can get a lot out of life.

Right now, he's numb in a way he's not used to. These strange, clutching feelings in his chest have been happening with somewhat more frequency, recently, but it's usually nothing he can't cover up with a smoke or a drink or a blowjob – maybe the lack of all those things is why he suddenly feels exhausted, like he wants to curl up in his bed and sleep for a month. Ilya sucks in breaths of the cold autumn air, pretending it's a cigarette, rubbing the soft gold of his mother's necklace between his fingertips.

Then, the club door opens in front of him, a brief clatter of loud music spilling out into the alley. Ilya glances up, assuming he's about to be told off by an employee, ready to charm and bribe them; instead, stood awkwardly with his hands shoved into his pockets, is Shane.

“Oh,” he says. “Hey. I thought you might be out here.”

He takes the one step down into the gritty alley and lets the door swing shut behind him, but doesn't move closer. Ilya swallows a thick clot of air.

“You were looking for me? That's cute,” he says, trying to grin. Autopilot's easy to switch on when it comes to their banter. See Hollander, tease Hollander.

Shane rolls his eyes, of course. “Shut up.” His version of autopilot is telling Ilya to shut up. “Look, I'm kind of done, I want to get out of here. I just wanted to tell you before I left.”

He's not quite looking at Ilya; facing his way, but looking more at his collar, maybe, or his ear. The way Shane does when he sort of wants to avoid eye contact without looking like he's totally avoiding it. Ilya recognises the tricks easily by now, tracks Shane's dark pupils as they dance around.

"Okay. I know I am very good at being captain, but you do not actually have to ask my permission to leave," Ilya tells him.

"Fuck off. You're an alternate, not captain! And I wasn't asking your *permission*. I'm just telling you. You – you know, it's whatever, I figured you're probably staying to meet up with those girls with Marley or whatever. But I was just. Letting you know."

Ilya pushes himself off the wall, and takes a step closer to Shane in the dark, enclosed space of the alleyway. Shane tries to back up, but there's a brick wall behind him and nowhere to go.

"Ah, I see. You are not asking to leave, you're asking to get fucked," Ilya surmises. Even in just the dim light filtering in from a streetlamp behind one of the buildings, he can see the flush climbing Shane's cheeks.

"I'm not asking. Who says I even want to. If you want to, *you* can ask," Shane says, indignant.

The idea of him ever saying no to Ilya would be kind of delightful, if Ilya didn't remember Shane's ability to back out of their arrangement in a second when he panics – like after their first time, or even during playoffs. Shane seems to have no problem turning his desire off like a tap and ignoring Ilya when he wants to. Yes, it makes him pent-up and snappish and annoying, but he can do it. Ilya's the one who feels the absence like a gaping wound.

So instead of risking it, he says, "Hollander, please, can I fuck you tonight? I don't care about those girls. I want to fuck the man who made game-winning goal against the Stanley Cup champions."

It's worth pandering to see the starry-eyed look on Shane; he goes a little glassy and absent, his mouth dropping open a sliver like he wasn't expecting Ilya to actually say anything. Shane kind of likes when Ilya's mean to him sometimes, but above that, he *loves* a compliment. He's so desperate for approval, desperate to be told he's doing well, all the time. It makes him slutty as hell.

Shane doesn't resist, now, when Ilya steps even closer and pins him into the wall, hands biting the rough brick either side of Shane's head. Ilya grins, leans in; the absent feeling in his chest is covered up again, by the richness of Shane, the smell of his cologne and skin, the heat coming off his body, the way Ilya can hear his little breaths. If Ilya tastes him, it'll officially be every single one of his senses swallowed up by Shane.

That idea is too good to pass up. Ilya glances around the alleyway, but there's nobody here; it's blocked off from the main street by a dumpster. Dark enough for deniability. And, most importantly, Shane doesn't seem to give a shit, so Ilya doesn't, either.

He leans in and seals his mouth to Shane's.

Shane's so fucking warm, cosy and delicious among the biting cold air; Ilya burrows into him, putting his hands in Shane's hoodie, making a helpless noise into Shane's mouth. Shane puts his strong hands on Ilya, pulls him closer, kisses him back. ONE of his hands creeps down to Ilya's ass and squeezes, which feels too good, has Ilya kissing him with a ferocity they probably shouldn't let themselves have in public. He hadn't really been angling for anything beyond a few kisses and driving home together to fuck, but suddenly he thinks about getting on his knees for Shane in this dark alley, thinks how hot Shane would get with the fear of being caught, how fast it would make him come, how Ilya could go back into the club with Shane's jizz in his mouth and nobody would know.

He groans and bites at Shane's lip, kisses him sloppier. Shane rolls their hips together. Ilya gently coaxes Shane's jaw with one of his hands, tilting him this way and that, laving kisses onto his mouth.

There's a crash of metal.

"Shane?" a voice calls. "Dude, are you—"

Ilya wrenches himself away from Shane with a choked breath, stepping back out of Shane's grip just as the hand on his ass whips away. They're quick but not quick enough, left panting to the space in between, the club's fire-exit hanging open, a pool of music and flashing lights splashing out into the alley like the floodlights of a police raid. They're raw, exposed. Ilya's blood runs ice-cold and his ears ring.

And Hayden Pike's boring, gormless face stares back at them, jaw hanging loose on its hinge.

"Holy shit," says Pike. "What the fuck?"

Chapter End Notes

next time: tough conversations 🧑♂️

soooo that's probably all gonna be fine and going into shane pov next time is gonna be super chill and calm right???

anyway let me know if you enjoyed love you bye ([rb on tumblr](#))

Chapter 19: best case scenario, we'd die at the same time.

Chapter Notes

tw for panic attacks, and emotionally repressed men with a history of multiple sports related concussions attempting to understand their own relationships. i know which one of these i find scarier

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

The world collapses in on Shane like the rubble of a building in an earthquake. That's how he feels, abruptly – amidst a natural disaster, nothing he can do to stop it, run, resist. All he can do is hunker down and survive.

He's not aware of his knees going out and falling into a crouch on the gravelled ground of the dark, cold alleyway; he's not aware of covering his face with his hands except he notices the whole world goes dark. Dark is good, because he doesn't have to see what Hayden's face is doing, or Ilya's. He sucks in a couple of rapid, panicky breaths and they only make the cavernous pain in his chest worse, like the air isn't filling up his lungs, but he can't slow his breathing, either, or force himself to pause for a second – his breaths are running away without him as his head fills with fuzzy static and red blobs swim in his eyes from how hard he's pushing them with his hands.

He can't see anything, but he can hear. Hear Hayden's voice going, "What the fuck, what is going on – what the fuck did you do to him, Rozanov?"

And a thud, an impact, and Ilya's voice – more worried than angry, which doesn't make sense to the Shane burning with terror on the ground – going, "Get the fuck off, Pike, I was not fucking doing anything – Hollander, shit, are you okay?"

Shane's eyes sting and his lungs burn and he can't force air down his throat, the rapid panting breaths buzzing out of him like the flutter of wings barely touch the inside of his mouth, just little sips of air making him sick.

"You were clearly doing fucking something, are you – what were you even–"

Like Hayden can't even think the words in his head, it's so incomprehensible – Shane's only real friend on the team, and now he's *seen*, he knows, he knows the worst thing Shane's ever done, and he's going to hate him, and he can't even say the words, and he thinks Ilya was hurting him or something, and he's going to think Shane's disgusting when he knows Shane wanted it, and he's going to tell everyone, and Shane's going to have nothing left. His sternum aches with the pain of breathlessness, flames crawling up inside of him as he struggles to gasp in the air, pushes his palms into his eyes so hard the darkness swims.

Ilya says, "Pike, stop fucking yelling, you are making Hollander think you hate him."

A pause, and all Shane can feel is the ringing in his own ears, the sting of his face. Then Hayden's voice, gentler; "Hey, man, no, not like *that*. If you guys were – I mean, Shane, buddy, that's fine, I just don't get *what* the fuck is going on–"

"Hollander," Ilya's voice says, suddenly closer – softer – "*Solnyshko*, take deep breaths, okay? Is all okay, it's just Pike, he won't tell anyone."

A hand lands on the back of Shane's neck, tenderly stroking the feverish skin at the base of his hairline. Shane jolts like a wild animal, shoves it away, finally dragging himself out of his tight ball on the floor to stumble upwards and push himself back into the wall, not looking at anyone, trying to focus on the bite of bricks into his back and remember some bullshit one of his therapists has told him over the years – *five things you can see*, or is it five things you can hear? Shane can't remember the order you're supposed to do it in, so he can't do it right, and anyway, he can't really see anything, as his eyes blur over with wetness and his chest caves in.

"Sincerely what the *fuck*," Hayden says. "Shane, buddy, I'm just trying to figure out what's going on here. Are you okay?"

From the side of the blurry alleyway and the stinging soreness in his eyes and rough, hot pain of a fever in his throat as he struggles to breathe, Shane chokes out, "You can't tell anybody."

"I won't, dude, I swear, but I still don't even – you guys are – you're, like, *together*?"

He says it like a bad word; like he's expecting to be told to put a dollar in the swear jar. Something sharp kicks in Shane's chest, a skate blade to the sternum.

"No, no, *no*," Shane says, at the same time Ilya says, "Not exactly."

But Ilya's voice fades into the background as Shane clutches his fists over his chest, rubbing hard with his knuckles at the aching point where he can't breathe, and says frantically, words stumbling out, "We're not, not like that, it's just – I mean, it's casual, but nobody can know, Hayden, *promise* you won't tell anyone."

"Okay, dude," Hayden says. "No worries, I got you, I promise, don't freak out."

His voice has gone gentler, like he's speaking to a spooked animal, or one of his crying children. It's calm in theory, but Shane chances a tiny glance at Hayden's face and finds his expression stunned, mouth agape, brows furrowed – like his entire mind is blown. Shane can feel Ilya's presence a few feet behind his shoulder like a looming giant, but can't bring himself to look that way. He can't take seeing Ilya's expression – if he's panicked, or annoyed, or mad at Hayden, or mad at Shane, or maybe even worse if he's *worried* about Shane.

Ilya says, "You better fucking mean it, Pike, or I will ruin your life so bad you cannot fucking imagine it."

Shane can't take this. He's gonna lose it. Feels like he's gonna barf. Can't look at either of them, or catch his breath, or make the world stand upright. It's just Hayden, but all he can see

in his mind is the splash on every tabloid – *famous athlete caught in scandalous gay affair!* – or the his coach telling him *we can't have this kind of thing around the locker room, you're getting traded* and then *nobody wants to trade for you, we're putting you on waivers*, and, fuck, his parents, looking at him like they don't know him, saying, *we gave up our own lives for your dream of hockey*, and all the eyes on him, everywhere, the reporters in his face, the fans on social media throwing slurs at him or theorising about his sex life, the way nothing about him would just be about *hockey* –

“I have to go home now,” Shane chokes out, and fumbles towards the door, grabbing the cold metal handle of the fire escape door and rushing back into the building. He hears their voices calling after him, but they're swiftly drowned out by the thumping beat of music and crush of voices. The club is a sensory nightmare; loud and crowded, bumps of elbows and hot bodies pressing against his as he fights through it, the smell of alcohol and perfume and sweat a staggering cloud that makes his stomach turn. Shane latches onto the sight of the exit and grits his teeth until he makes it to the street outside.

He walks three blocks in a pounding rush of feet before he finds a street quiet enough that he can stand to wait for an Uber. It's cold but Shane barely feels it. The driver clearly thinks he's drunk when he turns up, tells Shane not to barf. Shane says he won't. They make the drive in silence, Shane trembling in the back seat.

When he's home he doesn't even make it to his couch before he's down. He sits in a ball on the floor and hyperventilates into his hands. He tries to run through contingency plans in his head, but the truth is, Shane's never made a plan for the idea that this – this *thing* with him and Rozanov – could get out. It always seemed so ludicrous to him that it was even happening in the first place. He was constantly on the nail edge of ending it, or thinking about ending it, or imagining each time that it might simply never happen again with no discussion. Planning for there being any future, even a bad one, where they were still hooking up felt like tempting fate.

It's only Hayden, he tries to remind himself. Hayden, his friend. Hayden, who promises he won't say anything. But still – that's someone who knows, outside of the two of them in whatever little bubble they've made together. The first cracks in this secret. Shane can't let the fracture spread.

“Fuck,” Shane mutters into the sweaty meat of his palms. “Fuck, *fuck*.”

He doesn't know how much has passed when he's jolted out of his spiral by a hard knock at his door.

Shane freezes, goes stiff. He pulls his phone out of his pocket with trembling hands when it starts to buzz, abruptly realising he has several notifications from both Hayden and Ilya, texts and a couple missed calls. Mostly from Ilya. Another call is coming in, the ID flashing on the screen; *Rozanov (Boston Raiders)*. As caller ID goes, it's impersonal and succinct. Everything their relationship should have stayed, but didn't.

A knock at his door again. Shane declines the call. Doesn't move. A harder knock and a muffled voice calling through, “Hollander, at least tell me you're fucking okay!”

It's the frantic tone that breaks through to Shane. He opens his text thread with Ilya and sends, *Okay but don't want to talk. Go home.*

Then he turns off his phone, puts it face down on the floor. It's silent outside. Ilya doesn't knock again, and Shane, eventually, drags himself off the floor, and throws up in the sink.

Sleep is near impossible; Shane grabs scant minutes and tosses and turns with panicky, upsetting dreams waking him in-between. The snippets he remembers of his dreams vary from stressful to traumatic – that Men's Health accidentally publishes a magazine cover of his face with *FAG* printed on top of it in huge bold letters, and Shane has to try and run to every store in Canada and buy up all the copies before anyone else sees. That someone follows him down a dark alley where he's sucking Ilya's dick and bashes Ilya's skull in with a hockey skate and his brains land on Shane's tongue. It's hard to fall back asleep after that one, and Shane gives up trying. He gets out of bed and goes to the bathroom and throws up a few mouthfuls of bile and then cleans his toilet for half an hour, scrubbing until his fingers are sore and the room smells like bleach.

When it's only half an hour until his alarm, Shane gives up pretending he might go back to sleep.

He starts the day as normal; protein shake, quick run. Back home, showers and gets dressed in fresh gym clothes, checks his emails for sponsorship stuff, today dodging one from *Men's Health* with a stab of nausea. Eats a bowl of unsweetened muesli with fruit and peanut butter, then another protein shake before he's due to leave for morning skate.

His phone stares at him from the counter as he chews his muesli, finding it as tasteless as gravel. It settles weird in his stomach. The phone screen is dark. Shane keeps thinking he can see Hayden's face reflected in it, looking at him and saying, *What the fuck?*

The lack of sleep falls in him like a physical ache. Shane prides himself on keeping his body in perfect condition through discipline and self-control; right now, no amount of exercise and meal plans are able to stop him feeling strung-out and jumpy, short of breath, sick with anxiety. He's been rolling it around in his head all night.

Shane picks up the phone, and opens Ilya's contact.

[Sent: 08:05]

Did you say anything else to Hayden after I left?

The response is near immediate. Shane knows Ilya doesn't wake up as early as he does, although on a practice day schedule he would have to be up and getting ready by now – still, he can't help but picture Ilya holding his phone, watching it. Waiting for a text from Shane? Maybe not. He hadn't sent anything else after Shane's message last night asking him to go away. Maybe he's been asleep all night, not thinking about anything. Dreaming that he'd gone

home with one of the hot girls from the club last night instead of with Shane into that stupid alley.

Shane pushes the dregs of his muesli aside and hunches over his phone. The bleak winter light streaming through the windows disappears as he works himself into a dark little universe, just him and the glowing, taunting screen of texts.

[from: Rozanov (Boston Raiders), 08:07]

*no, we both just were calling you after you left
well i told him a few more times not to say anything before i come home
he wont tell anyone, dont worry*

But Shane's worried.

He works his thumbnail between his teeth for a moment, leaning over his breakfast bar and watching his protein shake congeal in its bottle. His fingers dance over his phone, not even sure where to start. The sockets of his eyes hurt from the fractured, scant drops of sleep he'd caught the night before. The world feels dialed up to two-hundred, everything grating on his senses; lights too bright, sounds too loud, the tickle of his clothes on his skin making him nauseous.

[Sent: 08:12]

It was the literal best case fucking scenario that it was Hayden last night. If it was some random person with a camera or one of the other guys on the team we'd have been so completely fucked

[from: Rozanov (Boston Raiders), 08:13]

*but it wasnt, it was your boring friend
we will be more careful next time*

Shane swallows; his mouth tastes like the coppery tinge of blood.

[Sent: 08:13]

It's too dangerous

[from: Rozanov (Boston Raiders), 08:15]

what is

[Sent: 08:16]

All of this, everything. We're asking for some kind of scandal, and it could ruin both our lives

[from: Rozanov (Boston Raiders), 08:16]

*you are just panicking, hollander. is all gonna be okay
that we hook up sometimes is not a big deal, everyone has casual things like this*

[Sent: 08:18]

*If it's casual, that means we can stop whenever we want
I think we should
Stop, I mean*

[from: Rozanov (Boston Raiders), 08:18]

hollander

u are over reacting

pike already knows and he cannot find out twice, it does not help 2 end it now anyway

[Sent: 08:19]

I don't care about Hayden right now

It's too dangerous, full stop

We've been getting reckless and I don't want to ruin our careers over casual sex

I mean it, Rozanov. I'm calling it here. Please accept that and don't make it difficult. I don't want this to affect the team.

Shane's so, so fucking glad he's doing this over text. It might be cowardly and rude but there's no way he could get through this looking at Ilya's face.

He doesn't want to know what Ilya looks like right now. Shane can't decide if it's worse if he's hurt or not. Ilya has plenty of other options. And, like he just said, the thing between them was only ever casual; not something that should be painful to end, according to all the bad magazine articles he's been guiltily reading on his phone in bed recently called things like 'How To Have A Successful Friend With Benefits Without Making It Weird.' Ilya's certainly had no problem sleeping through half the city while Shane's been hanging onto him like a idiot. On the other hand, they have spent a lot of time together during all this, as teammates, and as – whatever else. Shane doesn't think Ilya's spent much actual time with anyone else he's been fucking, outside of sex. So maybe there's a little bleed between their friendship and the other stuff.

That would be natural, Shane thinks desperately. It's probably natural that he feels like his chest has been kicked in and he can't breathe as he looks down at his phone, waiting to see if Ilya texts anything else.

He waits a really long time. The typing bubble appears, disappears, appears again.

In the end, Ilya just replies: *ok*.

And then it's done.

They have practice, because of course they do. This is something Shane's never really considered, in all this time sleeping with Rozanov – that he might *stop* sleeping with Rozanov, and it might affect practice.

He can't let it mess with his game, so he still goes, of course. It'll probably be fine. He feels a little like he's going to throw up again, but he's only just done forcing down his muesli and shake so tells himself that's the reason for the nausea.

In the locker room, most of the guys are hungover from the club last night. It's an optional skate this morning – anyone not skating will be working out in the gym at the practice facility or getting prodded around in the treatment room.

When Shane gets into the locker room, Ilya's already there. He's sat in his locker, dressed in gym clothes rather than skates, gazing down at something on the floor with a steely expression that Shane can't place.

Panic roars in Shane's chest. He turns away and crams himself into his own cubby, grabbing a practice jersey. If Ilya's skipping the skate, Shane will take it – he doesn't think he can take being locked up in a gym with him, listening to the sound of Ilya grunting on a weight bench, or trading chirps and gossip with their teammates, when Shane's whole universe could come crashing down at any second.

Shane's almost done changing out when Hayden appears at his shoulder, tentative, awkward, not quite getting too close. Shane swallows.

"Hey, man," Hayden says. "You, uh, doing okay?" He glances around like he thinks he's in a fucking spy movie, and says, kind of too loud, "I was worried you had too much to drink last night, since you had to leave so fast."

Shane should maybe appreciate the cover, but he doesn't. He doubts anyone else even noticed him racing out of the club last night; he doesn't want any attention drawn to him at all.

"I'm fine," he grits out, eyes flicking up to Hayden's, just for a second. Hayden doesn't seem angry, at least. He doesn't look like he knows what the hell to say, but Shane doesn't, either. Shane swallows something gritty in his throat and says, "I'm going to get my stick. I'll see you on the ice."

Ilya's locker is near the entrance to the rink. Shane takes a wide lap of the locker room, not walking past him; he feels Ilya's eyes on him, and dodges past him, feeling a weird swirl of guilt in his stomach, as he retreats to the ice.

He tries to practice, but it doesn't exactly go well. Halfway through skate, Coach pulls him to the side and says, "Hollander, what the hell's going on? Are you sick? I told you idiots to stop coming to practice when you have the flu, you'll give it to the rest of the fucking team."

"I'm fine," says Shane. He's missed half his practice shots and stumbled on the ice a couple times. It's just that he feels numb all over and his hands are shaking and he can't stop the vague feeling that he might curl up into a ball and die at any moment. "I'll shake it off before tomorrow, I promise."

"You fucking better," Coach grumbles. He peers closer at Shane, squints. "You just hungover or something? You're supposed to be our squeaky clean option. I thought you didn't drink."

"I usually don't," Shane says, desperately grateful for the excuse. "The whole team went out last night, so I'm a bit hungover. It won't happen again."

“Yeah, yeah, it better not,” Coach grumbles. “Get your ass off the ice, Hollander – you look like you’re gonna throw up. Go down to physio and work on some stretches or something.”

So Shane does what he says and goes to the physio room and gets stretched out and the whole time all he can think is, what if Coach knows? What if someone tells him? What if he stops playing Shane on the first line because he doesn’t think Shane can handle it anymore? What if he trades Shane because he doesn’t want him and Ilya in a locker room together at all?

When they get out of practice later, Shane sees Ilya in the parking lot, loading his gym bag into his ugly sports car. Lately, they’d been driving to practice together a lot – Shane hadn’t really noticed it becoming the norm until now, when it feels strange to see Ilya’s car. Ilya would always goad Shane into driving, which Shane agreed to easily because Ilya drove like a fucking maniac and if Shane was behind the wheel he could make sure they obeyed basic traffic laws. Ilya liked to flirt shamelessly while Shane kept his hands at ten and two.

Shane has to walk right past him to get to his own car, and he knows Ilya’s already seen him. Shane’s hands are trembling, the white-cold rush of a fever spreading through his body, where you can’t quite get control of your nerves. His stomach lurches, but he grits himself, and walks up towards Ilya, hovering awkwardly at the side of Ilya’s car.

Even from a few feet away, he can smell Ilya’s shower gel from his post-practice shower; can see the dark circles under his eyes. He’s unfairly gorgeous, even with the sharp jut of a frown between his brows, his strong mouth curled into a miserable shape like he’s been sucking a lemon.

“Hey,” Shane says. “Uh, you doing okay?”

Ilya gives him a look. It’s the kind of look he gives opposing team’s captains on the ice; or terrible drivers in bad Boston traffic; for all their cuts and jabs, he’s never levelled a look like this at Shane before.

“Oh, I don’t know, what do you think?” Ilya says. Even Shane can pick up on the level of bitter sarcasm dripping off his words. “I think I had the best night of my life last night, probably. Slept like a baby. Did not worry about anything at all.”

“Look,” Shane mutters. “I’m sorry if I – made things awkward, or whatever. I know you’re worried about Hayden saying something about you, too. I shouldn’t have made it all about me.”

He really is sorry. Shane knows he has a tendency to isolate himself into his own little world, let his own anxieties spiral and throb and take on such huge vast conspiracy-sized shapes in his life that they eclipse what anyone else might be thinking. But he gets it, with Ilya. After all, they have mostly the same stuff to lose. Ilya’s family and his safety in Russia are another level that even Shane doesn’t really understand, but makes out as murky shapes under the water. He doesn’t want Ilya to have to deal with this stress, either. It’s part of why he knew they had to end it – the pressure on both of them.

But Ilya doesn’t seem particularly on-board with Shane’s assessment of his own interiority. He gives him an incredulous look, brows arching, throws his hands up in the air.

“Hollander,” Ilya says. His voice is rough, gravelled. Halfway between fury and begging. “I do not give two fucks about *Hayden*. I did not even know if you were okay after you left, I did not know if you were—”

He cuts himself off. Shane swallows, thickly, feeling a horrible uncomfortable heat rising in his chest, swelling his airways, making his eyes prickle with the cruel threat of tears. He steels himself to bare a part of his soul, and offer it out for Ilya to see.

“I had a panic attack. I have really bad ones sometimes. Not very often the last few years, but I used to, a lot. So I kind of just needed to get away from everything.”

This, he thinks, is a gift of honesty – something real and true he can tell Ilya, that nobody else knows about him, that he doesn’t usually talk about. Just because they’re not going to fuck anymore, doesn’t mean they can’t still be friends. Doesn’t mean they can’t talk about things – the kinds of things Shane only imagines being able to talk about with Ilya, right?

“Right,” Ilya says. “Last night, you panicked. And this morning?”

His tone isn’t gentle. Shane finds it hurts to look at Ilya any longer, and diverts his eyes down to the scuffed concrete.

“I mean, this morning, I was thinking more clearly,” he says, quietly. They’re all alone in the empty corner of the parking lot, but even having a conversation like this, vague and alluded as it is, out in the open feels fucking insane. Especially after last night. Shane rubs at his chest. “That’s why I texted you.”

“Right. Because you were thinking *clearly*,” Ilya scoffs. “So everything you texted me this morning, this was a good smart decision, you’re saying?”

Shane doesn’t understand what he means. It’s true. This morning he wasn’t having a panic attack anymore and was able to assess the situation logically. It’s not like it wasn’t *difficult*. But it was clear. He understood that he was being cruel to both of them if he let this drag on any longer.

“Rozanov—”

“Oh, *fuck* you,” Ilya spits, and gets in his car; slams the door so loud it makes Shane jump.

It’s been months since Shane took one of his anxiety pills, but two days later, before their next game, he works the little orange bottle open with shaky hands and pops one.

It’s the only way he’s gonna get through the game. He told Coach he was just a bit off at practice and is fine to play, but it feels like he’s being stabbed in the gut whenever he catches a glimpse of Ilya’s serious face – the furrowed knot of his brow beneath his gold-brown curls, the bow of his mouth as he snaps irritably at the team. Having to get on the ice and play on a

line with him feels impossible. To cue into his body movements, sink into that feeling of connection with him through their hockey. It feels like the hardest thing Shane's ever had to do. Maybe even worse than those first days after the first draft, when even lifting his head off his pillow was a Herculean task.

So he takes a pill to stop himself having a full panic attack in the middle of the ice, listens to Feller's half-hearted pre-game speech in the locker room – because neither Shane nor Ilya seem in any state to give one – and goes out there, and plays.

It's fine. They win 1-0. Marley scores their only goal, and Shane sees him give Ilya a strange, evaluating look as they're all piling off the ice. Ilya played fine, just like Shane did, but not *great*, like he always is; he didn't make his usual sharp passes or bludgeoning shots on goal. No wonder Marley's looking at him weird.

Shane doesn't really know what's up with Ilya, either. He's trying not to think about it.

He's supposed to have his monthly therapy session that weekend, but he skips it. The last thing Shane wants is to sit in a bright room and pretend to be fine right now.

They play again on Monday, a home game against Tampa. When they arrive outside the locker room for morning skate, Shane, distracted by watching his own sneakers against the linoleum and not making eye contact with anyone, finds himself bumping into Ilya in the doorway.

“Oh,” says Shane. “Sorry.”

Ilya looks at him, and then works his jaw, and doesn't say anything back as he steps back to let Shane through the door first.

Shane goes, awkwardly twining his fingers into the pockets of his hoodie as he glances over his shoulder for a flickering second while he walks past. Ilya's got dark circles under his eyes, and his curls are flattened limply to his head, like he's been running his hands through them, maybe. He looks – well, it's kind of hard to tell. There's not much expression on his face. He definitely doesn't look in a *good* mood, but he's also not full of that spitty anger that he often gets before games. His eyes are sort of dull, in a way Shane's not used to seeing.

He looks away quickly.

“Brother, you look like shit,” Marley remarks cheerfully, as Ilya slouches up to the locker beside him. Shane's glad someone else said it. He sets about changing out in his own locker,

and sidely watches as Ilya throws Marley a middle finger.

“Fuck you, Marley, I still look better than you,” Ilya says, but there’s none of his usual snappish heat in it. It sounds like he’s reading off a script.

“Jesus,” Marley says, rolling his eyes. He can clearly tell something’s up with Ilya – they all can, Shane’s pretty sure even the dumbest jock on concussion watch could clock his facial expression right now – but he doesn’t seem to think it’s *that* bad. “How hungover are you?”

Shane’s brow furrows as Ilya says, “You are asking me that like you didn’t pour half those shots.”

“Dude, I left at twelve and you were still going, not my fuckin’ fault.”

Feller, a little incredulously, asks, “Did you two go out last night? You know we have a fucking game, right?”

“Chill, man, we were just drinking at Roz’s place, no big deal.”

“You still shouldn’t be getting drunk before games,” Shane says. It’s autopilot, practically, he doesn’t even really realise he’s saying it until it’s out. He’s said that sort of thing a hundred times to the rest of the team, of course, and is always treated with the same semi-fond derision; they don’t listen to him, and there’s an air of *glad Hollander’s on our team but he’s also such a dork* that goes around. Shane doesn’t mind that.

Ilya’s eyes flick towards him, and then away. He says, to his locker, “Maybe you should try it, Hollander, you wouldn’t be so fucking tense all the time.”

Suddenly, Hayden is at Shane’s shoulder, chest puffed out like he’s making some grand announcement as he says, loudly; “Shane’s right! You guys should listen to him.”

After he’s said it, Hayden glances at Shane, and gives him a little grin. A thumbs up. Shane has no idea what to say; if this is Hayden’s way of saying *see, I’m so woke that I think even dudes who fuck dudes can be right about sports performance diets sometimes*, Shane supposes he appreciates it. It just also feels extremely uncomfortable.

“Pike, you talk to me about what I can do the night before games when you score any fucking goals,” Ilya snaps. “Until then, I think my routine is clearly fucking fine.”

Half the locker room can feel the chill; voices dip a bit from the usual morning chatter, a few guys glancing over their shoulders, eyebrows raised. Ilya’s always an asshole, but usually he’s a cocky, fun asshole. Right now he sounds like he’s trying to be cruel.

The unfortunate thing is that Shane thinks he looks really, really hot when he’s being cruel. Instead of springing to Hayden’s defence like he probably should have, Shane swallows and forces his eyeline away from the vein standing out in Ilya’s neck, the red flush of irritation leading from his chest to his neck. Ilya angry kind of looks like Ilya during excellent sex. Heated and wild and sharp.

Hayden snaps something back and then some of the other guys start making fun, and it's all business as usual when Hayden leans over Shane's shoulder while he's grabbing his deodorant and mumbles, low enough for only Shane to hear and desperately confused, "Seriously, *him?*"

A shivering cold flood runs through Shane's head like he's just been dunked in the ice bath. "Shut *up*," he hisses. His heartbeat races. His throat knots. Shane grabs his practice jersey and flees across the room.

Shane's sat on his couch with ESPN on mute, chewing his thumbnail and staring at nothing, when Hayden texts him a few days later.

[from: Hayden Pike (Boston Raiders), 17:05]

Hey man, you doing okay? I have a night off from the kids, can I bring over some drinks and hang out?

It doesn't really sound like a question – not *do you wanna do something*, where Shane could make an excuse, but a specific plan already forming.

Hayden's been nice, but clearly trying to give him some space – that, Shane thinks, or he's ruined everything and Hayden thinks he's a freak now. But that can't be it, if he's asking to hang out. Or maybe he wants to let Shane down gently, like an awkward friendship breakup. Whatever the reason, Shane supposes they need to have it out.

He grits his teeth and texts back, *sure*.

When Hayden turns up an hour later, he's got this ridiculous smile plastered on his face, eyes too wide, like he's forgotten how to do normal social interaction. It's funny enough that some of the tension drains out of Shane as he lets Hayden in.

"Good to see you, dude," Hayden says. "Uh, I bought some ginger ale, and some beer, didn't know what you'd feel like."

He goes right to Shane's kitchen. He's been here before, although usually when they hang out they meet at Hayden's. He's got more space, and Jackie's there, and there are the kids, even if there's always a nanny around in his house somewhere trying to corral them. Meeting up here feels almost – secretive. Not *secret*, but like Hayden's only come here because, unlike at his house, there's privacy.

Shane swallows, and looks at Hayden cracking a beer open over the sink.

"I'll have one," Shane decides, thinking *fuck it*. It's not like he can feel any worse.

If Hayden's surprised, he doesn't make a big deal of it. They go over to the couch and sit at opposite ends, and Shane leaves ESPN on mute, so they watch the scores of some basketball

game he doesn't care about for a bit before Hayden finally finishes his beer, opens a second, and works up the nerve to speak.

"Look, dude," Hayden says, turning to face Shane on the couch. The fake smile is gone now, replaced by an earnest, if awkward, look of resolve. "I know you don't wanna talk about it, but I just want you to know, I have your back if you're, like, gay or whatever."

"I'm not –" Shane pauses, because he really doesn't have anything to finish that sentence with. It's not something he's tried to speak about before. He grits out, "I don't really label it. I'm not, like, totally sure what I am."

He looks down into his beer; the green glass makes the liquid inside seem strange and otherworldly.

"But you like dudes, right?" Hayden asks, tactless as ever. "Or were you and Rozanov just, like – uh, I dunno, experimenting or something?"

Shane, despite how much he tries not to confront his own feelings about sleeping with a man, has never thought of what he and Ilya do as *experimenting*. It's not like they were testing a variable. If they were, they would have pretty decisive results by now. He likes it, Ilya likes it. There was never any sense that either of them might back out because they decided sleeping with a guy just *wasn't their thing*, all of a sudden. It was everything else that was the problem.

"Not exactly," he says. "But it was more just like – uh, relieving stress, or something, I guess."

Hayden blinks at him.

"Okay. but you were reliving stress by making out with a dude, so that's at least kind of gay, right? Said with love, of course, man."

At that, Shane can't help but laugh; a desperate, weird little laugh that comes out like a gasp would, forced from the throat.

"Yeah," he agrees, feeling dizzy, tired, out of his mind. "I guess kind of."

Shane never thinks that word. He keeps the possibility open in the back of his mind that he might, someday, meet a girl, and manage to shove this part of himself down deep enough that it no longer needs to be a source of terror. If that doesn't happen, Shane will deal with it after he retires. That's what he's always figured. If he plays well enough that everyone says he's married to his hockey, it won't matter if his personal life is kind of limp during his career. The rest of it, he can ignore.

Or, he thought he could. He supposes, thinking about it now, he's actually been doing a horrendous job of ignoring it.

Hayden asks, "How the hell long has this thing been going on with you and Rozanov, then? Last week wasn't like, the first time, was it?"

He sounds a little hopeful that Shane might say yes, and he's never going to do it again, scout's honour. Shane swallows.

"No, I mean. It's been really – casual. And we're not even seeing each other anymore, like, the other night was the *last* time. But we've sort of been doing it since, uh, my rookie season."

Shane's still not looking at him, but he can catch Hayden's expression out of the corner of his eye; his jaw goes slack, his beer bottle droops between his fingers.

"Jesus Christ, that's longer than I've even known you."

"No," Shane points out, because that's not technically true. "We met at that charity thing the year before I was drafted, remember?"

Of course, he'd met Ilya before even that. Their first time playing against each other, world juniors. Shane had found him in a freezing cold parking lot and lectured him about smoking. At the time, he'd had no way to explain to anyone why he'd felt so compelled, after watching Ilya spit and curse and grin and display the skills that put him ahead of everyone else on his team, Shane had been so compelled to go and meet him. He'd told himself he was scoping out the competition. Maybe that was true, but he'd noticed Ilya's curls, the pink bow of his lips around his cigarette.

Hayden rolls his eyes. "You get what I mean, man, fuck. Jesus, what about Rozanov and all those women?"

Something churns awfully in Shane's stomach. He takes another sip of gross beer.

"They're nothing to do with me. Like I said, it was casual, and now it's over."

"So you were hooking up with other people the whole time?" Hayden asks. "I mean, I feel like we never see *you* with anyone. Everyone on the team kind of thinks you're a virgin."

"God, I'm *not*. I – I mean, I don't, really, with other people. Not because of Rozanov. Just because it's way more dangerous to go hook up with guys I don't know – anyone could recognise me and sell the story or whatever."

Slowly, as if dancing over a minefield, Hayden enunciates out; "Right, guys. So you *don't* like women?"

When you phrase it like that – well.

Sure, Shane likes women. He likes his mom. He likes his cousin Tara, who's a figure skater and grew up practicing at the same rink as him. He likes his manager's intern Ally who always texts him funny things she sees about hockey on Twitter. But he doesn't go out to clubs and find women to fuck. He doesn't watch porn with women. He doesn't want to meet any of Jackie's friends with the half-naked Instagram photos, no matter how much she and Hayden hint.

There's a hysterical tint to his voice, like he's absurdly close to either crying or bursting out laughing, as Shane says, "Not really, no."

"Okay," Hayden says. "Okay, that's – hey, dude, that's chill, you know that's fine with me. And I get why you can't tell anyone, so don't stress, okay? Hey, what you need is a rebound from Rozanov! Fuck him and his women." He pauses, sips his beer. "Oh, dude, you know, I think Jackie's hairdresser is gay. I mean, he's a hairdresser, he's gotta be, right? Why don't I set you guys up!"

Shane doesn't know what Ilya has done to him, but he's not sure he's attracted to men who aren't future Hall of Fame hockey players. He can get off watching a random hot guy in porn, sure, but in real life, the thought of dating someone who doesn't understand his sport or love it as ferociously as him is just sort of depressing. Could he even respect someone who can't keep up with him?

Not that Shane's dating, or has been dating, or even wants to date. It's just – thinking of having anything else, outside of Ilya, makes him want to burst out laughing.

"That's seriously the last thing I need right now," Shane says, with an awkward spit of laughter. He stares down into the remainder his beer, suddenly kind of disgusted that he's drunk any of it. "I just want to focus on the game and the cup, this year. I can have a personal life when I retire."

He can see Hayden frowning from across the couch. He opens his mouth, but then he wavers for a moment and then says, "Okay, dude, whatever you want. Just, like, uh, I'm here for you, and shit."

ESPN's still playing in the background, now onto clips from a baseball team Shane's never heard of. The image is going a little blurry in front of his eyes, like it's swimming underwater.

"Hey," Shane says to the TV. "I, uh – I really appreciate, you know, that you're being cool about this? But can you promise not to tell anyone – I mean, like, not even Jackie, if you haven't yet? I know that sucks to ask, but, god. I just – literally nobody knows this about me, other than Rozanov, and I can't be the—" he swallows – "I can't be *that* player. Not on top of everything else."

Not on top of being the Asian one, the weird one, the too-intense one, the one who's been scouted since he was ten years old and had the media in his face half his life, all that attention – the one who dropped out of the draft, who's still dodging questions about the injury, the hospital – it's already so, so much. It crushes down on him all the time. Shane's the best player in his generation and he still has people who say he shouldn't be in the league because of everything he represents. He can't add being the first – well, whatever it would be called. It's something he can't even bring himself to imagine.

"Hey, dude, it's fine," Hayden says. "I get it, I swear. I won't tell anyone. Not even Jackie."

He doesn't get it, but Shane appreciates that he's trying. With one more shuddering breath, Shane gets up to dump out the rest of his beer. It's just making him sick.

Shane usually hates a break from hockey, but after the last couple weeks, he's been anticipating the Christmas vacation like a lifeline. It's not until he lands in Ottawa that he sees the problem.

The last time he was here, it was with Ilya.

He tries to go to his childhood bedroom and all he can think of is Ilya; fucking him in that bed, making fun of his posters, walking around the room naked looking at Shane's childhood trinkets.

Shane tells his mom the mattress in his room is hurting his shoulder and sleeps in the guest room the three nights he's there. Suddenly, he's never been happier that hockey doesn't get a real break for the holidays. His dad keeps giving him weird looks, like he can tell something's wrong, and Shane's running out of ways to avoid talking about it. But he can't. Because there's nothing to even talk about.

On Christmas day, Shane opens his phone to his text thread with Ilya. He stares at it for a really long time.

Shane's been having trouble breathing, the last couple weeks. He finds himself periodically squeezing back tears or the urge to hit something; always with this thick knot of pain in his chest, constricting his lungs. The feeling comes on hard and fast as he curls in the guest bed of his childhood home and stares at their texts. It would be easy to scroll up; see the texts before the last ones, which are silly, banter about their points so far this season, a flirty line from Ilya about his backhand.

As he's staring at it, a bubble pops up at the bottom of the screen.

Shane nearly jolts out of his skin. Ilya's texting him? Shane exits out of the thread immediately, feeling his heartrate kick, and then cradles his phone like a grenade that could go off at any second. He tries to count his breaths and pushes his sore face down into his pillow and watches, unblinking, the harsh blue light of the screen.

The bubble in the text preview keeps typing, typing, typing. But then it disappears. Shane waits a while longer, but no text comes.

Chapter End Notes

next time: sveta visits 🤔

🤔👉👉 so uhllh comment and [reblog?](#) we're all happy and nobody's mad at me yeah?

Chapter 20: i am drowning; there is no sign of land.

Chapter Notes

i've been living in fear that our ailing wife ao3 will hack this chapter up like a hairball if i try and post it now but let's all be brave and see if this sticks. if it crashes and deletes the chapter and all ur comments please promise to leave them a second time lmao

on the warnings side, this chapter includes a tough emotional state, some hockey-bro-typical misogyny, and ilya says a slur because he was raised badly and lashes out when he's sad

a note on language use in this fic: i've been trying to show the evolution of ilya's english over the course of the fic. in chapter one he was less than a year in the league and struggled a lot; by this point in time he's basically fluent. some of his grammar issues re-emerge when he's drunk, because he doesn't care enough to think about translating in his head. when he's with svetlana or his family, he's speaking in russian, so his vocab and speech cadence are written differently to express that he's speaking fluently in another language and we are just reading the gist of the exchange in english. i hope all this is clear from reading, but i wanted to make sure i expressed it somewhere too, as i think his language use is so interesting and important to him as a character!

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

Ilya takes a deep drag of the end of his cigarette, pinching it between two desperate fingers as he tries to get a few last puffs out before it burns down to the filter. It's freezing cold in the Boston January air, and he's currently the only one huddled out in the roped-off smoking area outside the club, kicking up the slush of ten inches of snow with his two-thousand dollar shoes.

It makes it hard not to feel a little pathetic, that he needs a fix this bad – that he'll feel nauseous and snappy without it, enough to pause his whole night and go outside to huddle, freezing and annoyed, by himself in the dark. He's been smoking more the last month than he has since he was seventeen, and it's irritating to realise how quickly the addiction can fold him back into its clutches. But it's not like he's going to quit.

Last year they'd made New Year's into a whole thing. Hired out a club, planned the night, special drinks, special playlist. Ilya's own secret special plan had been kissing Shane Hollander at midnight. It had been fun.

This year he'd not felt any motivation to do any of that. Svetlana's busy, back in Moscow to spend the holiday with her father; Ilya hasn't scored for three games; he has nobody to kiss at midnight. What's there to celebrate?

His first cigarette has burned out too fast. He stamps it down into the slush beneath his feet and lights a second. Smokes it fast, done in five minutes, and throws the end of it into the street before he retreats back into the blistering noise of the club.

Dark room, neon lights, crush of bodies, smell of sticky alcohol and strong perfume, thumping music you can't talk over. Ilya's felt at home in spaces like this since he was fourteen years old. He jostles past a couple guys doing poppers in the middle of the dancefloor and makes his way back to the private booth where Marley and Connors are counting down to take a shot of something neon green and vile.

The couple of other teammates they were out with have already peeled away, off chasing pussy on the dancefloor. Ilya slams his way into a seat and steals Connors' shot before he can take it, necking it back in one swallow and then blanching, sticking his tongue out.

"Is fucking gross," he grumbles. "What happened to vodka like a normal person?"

"That was mine, asshole," Connors says, shoving him. Ilya laughs, not much humour.

"Whole fucking tab is on my card, I own everything in your stomach."

Marley, always quick to diffuse an argument by largely not caring about one happening, says, "Well, in that case, let's get another fucking round!"

So, more shots. Ilya orders top-shelf vodka. They chase it with beer. More shots. Tequila, kind of fun because of the performance of it, licking the salt, sucking the lime. Ilya missed the countdown to midnight while he was smoking. Already January 1st, happy fucking new year, Novy God, *счастливого нового года*. More shots. Something neon blue and awful, chosen by Connors. Ilya's head is starting to swim. Marley's saying something over the deafening music and it's pissing him off but he doesn't know what it is.

Connors is suddenly up from the table, arm around a bottle-blond model type. Ilya remembers; Connors' girlfriend, must be going on a year, he talks about their kinda nasty sex life in the locker room. She's hot in a big-boobs-skinny kind of way, but looks like every other WAG he's ever met.

"Babe," she's saying, clinging to Conny's arm, "Come dance!"

"Sorry, bros, gotta keep the ball and chain happy," Connors says, winking at him and Marley before he disappears. Ilya makes a face at his back. Like it's a chore, to dance with your girlfriend. He should be on the fucking ground kissing her feet and licking her pussy for putting up with him and his ugly moustache. Ilya sort of wants to kill them both.

When he turns back to the table and grabs another shot from the littered mess of the table in front of them, Marley's scooped around the booth, sprawled up in Ilya's space, staring at him.

"You need to sit that close?" Ilya asks, grouchy, as he knocks the shot back. "Your cologne smells like shit."

“Yeah, and you look like shit,” Marley says. It’s their usual banter, whatever. Would be nothing, except for suddenly, he’s wobbling drunkenly forward to lean one lanky elbow on the table, and his voice has gone all serious as he says, “Listen, bro, we’re fuckin’ worried about you, straight up. Are you doing okay?”

A strange laugh works its way out of Ilya’s throat.

“Why the hell you worried about me?” he asks. He’s not exactly plastered, but he can feel the alcohol working its way into him; limbs heavy, moving slower than he likes them to, and an edge of hurt in his voice he doesn’t usually let slip in there. English is getting harder, those stupid prepositions slipping out of his fingers. “I am fine. See, I drink, club, dance, same fucking Rozanov like usual.”

He takes a heavy slurp of beer straight out of the pitcher they were served, not bothering for a glass.

Marley says, “I mean, like, not *really*, dude. Don’t get me wrong, I’m all here for a wild fuckin’ party once in a while, you know that. But, I dunno, man. You’re drinking like a fish but you don’t seem like you’re fuckin’ enjoying it, lately, y’know?”

“What this stupid English expression,” Ilya says. “Fish do not drink tequila.”

“You fucking know what I mean.” Marley picks up his own beer from the table, but doesn’t take a sip. He’s staring at Ilya from under the heavy set of his dark brows like he thinks Ilya might suddenly burst into flames or something. “You look like shit and your heart’s not on the ice, and you and Hollander are avoiding the hell out of each other. It’s been weeks, man. I can tell some shit’s going on.”

If there was one thing Ilya did not want tonight, it was to hear Shane Hollander’s name.

Nausea flips his stomach, and he hopes it’s from all the liquor, but he knows it isn’t. The club feels unbearably hot, between the scorching stage lights and cram of other human bodies working up a sweat in the room; Ilya can feel sweat prickling the back of his Jean Paul Gaultier. His tongue is heavy in his mouth, the edges of his vision blurry.

“We are still in playoff spot, my goals fine. What the fuck is problem s’posed to be?”

“Don’t be a moron, asshole. I’m not asking team shit, I’m asking as your friend. Like, bro, you know you can talk to me, right? About shit, if there’s shit going on?”

A painful breath works its way through Ilya’s teeth and into the back of his throat. He tilts the side of his blurry vision towards Marley for a second, taking in his stupid, earnest face.

Ilya and Cliff don’t have *that* kind of friendship. Everything they say to each other is a chirp or an insult. They’ve bonded over a similar bullheaded appreciation for life, a cockiness that annoys the rest of the team, and the ability to turn any room they enter into a party. They both snorted an eight ball at Feller’s wedding during Ilya’s rookie season and then Ilya jerked off in a bathroom stall at the venue while Marley was pissing in the urinal and they both heard each other, and they’ve been tight ever since. Marley’s a good hockey player, not just a wild

idiot, and knows how to chill, and doesn't judge Ilya for anything. It's not a friendship that's taken any effort or thought to maintain, but they don't *talk*.

Now, in the sweaty throng of the club on the first day of another miserable year of life, Ilya thinks about what would happen if he said to Cliff: my father is dying and I haven't seen him since the summer because he hates me and my brother hates me and their house is hell and I want Shane Hollander to suckle on my cock every second of the day and he doesn't want anything from me at all and I feel like I've been stabbed in the heart.

Instead, drunk and morose, he says, "First time I get dumped."

"Shit, dude," says Marley. "No wonder you're fucked up. I didn't even know you were seeing anyone serious, bro."

Serious is one word for it. "Does not matter, I'm not anymore."

"Hey, that sucks, dude. But listen, I get it, man, you got every right to be hurt. When Lola dumped me I thought I was gonna drive my Wrangler into the Charles."

Ilya says, "Do not do that," which he thinks is pretty good advice.

"It's all good, man, I'm over it now. You're gonna get over it too, y'hear me? But if you wanna get trashed as hell tonight to make yourself feel better, have fuckin' at it."

There are more shots on the table. People keep bringing them over because Ilya had flung enough money down at the start of the night to buy most of the top shelf. He grabs one at random, says, "Okay. *Будем здоровы*," and downs it.

"But, dude, if that's why you're pissed lately, what's up with Hollander?" Marley asks, just as Ilya's in the middle of taking the shot, and he coughs and the sharp bitter alcohol stings at his throat. "Shit, he didn't like, fuck your girlfriend or something, did he?"

Even the idea of that makes Ilya nearly ready to laugh his head off. He's sure Shane would prefer it if everyone thought that. Or maybe he wouldn't – for someone desperate not to be seen as *gay*, he seems equally terrified by anyone ever suggesting he sleeps with women. The thought of Shane with a woman, one of Ilya's flings – no matter how attracted Ilya is to both Shane and the women he fucks – makes him feel ill to even consider. Shane would hate it, not want to be there at all; the girl wouldn't have fun; Ilya couldn't stand to watch him with someone else, someone who can't give him what Ilya gives him, someone who can't understand the raw gorgeous potential of his needy core.

Ilya bares his teeth against the taste of the alcohol. "Nothing like that," he grits out. "Just Hollander does not understand emotions."

Too drunk to invent a good lie, it's the simplest way he can put it without losing his mind. Let Marley interpret it however he wants.

"He said some shit about your girl or something, then?" Marley guesses. Ilya ignores the question. As the music swells around them, Marley slaps his shoulder and says, "Well, just let

me know if I need to kick his ass or whatever. I know we're all a fuckin' team but you came first, right?"

Ilya appreciates the sentiment. As the world tilts around him in a blur of foggy drunkenness, he expresses this by handing Marley a beer.

A couple more tequila shots later, a couple of girls come up to their booth, leaning over the side of the table and blushing, knocking their shoulders together like they're hyping each other up.

"Um, hi," one of them says, a pretty brunette with big curves rammed into a skintight dress. "We're, like, huge fans. We were just wondering, um, could we get a selfie?"

Ilya's a little too drunk to function, but *this*, he could do blindfolded and handcuffed. He's done it a thousand times. He spreads his legs and leans back and grins, says, "Oh, I am big fan of yours as well. You both should sit here with us, have a drink. Anything you want – I get you champagne? The Goldschläger with the real gold in it?"

They giggle and glance at each other and then let themselves be led into the booth to sit between him and Marley, and Ilya gets them drinks, and they talk about coming to a Raiders game last month and how they brought a sign – *Marry Me 81!* – and does he remember it? Ilya says yes, even though hundreds of people bring signs like that and no, he doesn't remember any of them. But he knows how to talk to girls in clubs. Lavish with attention, agree with anything they say, compliment them, buy them a drink, spread your legs and touch their waist so they know you want to fuck. It's never been hard for him to spot when someone's attracted to him. The language of bodies is so much easier than either of the real languages he speaks.

By the time they've finished their drinks, the redheaded girl is halfway in Marley's lap, distracted from Ilya by the rules of proximity, and the brunette is pink-cheeked and staring at Ilya's mouth. She's gorgeous, plump lips and big curves and no shame. He doesn't remember if she introduced herself.

"I kind of want a cigarette," she tells him, putting her hand on his knee and leaning in to speak in his ear over the music. A universal body signal. She wants to get closer.

"Me too," he says, thankful for the excuse. "Come, smoking area is out there."

The room tilts a bit as Ilya stands. He's not black-out drunk but he's closer to it than he's been in a while. He makes his body do impossible things for a living, so it's not overly hard to get his arm to sling over the girl's shoulders and his legs to march out towards the smoking area, but he's heavy all over and more exhausted than he should be as they break back out into the cold winter air.

She's gotta be freezing, in just her little pink dress and staggeringly tall boots. She leans into him as they step outside and giggles, a grating noise that makes Ilya's temples throb, as he lights them both cigarettes. There's nobody else in the smoking area. It's behind the building, roped off from the street, a wooden canopy keeping the worst of the snow off, a couple of

heat lamps suspended from it to keep the patrons from freezing. Not exactly private, but quiet.

Ilya smokes half his cigarette and then throws the rest in the snow, takes her hand, and leads the girl further under the wooden canopy, out of sight from the door. He kisses her.

She gives one of those fake porn moans that girls think guys like, and puts her hands around his neck. She's tall, nearly as tall as Ilya in her heels, but her hands are so small and delicate. They feel unfamiliar on his skin. Her body's plush when he presses her gently back into the wall. Can't push too hard, can't be rough, can't make her feel uncomfortable, of course. Her mouth's warm, nice. Tastes like lipgloss, which isn't his favourite taste. He slides his hands over the soft curves of her body, squeezes one of her huge tits through her dress, and she makes another noise. He kneads her breast harder, plucks at the nipple, thinks about sucking on it, but his head is swimming too much to work up a coherent fantasy.

When they break apart her lipgloss is smudged. She bites her lip and looks up at him from under her lashes; it's a practiced expression. He can imagine her doing it in the mirror, wondering what it would look like from above, how best to turn a guy on. She does look sexy, he can just tell it's not natural, is all.

Her small, soft hands go to his jeans, and unbutton them, tug down the zipper. "I can't believe I'm hooking up with Ilya *Rozanov*," she giggles. "My roommate is going to kill me she'll be so jealous."

"Uh huh," Ilya says, distracted, cold, jittery from his half a cigarette, something unpleasant roiling in his stomach. Her perfume smells like bubblegum. He's sure he's smelled the exact scent on another girl before, maybe more than one. He's done all of this a hundred times before.

Except –

She gets on her knees on the ground and gives him that sultry look and pulls his jeans and underwear down enough to get him out, and his cock is completely fucking soft.

Ilya's sure lots of guys say this. But it honestly, truly has never happened to him before.

He hadn't even really noticed he wasn't getting hard while they made out. It's just what he does. Ilya can get hard watching hockey highlights on YouTube. He can get hard just smoking a cigarette in bed and thinking about how good his body feels. Getting rid of his inopportune boners is usually the problem; getting them in the first place never has been. When a gorgeous woman is on her knees in front of him, he should be rock hard and ready to bust.

Ilya stares down at his own cock with his jaw half open. The world's spinning around him, night sky hazy with city lights, and the miserable, soppy feeling in his stomach won't go away, and his mouth tastes like the bitter bad aftertaste of alcohol and lipgloss, and he wants a blowjob. But his dick doesn't seem to have received that memo. In fact, he sort of feels like it wants to retreat back inside his own body. His cock is a fucking spoiled little bitch that's too good for any hole which doesn't belong to Shane Hollander now, apparently. So it thinks

just because it's had the best it's ever gonna have, nothing else is good enough now? Is he just not allowed to fuck again for the rest of his life?

"Oh," the girl says, "Um. Are you gonna, like, get it up?"

It's perhaps the most mortifying thing she could have said. Ilya's too drunk to have a witty response ready to go in English, or even know what to do with himself. He lets go of the grip he had on her hair and scrabbles to pull his pants back up, shoving his cock back into his underwear, fumbling drunkenly with his zipper.

"Shit, I think I have too much to drink," he says, as a flood of embarrassed shame crunches his stomach. "We should just go back inside I think."

"Um." She's still down on her knees, not meeting his eyes, her face flushed beneath her cakey foundation. Ilya reaches down to help her stand up, and she lets him, but then pulls away from his hands. "Okay, yeah."

An absurd, overwhelming guilt rushes through Ilya. Suddenly he feels like he might cry. It's maybe just the cold air stinging his cheeks, the booze working out of his system. He's so miserable it hurts all over. He feels like shit. He's only ever been good for his body – his body earns his money, wins his medals, and fucks all his partners good. The sensory, the physical, all of that has always made sense to Ilya like a mothertongue. He's never felt at a disconnect with his own body before; it's never not done something he wanted.

Nearly two months ago, Ilya was in a different club alleyway wanting to get blown, before Hayden Pike walked out and ruined it. He'd had no problems getting it up then. Even being in the same room as Shane could sometimes do it – just smelling his cologne, or catching a glimpse of his dark soulful eyes through a crowd.

"Sorry," Ilya says to the girl, miserably. "I am not usually like this. I'm sick right now, maybe."

She wraps her goosepimpled arms around her waist and says, "No, whatever, I get it. You must get way hotter girls than me, usually. If I don't turn you on it's fine, like, you could have just said."

Before Ilya can say anything else, she's fleeing back inside, leaving him there, miserable, guilt-ridden, on the brink of tears in the icy slush.

"*Fuck*," Ilya curses, up to the dark sky. "Fuck, fuck this."

He opens his phone to call an Uber, deciding this whole fucking night is dead in the ground. He can't stand being here anymore; he doesn't even want to think of it as a holiday, doesn't want to know the date, doesn't want to remember a fucking second of tonight, or of the last month of his life maybe either. He wants to be home, in bed, unconscious. He wants it all to stop.

Of course, when he pulls his phone out, the screen's littered with notifications. *3 missed calls from: Papa.*

“Leave me the *fuck alone!*” Ilya shouts, and puts his head in his hands to muffle a scream in the clammy skin of his palms. Happy New Year.

When he gets home at 4am, drunk and miserable, all Ilya wants to do is go downstairs and knock on Hollander’s door. It’s so close. If Ilya had some power tools he could tunnel his way through the floor and land right on top of Shane’s bed, force him to let Ilya stay there. Instead, he goes into his own apartment and strips, leaves his Jean Paul Gaultier crumpled on the floor in a careless heap, gets naked into bed, and calls Sveta.

She answers after a few rings. It’s mid-day in Moscow; she’d been at a party with her family the night before, their usual social circle. He wonders if people there missed his father, wondered where he was, know that he’s sick or not. Wonders if any of them asked about Ilya, remarked on his career, the successful athlete overseas, talked about it like they think he’s doing well or should be happy.

Sveta’s voice is tired and croaky when she answers; he can tell she’s still in bed just from the way she sounds. She’s wry as she says, in Russian, “Pretty late for you for a booty call, isn’t it? I’m not having phone sex right now, so you can forget it if that’s why you’re calling.”

They never have phone sex, so they both know she’s teasing. Their sex is purely a bodies thing – he enjoys it when it happens, when she’s close to him, but when they’re not in the same room, all interest they have in sex with each other is lost. When touch is removed, all that’s left is the earnest well of platonic affection they share.

Ilya’s head is stuffy and his eyes are wet and something cracks in his throat as he says, “Sveta.”

There’s a rustle on her end, and then her voice comes closer to the phone, louder, immediately worried; “Ilyusha? What’s wrong, why do you sound like boiled ass?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “Everything is awful. My heart hurts.”

“Why? Do I need to kill someone?” she asks. “I know men who would do that for me, just say the word.”

Ilya just groans, rolls over and buries his face in his pillow. He hates these pillows. Shane’s been all over them; holding them in his arms for something to twist while Ilya blows him, shoving them under his hips to make his ass the perfect place to sink into, throwing them at Ilya’s head when he’s annoying after sex. The covers are washed and changed, but it’s still the same pillows, the same bed, the same fucking building.

He’s thinking about burning down his whole apartment when Sveta’s voice says, tinny over the phone connection, “You need me, just say. I can come. Book me a plane ticket, I will fly out tomorrow. I have nothing back in New York until next week anyway.”

Ilya knows it's selfish to ask her to drop everything just to comfort him, but right now, he needs something – he needs *someone*. She's his someone. She's the only person he thinks he could ever talk to about any of this, actually, and even if he can't talk about it, Ilya knows he needs to at least pretend he might – the hot misery is eating him alive.

So he says, "Okay. I'll book you first class."

Sveta's not the mothering sort, but when she arrives at his apartment the next afternoon, she takes one look at his mournful hungover face and immediately pulls him into a hug.

Ilya sinks into her, rasping a shuddery breath against her neck. Her skin's chilled from the winter air outside, but she's all bundled up in a big fur coat and warm in the places that count; it's sort of like being hugged by a skinny, perfumed bear. The sensation might be funny if he didn't feel so horrible.

"Oh, Ilyusha," she mutters, as she pushes him away a minute later to get herself sorted, take off her shoes and coat and wheel her suitcase into the hall. "What's the matter with you?"

Ilya thinks about saying *everything*, but can't quite bring himself to sound so immediately pathetic.

"I'm still hungover," he complains. It's not horrendous; Ilya usually bounces back fast from hangovers, he has enough alcohol tolerance and he takes care of his body, but he's still headachey and nauseous and mostly just fucking exhausted today. He grumbles, "Can we just take a fucking nap?"

"Bring me all the way here just to be lazy," Sveta says, rolling her eyes, but she hugs him again, so he knows she doesn't mean it. "You go nap. I want to take a fucking shower first, you know how long I've been on a plane?"

When she emerges from Ilya's bathroom a while later in her sweatpants and one of his shirts, Ilya feels awfully fond of her in a way that's more painful than pleasant. Sveta collapses onto the bed with him, taking up more space than seems possible for her small body, and pushes him around until he's resting his head on her chest.

Ilya feels like bursting into tears. He knows Sveta hates when people expect her to be *nurturing*, but there's something to the depth of friendship that means even just being around each other is a form of nurturing. The fact that she's letting him invade her precious personal space – that she's come all this way at all just because he's miserable – is important enough. He loves her. He knows she loves him, in their own special secret way.

He thinks about how Shane always took care of him in tiny ways without seeming to realise it. Checking if he'd eaten. Not letting him smoke. Asking if he was warm enough when they were at Shane's with the air-con set to freezing. Rubbing his muscles after they fucked like

touching him was a reward. He was often rude and defensive about it when Ilya mentioned his mother-henning, but always genuine. It all comes natural to Shane, like he was designed to take care of people. He can be so awkward and yet he's so sweet, thoughtful, caring somewhere deep in his soul. Ilya's not known anyone like him before.

It guts him. Shane hasn't said anything like that to him in weeks. Nearly two months now, actually, that he's been treating Ilya like a pariah, avoiding his eyes, going stricken and panicky when anyone mentions Ilya's name around him. Two months since he held Ilya like this. Every time Ilya opens their text thread and hopelessly stares at it, the date on those last messages stretches further away.

He's been laying miserably with his head on Svetlana for a long stretch of minutes when his phone starts buzzing in his pocket. Ilya looks down at it, and a pained noise works out of his throat.

"My fucking father keeps calling me," he tells her, watching the screen ring. He doesn't have a contact photo for his father saved – never wanted to look at his face that much – so he just stares at the Cyrillic letters of his name on the stark black background, feeling vaguely nauseous.

"Want me to answer and tell him to fuck off?" Sveta asks. Ilya shakes his head, and declines the call.

He turns his phone face-down on the bed, then leans his head back down onto her chest, smushing his cheek into her boobs. It's one of the great miracles of life, Ilya thinks, that despite the difference in biology, Sveta and Shane have very similar sized tits. They both fit in the palm of his hand perfectly. He tries to work up an interest in reaching under Sveta's shirt and proving that now, but it doesn't come.

"No point, he doesn't know why he's calling anyway. I spoke to him earlier today already, but he won't remember that. Whenever I answer he is making less and less sense."

The shackles that tie him to caring about this are one of Ilya's most hated parts of himself. There should be nothing keeping him in contact with the miserable man who made his mother's life hell, his childhood hell. It's not like there are secret fond memories hiding in the crevices of Ilya's mind. There was never a time when it was *different*. It's not that his father was once fun and loving and later became the way he is now – he's never smiled or laughed with him, he's never said a word to Ilya that wasn't derisive or critical.

But he is the man who taught Ilya to shave, a month after his mother died in their downstairs bathroom. Stood in the upstairs bathroom and unfolded the straight razor; showed him how to hold the bare blade to his throat and not get cut. His instruction was stern, but precise. He watched Ilya turn from a boy to a man; rarely impressed with the results, but always aware.

They have the same eyes. When Ilya looks at himself in the mirror, he mostly sees his mother's dark-honey curls and large scattered moles and bowed lips. But his father's eyes stare back at him out of her likeness. Ilya only makes eye contact with his own reflection when he feels like hating himself.

Now, the man with his eyes is dying, and Ilya couldn't stand to spend more than two weeks with him this summer. He doesn't know if he has anything he should be grateful to his father for, but he knows that a better son would have sucked it up and stayed. Helped. Cared. Instead, Ilya fled to Canada, into the arms of a man who doesn't even want him anymore, and now he has nothing to show for it but an aching heart and a list of missed calls in his phone that never stops growing.

He tells Sveta, "I should have stayed longer in the summer. I didn't know he was going to get so sick so fast."

"It was torturing you to be there," she tells him. She's not exactly being soft – her voice is brusque, insistent – but her soft thumb strokes at the lobe of his ear as he burrows into her chest. "It was no benefit to anyone, there's nothing you could have done to help. You're not a fucking nurse."

"I'm his son," Ilya says. The words gape and gnaw at him, maybe the first time he's ever said it like that. His father is his father: he is part and parcel of Ilya's life, a shape of it, a foundational stitch in his tapestry. Ilya's never thought of it the other way. That in his father's life, Ilya is part of what has shaped it, influenced his choices, changed who he is as a man. Certainly not for the better, but somehow, sometimes, at least.

"You'll have a few days off before the All-Star game in February," Sveta points out. "Why don't you go back and visit him then? Just for a few days; it won't hurt as much as trying to stay the whole fucking summer and watch that shit go down."

He thinks about the prospect, and anticipates it miserably. Nobody will be happier for it; Alexei will yell, Polina will be even further transparent and retreated. His father will have less idea what's going on and be angrier about it. According to the updates Ilya receives from the carers he pays for, they have now turned the downstairs study into a bedroom, because his father can no longer make the stairs. He has a wheelchair to leave the house in if someone wants to take him for some fresh air to the park. They are giving him soft foods because he sometimes struggles to swallow.

From a distance, it's hard to imagine. It sounds like a television show version of a dying father, not something Ilya could ever experience in real life. If he goes home in February, he will have to see it, reckon with it, think about what comes next.

"Yes," he says. "I will go."

The thing about life is that a lot of it is pretty miserable. Ilya doesn't see any alternative to just sucking it up and dealing with whatever comes.

Sveta tugs on his earlobe, the way his mother used to when he was a child and slept in her lap. Ilya briefly tries to fit his hand over her other breast and she pushes it away with a rude dismissal, so he's saved having to pretend he actually wants to fuck. He knows she must be itching – she hates being touched like this, cuddled and held, it makes her talk about getting her tubes tied – but she's putting up with it, because Ilya's a mess. He thinks about how she's the only person in the world he would let see him like this, and something wet works its way

out of the corner of his eyes. He hopes she doesn't notice he's staining her t-shirt and make him move.

Then, she says, "Okay, out with it. I know your father sucks but you didn't call me here to mourn. Tell me the rest. What's really going on?"

Something finally, abruptly breaks in Ilya, and he gasps snottily into her shirt, the red sting in his eyes spilling over frantically. She startles a little, not expecting this level; Ilya can get pathetic around her, but he rarely *cries*. Not since he was a kid. Right now, he can't seem to help it. He tries to turn over and hide his face but she clutches painfully at the roots of his hair and won't let him squirm away.

Achingly, wetly, Ilya says, "I think I have done something really stupid."

"You're not doping, are you?" she asks. "Or you got someone pregnant? Is she married? Will it ruin your career?"

"Fuck off," Ilya groans, as he fists his hands in her shirt and puts his face in the cold wet patch of his own tears. "No. No, it's worse."

She waits. Tugs his hair harder when he stops talking and just gasps wetly against her for a minute.

Ilya says, "I think I've fallen in love."

Finally, because he's weak, he tells her everything. Not using names – but he tells her, miserably guilty, knowing he's breaking Shane's precious trust because she will surely guess who he means, that he has been sleeping with a guy on his team. That he's in so far and way too deep. That someone found out, and isn't the type to leak it, but nevertheless holds Ilya's fate in his hands now; that Ilya knows if it comes out they could end up on waivers and get kicked from the league, that Ilya could be sent back to Russia on the heels of a public gay scandal.

She says, "Fucking hell, Ilya."

And he says, "But the worst part is that he is too scared, so he ended things between us. I feel like I'm going to die."

"*Fuck* him, then," Sveta spits out. She wraps both arms around his neck harshly, drawing him in tight, smothering him in her chest. She's never gentle in her affection but that's how he knows she means it. "He is a coward, you don't need him. Fuck anyone who doesn't want you, Ilyusha. I will kill him. I will bury him in the woods. Fuck him if he doesn't see what I see in you."

"That's the problem," Ilya sniffles. "I think he does see it. I think he sees everything about me."

Svetlana leaves after three days, the morning the Raiders are due to leave for their next roadie, making him promise to call her every night – though she warns she won't pick up if she has *something better to do*. The dismissal has little effect given the gentle way she cups his chin before she leaves, looking searchingly in his eyes like she's going to see his heartbreak reflected like a physical mark.

It only occurs to Ilya after she leaves that this might be the first time she's ever come to stay with him without them hooking up at least once.

On the plane, Ilya plays cards with Marley and Dubek, forcing himself to be normal. He's hyper-aware of the fact that Shane is sat all the way at the other side of the plane by himself, headphones in his ears, staring out the window. When Ilya goes to the bathroom he sees that Shane has a movie playing, some superhero flick, but he doesn't look like he's actually watching it. He goes tense as Ilya passes by him, and doesn't look up.

Normally, Shane sits with Pike and talks about boring things like Pike's children's kindergarten report cards, or whatever. Today Pike's sat several seats away, fucking around on his iPad.

Ilya swallows his own bile, goes to the bathroom, pisses, avoids his own eyes in the mirror. When he exits the cramped plane bathroom, he looks again at Shane and Pike sat clear across the plane from each other.

With no real forethought or planning, instead of going back to his card game, Ilya detours and slides into the seat across from Pike. Pike's watching some kind of church shit on his iPad, one of those very American priests who aren't called priests and don't even wear cool outfits holding a sermon, which makes Ilya respect him even less. He yanks Pike's headphones out and mutters, low enough not to be heard over the sound of Feller's fuckass Top 40 playlist, "If you are avoiding him because you are uncomfortable I will force your own stick down your throat until you vomit."

"Jesus," Pike hisses back. "Fuck *off*, Rozanov. I'm not. He wanted to sit by himself because he's stressed. We've fucking talked and we're cool, not that it's any of your business."

"It is very much *my business*, unless you are so dumb you have forgot already."

"That's not what he told me," Pike mutters. "Sounds like he doesn't want shit to do with you right now."

An awful taste rises in Ilya's mouth. He reaches over and slams a few random buttons on the screen of Pike's iPad, just to fuck with him in some kind of way, before he stands up and goes back to his card game. Fine. It's none of his fucking business after all.

After they land and the bus takes them to the hotel, the team's travel manager goes to check them all in and get room keys while they fight over where to go for lunch. Marley's really insistently arguing for Thai while everyone else wants to get pasta because it's the only way most of them know how to carbo-load. Ilya's considering taking a hard stance on a third

option just to annoy everyone when the travel manager comes back over with a bundle of keycards and a clipboard.

“Okay,” he says, “Come grab your keys. We’ve got Connors and Pike in 401, Marleau and Cadyn in 403, Dubek and Feller in 405, Hollander and Rozanov in 407–”

Dread floods Ilya’s whole body. While the manager keeps rattling off names, Ilya glances over his shoulder to find Shane, lingering at the back of the huddled team. His face is pale and pained, like he’s been thrown deep into freezing water. His eyes flicker to Ilya, just for a second – then, awfully, he winces, and looks away.

Ilya thinks about playoffs last year. Shane’s infuriating sex ban hadn’t really felt like a break in their arrangement, because of how bad they clearly both still wanted each other. Ilya had spent every moment he wasn’t thinking about hockey thinking about ways to lure Shane’s cock out of his pants; it had almost been like a game. He’d felt like he won when he was staring at Shane from across a shared hotel room, breathing the stale recycled air and jerking off beneath beige hotel sheets while Shane looked at him, open-mouthed and desperate and so wound-up that he still wouldn’t let himself touch.

This hotel could be that hotel; they all look the same, but nothing else is. Ilya grabs the nearest arm in a vice-grip and squeezes.

“Caddy,” Ilya identifies, once Cadyn’s face swims into his addled view. “I need to switch rooms, give me your key.”

He holds out his hand insistently, not waiting for an answer. Cadyn glances over his shoulder, dumb look on his face.

“Uh,” he says. “Don’t you and Hollander usually room together?”

Not *usually*, although definitely more than just sometimes. Hollander sometimes shares with Pike. It’s not really up to them where they get assigned, although sometimes people make requests; the travel manager clearly knows Shane and Ilya are close, co-alternates this season, the same age, the same line, and often puts them together. It would make sense, if it weren’t for everything about them.

“The fuck does that matter?” Ilya bites. “I am telling you to switch with me, fucking switch with me. Unless you are desperate to listen to Marley’s fucking snoring all night why are you crying about it?”

“Jesus, calm down,” Cadyn mumbles. He puts his keycard into Ilya’s hand, with a weird look, and takes the other one. “Is everything okay, man? Did Hollander steal your lucky panties or what?”

“Maybe I stole his,” Ilya snaps. “Maybe I fucked his sister. Did I ask you to write magazine article about my personal life, or did I ask you to give me a key?”

“You’re such an asshole,” Cadyn says, walking off, which is good, because Ilya feels liable to say worse stuff if given the chance. He cheats out a sharp breath and looks down at his new

keycard, trying to let it ground him. He'll be staring across the beds at Marley mouth-breathing and scratching his balls all night, now. There has not been a universe before in which Ilya would prefer that to looking at Shane Hollander's pretty, slack face in a dark private room where Ilya could do anything at all to him, but it's a weird world these days.

By the time they get to dinner, half the team is glancing at Shane and Ilya out of their side-eyes. Cadyn's a fucking gossip, Ilya forgot. Great. Now everyone thinks they're fighting.

Ilya supposes it's not a lie. He stabs a piece of pasta with his fork like it killed his mother; it makes an unpleasant noise as the cutlery scrapes along the dish beneath it. Down the table, he can just about see Shane wince at the sound.

They're both playing fine. It's maybe not the generational run they'd been for the first few weeks of the season, but they're in a comfortable playoff spot by the end of January, provided they don't suddenly start tanking. Ilya's still scoring goals. Minnesota's first line centre has overtaken both him and Shane in the scoring race for the season, for the first time in their careers, but second is still pretty fucking good.

The problem is after either of them score a goal. Even if there's a spike of that elated feeling of victory, Ilya can't bring himself to celebrate on the ice; can't bring himself to wrap his arms around Shane and jostle him about and kiss his helmet like he used to. Even if the rest of the team's huddling around Hollander after a clinching final-period goal, Ilya drifts to the edges and grabs his water bottle off the bench instead.

Everyone can tell they're fucked up, but nobody's saying anything. At least, not until the final week of January, just before the All-Star break, three days before the date stamped on Ilya's plane ticket back to Moscow to spend a long weekend watching his father forget who he is. They lost a long irritating game the day before, and they're all worn out at practice that morning; Ilya's snappy enough to be on the brink of making enemies as he works on the stationary bike, soaking in the stench of sweat and rubber in the gym, ignoring the bland pop music playing on the television above their heads.

Then, suddenly, a small gaggle of idiotic hockey players are looming in front of him. Ilya can tell it's a co-ordinated effort, which is quite an achievement for a group of guys as stupid as most of this team. Connors and Dubek seem to be leading the charge, and it's Connors who leans over and says, "So, uh, not to be like 'this is an intervention', but we kind of need to have an intervention."

Ilya keeps cycling. He's not been at it long enough to be sweating yet, but the repetitive motion helps him fight off the sense that he's about to hear some absolute bullshit.

"I don't know this word in English," he tells them. "Say whatever stupid shit you're saying and leave."

Cadyn says, “Look, man, we’re here for you, y’know? But this thing with you and Hollander, like, whatever you did to him? It’s affecting the whole team, which kinda sucks.”

Behind him, Dubek is nodding. “Yeah, bro, can you just say sorry and fix it?”

Ilya’s feet slow on the pedals. He looks at each of the guys stood there, brow furrowing, something knotty churning in his stomach.

“Oh,” he says, “So you are just assuming it’s my fault?”

Heikky and Dub exchange a look, half-guilty; Connors just shrugs. “Hey, man, we love you,” he says. “But you are kind of the asshole in this scenario. I mean, if it’s Hollander’s fault, whatever, too, but like, you guys need to sort it out.”

“We are playing fucking fine,” Ilya says. His legs have stopped moving. He pulls his feet out of the clips and steps off the bike, not liking that he’s sat while the rest of them are standing. “Team is fine, on track for playoffs, me and Hollander still score most goals on the fucking team, what the *fuck* do you actually think is a problem?”

“I mean,” Dubek says, kinda awkward, “You’re playing fine, but not, like, *great*, dude.”

“Not like usual,” Connors adds. “Neither of you. We’re fuckin’ worried.”

“You are fucking assholes, actually,” Ilya says. “Maybe if any of you ever scores as many goals as me you get to have this conversation.”

“It’s not just about goals, Roz. You won’t even look at each other in practice. You don’t seem psyched when we win. We’re trying to, like, make you feel better.”

“Well you are doing it really badly,” Ilya snaps. He snatches up his water bottle and towel, a spitty little heat building inside him like the sparks of a just-catching fire. “For the record, you should say all this to Hollander. Is not my fucking fault.”

More glances exchanged. They don’t believe him, probably. Ilya’s the one who did coke and broke a sliding door at Dubek’s house two years ago – Shane does jigsaws and drinks ginger ale and calls his parents after every game. Who’s more likely to be the one fucking up? Ilya’s always the cause of the problems, the source of the fire, the ignition point.

“Well, I dunno, dude, just tell us if we can help, I guess?” Cadyn says.

“You can help by leave me the fuck alone when I am trying to work out,” Ilya suggests. “I lost my motivation now. Have to go eat donuts instead.”

He leaves them standing there like idiots and stalks across the room, throwing the door open. The entire building suddenly feels claustrophobic, oppressive. Like it could fall down on him at any moment. Everywhere he looks in the gym there’s a team logo, that fucking cannon that he’s always loved because it reminds him of his cock. Right now, this team is his biggest fucking problem. A reminder of everything he can’t have, and why he can’t have it.

The door to the gym is glass, bordered by huge windows either side. Ilya's three steps into the hallway before he realises Shane Hollander is stood right in front of him, staring in.

So he saw that whole little scene. Ilya's stomach clutches, lurches like he might throw up. He doesn't, so instead he slams his palm into the wall so hard it hurts, and then turns, heads down the hallway at a brutal pace. He doesn't want to be followed. Of course, Hollander's pristine sponsored sneakers squeak their way down the hall after him, because he's an awful hypocrite who will tell Ilya to let go and then refuse to do it himself. Because Shane's always *right*, because he knows what's *best*, because Ilya can't be fucking trusted.

It's not until Ilya's turned into a quiet, empty hallway between the sports science room and a storage closet, that he finally wheels around; a sharp, impulsive concession he knows he'll regret. Hollander immediately freezes, wobbling on his feet with the effort it takes to stop so abruptly, to not let himself get a millimeter closer to Ilya than he has to. Of course.

"If I ask what you want, will you stop following me like a stupid puppy?" Ilya asks. His voice sounds tired even to him, low in the isolated passage of their labyrinthian practice facility, a place he suddenly feels the two of them will never escape.

"What was that about?" Hollander asks quietly, his ever-obvious anxiety clawing through his voice. His eyes flicker nervously back behind them, towards the left-behind door of the gym. "Did they, like, say something? About us?"

The burning, bubbling anger inside Ilya reaches an incandescent fury. He throws his hands up and laughs, a giddy kind of laugh, like something has unspooled in his mind.

"What the fuck do you care?" he asks Hollander. "They all think I am a horrible monster who eats babies and you are fucking Vasilisa, whatever. Don't worry, your secret is safe."

"Don't say it like that," Hollander says; his voice is low, quiet, almost intimate in a way that mocks the space – the cavernous hallway around them, the oppressive black-and-yellow walls of the team, the reason they have any of this at all. "It's not just *mine*."

Of course it's not. Ilya can't let anyone find out either; he maybe has even more to lose, out of the two of them. And yet – if he could – in a world where that might ever be possible – Ilya thinks keeping it inside might feel even worse than hiding it. For Hollander, it seems the opposite. Like it's not the circumstances that scare him so much, but something inside himself first of all.

Shane hates the thing between them viscerally, with disgust. And Ilya thinks he loves it. Or at least he did.

"Sure, not just yours. Not *fucking* mine, either, anymore," Ilya spits. "You can forget about all of it, okay? Like none of it ever happened. I am not going to wait around now for you to change your mind."

Hollander blinks at him, those big brown eyes that have undone Ilya so many times. Ilya likes the fact that Hollander is a big tough man, an athlete, can take a punch and a split lip and skate on a broken bone, could toss Ilya around and usually just chooses not to – he likes all

that, but a part of him also views Hollander as so *soft*. He's golden and warm and there's something gentle in the way he looks at Ilya, and his tentative anxiety. When things are good, it makes Ilya feel held, babied, nestled in the safe warm glow of Shane where nothing can hurt him. When things are bad it makes him want to rip Shane's throat out and let him bleed.

"I wasn't asking you to wait around," Hollander says. "I said kind of exactly the opposite."

Ilya knows. That's the problem.

Awfully, he suddenly feels he may be about to cry. Sobbing on Sveta unlocked all the terrifyingly vulnerable parts that Ilya usually smothers; now that they're out, he can't stamp it down. He's twelve years old on that bathroom floor crying on the phone to the ambulance. Everything bad that's ever happened in his life lives in his chest and stabs him with knives from the inside out. He feels like nobody has ever fucking wanted to stay for him the way he's wanted to stay for them.

"You know what—" Ilya says, but horribly, his voice cracks. He really can't tell if he's about to cry or scream. Hollander is broad and cosy in his sweats two meters away and Ilya wants to fall into his body and sob on his chest and suck on his skin and fall asleep in the pit of his neck where he smells like spicy soap. And he wants to kill him. He can't remember what he was about to say, so he just says, "I hate you so much."

Then he turns and walks away.

"Please, just—" Shane's voice carries after him, but Ilya ignores him, and Shane doesn't chase him this time.

The team's supposed to watch tape for another hour but Ilya can't fucking stand it. He goes to the locker room and grabs his bag and leaves without saying a word to anyone. Coach can deal; Ilya thinks he's more than earned a sick day. He hits his way through the swinging doors. Hurts his knuckles on the stainless steel. Swears under his breath, kicks the bottom of the door too, a sharp sting of pain that he's earned.

He stamps out to his car. His phone's ringing in his pocket, third time today. The sound grates his nerves so sharp he shouts, "*Fuck!*" He's satisfied by the sharp cut of his voice in the open air. It feels violent. Nasty. He thinks about throwing his phone on the ground. Wrenches it out of his pocket instead and looks at the name. *Alexei*.

Finally, someone Ilya can yell vile things at and feel no fucking guilt or remorse. What are siblings for?

He answers the phone, switching back to Russian like it's a loaded bullet in the gun of his mouth.

"What the *fuck* do you want, you fucking faggot?" he asks.

And Alexei says, "Papa is dead."

Chapter End Notes

next time: shane's doorstep 📖

i'm sorry that i keep making things worse but please understand it's really fun for me personally

please comment and let me know ur thoughts, all ur comments mean so much to me even if i'm not able to reply to everyone !! u can also rb this on tumblr [here](#) 💚💚

Chapter 21: these thoughts are somebody I don't wanna to be.

Chapter Notes

chapter title from gay thoughts by the growlers, which i highly recommend as a shane hollander anthem

sorry again that i can't reply to everyone's comments but pls know i love and read every single one of them and really appreciate it !!!!!

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

I hate you so much. I hate you so much. I hate you so much.

The words have been swirling around Shane's head all day. He barely paid attention to the game review at practice, players swimming on the screen in front of him on the screen like koi fish in a pond. Couldn't pay attention to a thing Coach was saying.

I hate you. I hate you *so much*; not even an isolated statement, but something requiring a qualifier of intensity. Emphasised.

Ilya's never said anything like that to him before. Shane suspected, of course, that Ilya's feelings for him weren't that deep – certainly weren't romantic, certainly stayed in the realm of casual. But Ilya *hates* him? He doesn't understand why Ilya would hate him. Just because Shane ended their arrangement for casual sex? It's eating up at Shane too, that it's over, but he's the one who'll be suffering more for it.

Ilya can sleep with anyone he wants. And he does. Just a few days ago Marley was joking about the stone-cold hottie Ilya left a club with on New Year's. Last January Shane celebrated the New Year getting blown in a bathroom by Ilya; this year, he was alone in his apartment with a lukewarm ginger ale, watching the Canada Live broadcast on his laptop in bed as the countdown ticked over. And Ilya was out having sex with someone else. Why does he get to hate Shane?

It hurts, guts him where he stands, keeps him distracted and upset throughout practice, his mind spiralling, his teeth worrying into his lip. Shane's had plenty of shit hurled at him in his life. The first person who called him a slur to his face was an adult when he was six years old, the parent of someone he was beating at Timbits; kids were vile to him in the locker rooms, their parents often nearly as bad. The press have said insane things about him, especially after his missed draft. Shane's used to that, all of it, can push it down and shove it away. But Ilya *hates* him. The embarrassing sting of tears works its way into his eyes.

It's not until he's home from practice that afternoon that the anger starts simmering.

Because it's not just that Ilya said that. It's that he didn't fucking explain himself. He never does; he acts like he doesn't want anyone to know what he's thinking, and then goes around all upset when they haven't magically read his mind anyway. What makes it okay for Ilya to say shit like that and then walk out of a mandatory practice? Why is he the exception to all the rules?

He can be pissed at Shane, hate him, not explain himself, and still sleep with other people at clubs. Shane has to sit in his misery and anxiety and he can't even get his dick sucked.

Shane stew in his apartment for a bit. The problem with his apartment is that everything in it reminds him of Ilya.

Because Shane was a fucking idiot, and he let Ilya work his way into every part of his life. Ilya's fucked him on this couch. On the kitchen floor. Eaten take-out and shit talked other teams with him at the kitchen island. Watched game tape on his big TV. Kissed Shane long and hard in his shower while Shane worked Ilya's wet curls out of his eyes. The bedroom's a separate warzone of memories that he can't begin to touch.

Shane paces around the apartment, working himself up into a fit of frustration that has nowhere to go except balled up in his chest, getting bigger and worse with each tense breath.

"Fuck him," he mutters, putting a single glass in the dishwasher just for something to do. He jams the door shut with too much force. "*Fuck* him," as he strips the sheets off his bed for the washer hard enough to make a sound as they whip through the air.

Why did Ilya leave practice early? Maybe he's with someone. A woman. Maybe that friend of his, Svetlana, who he sometimes sleeps with, who he got caught with in the locker room before Shane joined the team. Shane wonders who Ilya's slept with more times, him or Svetlana. He knew her first. He's never fucked Shane in the locker room; obviously, Shane's never let him.

Suddenly, Shane's phone buzzes from its abandoned spot on the counter. He startles a little, ripped out his spiralling anger too fast; Shane snatches the phone up, in dire need to distraction. It's Connors.

"Hello?" Shane answers, kind of dubious. He gets along fine with Connors, often watching games with him on off days, but they don't exactly talk.

He can hear the background noise before anything else; chatter and music, a party. Connors is whisper-shouting as he says down the line, "Dude, bro, I'm calling everyone, you gotta get down here!"

"I'm not really in the mood for a club," Shane says.

"Boo, when are you ever? Look, man, you're not gonna believe this, it's sick as hell. The cast of *X Squad* are here!"

That does get Shane's eyebrows to quirk, a brief surprise. "Woah, really?" he asks.

It's not like Shane hasn't met famous people, but hockey-famous is very different from blockbuster-move famous. They fly so much for games that Shane has watched a lot of the kinds of movies that are available on planes, which means he's seen every X Squad flick made so far, as well as a bunch of the knockoffs. It's not like he's a die-hard fan, but it's pretty cool to imagine meeting someone he's seen on a screen.

Connors says, "Get your ass down here, man, I'm telling you!"

Shane thinks: Fuck it.

"Okay," Shane says, feeling rallied by the deep irritation, frustration, longing anger bundled up inside him. "Text me the address."

He hangs up and puts his head in his hands for a moment and puffs out three short, sharp breaths. It feels a bit like he's losing his mind. Then he gets changed into dark jeans and a hoodie, calls an Uber, and jogs down to the frigid street outside.

The club Connors texted him the name of is pretty far across the city. Shane stewes in the back of the Uber, thinking about Rozanov's fucking nerve, wondering what the hell he's thinking, missing his dick. It's a horrible maelstrom of unreconcilable emotions that leave him bouncing his leg, picking at his nails, watching the streets outside pass with blurry irritation.

Then, something catches his eye. Out of nowhere Shane leans forward to the Uber driver and says, "Wait, uh, can you let me out here? I'll walk the rest."

The guy shrugs, and pulls over. Shane thanks him, pays, zips up his coat, and tumbles out onto the street outside.

In front of him, two men are making out against a lamp post.

Shane swallows. He doesn't want to stare at them like some creep, but he can't quite catch his breath, either. They're out in public. Just – where anyone could see. People *are* seeing. The street is nightlife-busy, the fronts of several bars lit-up and filled with milling patrons spilling in and out.

Walking past him on the street: two women, holding hands. One of them has a shaved head.

The bar in front of them has a huge rainbow flag hanging out of the upstairs window.

It takes two seconds for Shane to regret getting out here. He doesn't know why he did it. He just – can't stop thinking about Ilya, off somewhere with some woman, getting laid endlessly, like it doesn't matter at all to him that he can't have Shane. Shane knows he should go find a girl to hook up with, too. He should go to the party with Connors and try and meet a girl who likes hockey enough to go home with him and prove to himself once and for all that he's not broken.

A small gaggle of guys in weather-inappropriate clothing are laughing and sharing a cigarette outside the bar with the rainbow flag. Shane swallows, ducks into the collar of his jacket, walks past them and down the street away from the bar.

Except now he's following the men who'd been making out before; now holding hands and laughing drunkenly as they stumble off down the street together. There's another bar with rainbows on the sign a few storefronts down the block. Panic catches in Shane's chest. He can't stop staring at the sign. The people coming in and out of the doors, like it's fucking easy.

"What the fuck am I doing?" Shane whispers to himself, clenching his hands in the pockets of his hoodie, twisting up the fabric in a white-knuckle grip. He forces himself to put his head down, puff deep breaths of the cold air, and walk around the block. He's going to leave. He's going to get a cab and go to the party with Connors.

He circles the block, and ends up where he started.

The vague sound of pop music he doesn't like is filtering through the air. Cigarette smoke hanging in the street. He's outside a gay bar. Shane makes himself think it, the word, maybe for the first real time. This is a bar for people who are gay.

Shane doesn't know what he is. He doesn't want to be anything at all, except normal. But he watches the strong, muscled form of a man with great biceps disappearing through the doors, and before he can help it, Shane finds that he's following.

Nobody asks for his ID at the door. He pushes his hair out of his face in a way he thinks makes him look older and a little different to the posters of him outside the rink across the city. The insanity of it is making his pulse race. He feels hot and sweaty all over as he diverts inside, but nobody seems to be looking at him. Boston has plenty of hockey fans, but it's not a *hockey city* the way his hometown was, the way he knows cities like Montreal are; in Canada, he'd never be able to step foot in a place like this, but on a random night, in America, in a dark club where everyone's already fucked up, wearing generic dark clothes, where nobody's breathed a word about hockey? Is it really impossible?

I hate you so much.

Ilya hates him. Maybe Shane hates himself. Maybe he wants to ruin his whole life.

The bar is dark, a little claustrophobic with bodies, smells like sweet alcohol and bodies under hot lights, and way too fucking loud. But it certainly seems like nobody's looking at him, at least. He dodges the dancefloor and edges his way around the dark corners of the room until he reaches the bar. There's a draped rainbow flag on the wall. It makes him feel kind of queasy when he looks at it.

Shane knows that gay culture exists, obviously; it's just that he's always tried to stay as far away from it as possible. He's never felt drawn to it, rather terrified and put off. The loud celebrations of difference – it makes him want to run and hide. Shane's whole life, being different has been the worst thing about him. He's always been trying to make it go away.

A shirtless, sweaty man covered in glitter flings himself over the bar beside Shane, tapping the bartop with frantic insistence. He's wiggling to the loud music, probably on something based on how he can't stop moving. He calls out to the bartender, "Baby, get your cute little butt over here and give me another vodka soda!"

“I think you’ve had more than enough, honey,” the bartender says, but pours the drink anyway. The bartender’s tall, broad, wearing a tank so tight that he may as well also be shirtless. His thick arm muscles remind Shane’s of an athlete’s, but his well-trimmed stubble and half-shaved haircut are nothing like he’s ever seen a guy sport in a locker room. He’s very –

Hot, thinks Shane, after a long, dumbfounded moment. The word he’s looking for is hot.

Once he’s poured the vodka soda for the glittery guy, the bartender turns to Shane, raises an eyebrow. “What can I get you, stud?” he asks.

Shane’s mouth is dry. “Um,” he says. “Do you have ginger ale?”

It gets a laugh, like an actual belly-loud laugh, as if he’s joking. Right. Of course. This isn’t a ginger ale sort of place. Sticky remnants of alcohol are spilled all over the bar, people are screeching with no inhibition, a few paces away Shane can see a couple of guys shoving a weird little plastic bottle up their noses.

God, he shouldn’t be here. Anyone could have a camera, could see how awkwardly he’s standing and know he doesn’t belong here, could recognise him from his Dunkin ad or a Rolex billboard on the street even if they don’t know hockey.

To the bartender he says, “A vodka soda is fine, actually.”

He only says it because he just heard that other guy order it, so he knows it can’t be wrong. He’s not going to drink it, but he can’t back out of ordering something now, when the bartender’s looking at him with intense eyes, glancing him up and down. Shane can smell the weird fake-smoke smell of a fog machine whirring on the dancefloor, and sweat, and sticky alcohol. It’s dark everywhere except where flashing rainbow lights spin around the room. He can’t hear himself think. His breaths are coming faster, terrified, fucking horrified that he’s here.

He over-tips for his drink and takes it to the darkest corner of the bar, his back to a wall, forcing himself to take a deep breath. He’ll leave in a minute, he thinks. He’ll just get his breath under control, and then he’ll leave.

A group of shirtless men are all dancing together nearby. Sweaty chests grinding together, like it’s easy to get their bodies that close to each other, like it’s not terrifying to them. Shane turns his head away from them, and instead, he’s met by the sight of another couple of guys. They’re fully dressed this time, but they’re – kissing. Open-mouthed, dirty kisses, with their hands all over each other. One of them’s pushing the other into the wall.

Shane tries to remember if he’s ever seen two men kiss in public before tonight. If he’s ever seen it outside of porn, or that one movie he watched about cowboys that he never got to the end of.

His heartrate ratchets. Something sick and scared roars in his chest, the kind of deep, primal fear you feel when you’re a child. Shane’s been to regular bars with his teammates so many times; he’s seen men and women making out, of course, hundreds of times. It’s never

interested him. But right now, he finds it hard to look away from the two men against the wall, tracking the dim details of their faces and hands as the roaming club lights move over them, washing them in a haze of passionate red.

Hayden had asked him, *so you don't like women?* Shane had been honest. He hasn't liked a woman that way before, not in his whole life. It's been something he's had an eternal pin in, to think about later. To hope it resolves itself on its own. Sleeping with Ilya is one thing; he enjoys what they do together, in a bodies way. The other thing, he hasn't let himself think about.

The other thing is: the rainbow flag thing. The pride parade thing. The two-men-holding-hands thing.

The word *gay*.

"You look lonely over here," a voice says over Shane's shoulder, loud to be heard over the music. He jolts, spills a lick of his untouched vodka soda over his hands.

"Uh," Shane says. "Not really. I'm just – hanging out."

The man who's come up to him is a little taller than Shane, dark skinned and broad chested. He looks strong. He's stood close enough for Shane to smell his cologne.

Friendly as anything, the guy says, "I hear that. You here with anyone?"

"No," Shane says woodenly, because it doesn't occur to him to lie. "Just, um, just by myself."

"Well, in that case, you could definitely use some company," the man says. He's smiling; a nice smile, pearly teeth. None of them look fake. "I'm Brandon."

Shane swallows. "I'm Jack."

He doesn't know why that's the name that pops into his head, but he's certainly not going to give out his real one. Shane usually hates lying, but mostly because it rarely occurs to him to do it. He has a habit of being too literal, too honest. *This* is the only thing that's ever come naturally to him to lie about.

Thankfully it seems he was convincing. Brandon says, "Nice to meet you, Jack. I'd offer to buy you a drink, but you look like you haven't touched that one."

Shane glances down at his glass, wincing. He'd like to get rid of it, but there's no surfaces nearby, so he keeps limply holding it in one fist.

"I'm not much of a drinker," he admits.

"Mm, me neither. Who wants the hangover? You want something else? Poppers?"

Shane only has the world's vaguest understanding of what *poppers* are, but that's enough to know he categorically does not want to be given them in a random club.

“No,” he says.

“Suit yourself. Hey, has anyone told you lately how hot you are?”

One of Brandon’s hands lands on the collar of Shane’s shirt. His mouth goes dry. He thinks what a terrible, horrible idea this is, and a warm finger drags beneath the fabric and teases the skin of his neck.

“Not really,” he says, which is true, because other than random hockey fans in the Instagram DMs he doesn’t check, nobody really talks to Shane like that except Ilya. And Ilya hates him now.

“Well, that’s a damn shame. I could do it some more, if you like.”

Shane shouldn’t say yes. He should say no, and get out of here, because Shane isn’t gay. Or, he doesn’t think he’s gay. Or, he doesn’t want to think about it at all.

The thing is that being *gay* is different than just sleeping with a man. Getting fucked is just behaviour. People can justify odd behaviour in all sorts of ways. Being gay is a rigid box, an identity, a whole difference.

Is he into men, or just Ilya? And can he blame it on Ilya at all, when Shane had that one boy at that party before he and Rozanov even met – the one terrified handjob he still thinks about. If it’s not Ilya, is it hockey? Is it just that he loves his sport so much he can’t possibly be into anything that doesn’t connect to it? How many words can he put on his own desires to make excuses for the thing he’s always talked around?

He says to Brandon, “Okay.”

The bathroom stalls in the bar are gross and clearly used more for fucking than their originally intended purpose, but Shane lets himself be pushed into the wall of one anyway, and lets Brandon get to his knees on the sticky tile. Brandon puts a condom on him. He seems kind of drunk, but not so much he doesn’t know what he’s doing. He’s clearly had some fucking practice. Shane closes his eyes and puts his head back against the wall, scrabbling for purchase as a hot mouth descends on him.

He thinks he’s been possessed. This isn’t him. He’s not in a fucking gay bar right now, he’s not letting a stranger blow him in a public bathroom. He’s not trying to blow up his whole life.

Sometimes Shane just doesn’t want to be in control. Everyone expects him to keep such a tight leash on himself, all the time. He has to be perfect. He has to do everything right. What if he doesn’t want to? What if he just wants to be able to let go for fucking once and not have it be the end of his world? Can’t he be like everyone else? Like Ilya?

The blowjob is really good. Shane gasps and squeezes Brandon's head and comes pretty fast.

"You're really hot, dude," Brandon tells him, a messy grin up from the floor. Shane, panting in post-orgasm haze, abruptly has no idea what to do next. Ilya usually tells him what to do at this point, bosses him around if he needs to reciprocate, or just takes whatever he needs, knowing Shane's limits of when it's too much.

But Brandon stands up off the floor and then just sort of stands there. Shane, not wanting to be rude, holds out his hand, which is apparently as much signal as Brandon needs to get his cock out and let Shane jerk him off. It flatters Shane a bit that Brandon doesn't take long either.

A couple other people enter the bathroom outside their locked stall, laughing, as Shane cleans his sticky hand off with toilet paper. He can hear them giggling, over Brandon's panted breaths, and they run the tap for a bit and then leave again. Shane doesn't know why they came in, but he swallows and blinks away the wetness at the corners of his eyes and turns around in the cramped bathroom stall.

"Can I ask you something?" he says.

"Sure." Brandon's fishing through his pocket for something and not looking Shane's way anymore. "So long as it's not my number, because I'm only in town for the weekend."

"No, not that," Shane says, only thinking afterwards that it's probably rude he was already planning to never see Brandon again. "No, I just, uh. Are you – gay?"

Brandon pauses in rooting through his jeans, and looks up at Shane with an inscrutable expression. Then, he lets out a loud, staggering laugh, leaning back against the stall wall and grinning with his nice real teeth.

"No, baby, I just swallow stranger cock on a Tuesday night for shits and giggles. Yes, I'm gay. Was it not obvious?"

Shane doesn't know if it's obvious or not. Sure, the blowjob was pretty telling. On the other hand, the only other gay-ish person Shane knows is Ilya, and Ilya has slept with like, a thousand women, so giving blowjobs clearly isn't an exclusionary factor. They're in a gay bar, and Brandon has a rainbow on his grey t-shirt. He keeps calling Shane little pet-names. Maybe it's obvious, or maybe he'd be horribly stereotyping if he thought that.

"Sorry, dumb question," he says, zipping up his pants, feeling the dizziness of his stupid fucking decisions starting to catch up with him. "Um, thank you for the blowjob? Enjoy the rest of your night."

Shane leaves the club, walks three blocks away until there are no rainbow flags in sight, orders an Uber, and goes home.

At home, he mechanically gets undressed. Showers, scrubbing himself thoroughly of the smells of sex-sweat, club-toilet and alcohol. Does a bit of yoga. Texts Connors to apologise for ditching out on the other party, even though he's sure they're all trashed enough that Shane wasn't missed.

Then Shane lays in bed, and stares at his ceiling. It's a normal ceiling. White paint. A dark fan suspended in the middle.

Above that ceiling is Ilya Rozanov's bedroom. Shane wonders if Ilya's there right now, or out somewhere; maybe with a woman. Maybe with Svetlana. Maybe he's fucking someone. Maybe he's even fucking someone in his own bedroom, right above Shane's head.

Shane's mouth is dry and tacky. He looks at his ceiling, and says to himself, out-loud, "I'm gay."

The words seem so pathetic said aloud like that. Small, scant things, so strange that they make him feel like his chest is going to explode. Two syllables shouldn't feel like a death sentence.

He tries again. "I'm gay. I only like men. I'm gay. I like cock. I do not want to fuck a woman. I seriously think I would throw up if I tried to fuck a woman. Because I'm gay."

His voice is shaking by the end. A hot, frantic spill of tears gathers in the corners of his eyes.

"I'm gay," he says, snottily, wiping his face with his hand like a kid.

He's been trying not to say the word for twenty-one years. It's a petrifying diagnosis.

Shane finds that he suddenly, desperately, wants to say the word to someone else. But the only person he'd want to say it to is Ilya. And Ilya hates him.

Shane sleeps better than he expects to. The next morning, his alarm wakes him out of a deep, dark sleep, a cavernous unconsciousness that he rises to the top of slowly. When he blinks his eyes open and looks at his bare ceiling, he thinks it: that's my ceiling, and I am gay. The ceiling is the same as it was yesterday, but he is not.

He gets out of bed, showers, brushes his teeth. In the mirror with toothpaste suds licked across his mouth, he peers closely at his own face, inspecting it for any kind of difference for the day before. He's not sure what he's expecting to see. He supposes if he was gay yesterday, he'd have still looked the same; saying the word won't have changed anything. He pushes his hair off his forehead, wondering about getting a haircut. The guy at the bar last night seemed to like his hair pushed back.

While he drinks his protein shake at his kitchen counter and stretches for his morning run, Shane takes out his phone and googles *what to do when you realise you're gay*.

He looks for some kind of itemised bullet-point list. Definitive instructions.

A few articles talk about coming out, which Shane has no desire to do, and tips for your first time having anal sex, which Shane is long past needing. One blog tells him *step one: accept yourself*. Which makes it sound a lot fucking easier than it has been. *Step two: develop and express your individuality*. That might be even harder. Shane's been trained his whole life to view standing out as a death sentence and a personal affront. He's a hockey player. Everything is for the team. He dresses in whatever clothes his athletic sponsors give him, takes whatever ad deals his mom suggests, plays wherever his team tells him to go. Shane doesn't want to be an individual. He wants to be a human hockey stick in a rack of other hockey sticks. *Step three: stay true to your authentic self, even if others pressure you to conform*. He skips that one entirely.

The article says, *step four: use good judgement if you choose to come out*. That's an easy one. Shane's never going to tell a fucking soul, which he thinks is pretty good judgement.

His fingers itch, wanting to text Ilya. He wonders if Ilya identifies any particular way. They've never talked about it – Shane has, in fact, desperately avoided the topic. Ilya's never mentioned it either, and doesn't seem the type to put much thought into that sort of thing, but on the other hand he's so much more confident than Shane, so much more experienced. Maybe he knows all sorts of things about being gay that he's not told Shane.

The word for liking both is *bisexual*; a girl with emo hair at a party he went to in Juniors told him that when that Katy Perry song about kissing girls came out. So maybe that's what Ilya is. Or maybe there's a different word in Russian? Or maybe Ilya doesn't care about any of those words, and just likes sticking his dick wherever it'll go.

He's about to do it, seriously about to finally type something into their bereft message thread and see if Ilya still hates him today, too much to talk to him – when Shane's phone rings.

It's Assistant Coach Greggs.

Shane's not even sure he knew he had Greggs' number in his phone. They've certainly never spoken on it before. Usually one of the player management team calls Shane if there's anything he needs to know. His mind abruptly jumps, and he closes the tabs with the gay articles on his phone as fast as he can, like somehow he'll accidentally share his screen over a fucking call, before he answers.

"Uh, hi?" Shane says, tucking his phone up to his ear. "Coach Greggs?"

"Hey, Hollander, you got a sec?" Gregg's tinny voice says down the line. Shane puts his empty protein shake in the sink.

"Yeah, sure. Um, is everything okay? Practice is still on, right?"

It's the last day of practice before the break. Shane's tapped to lead a team at the All-Star game this year, which is flattering but also a little frustrating because they play far less hockey at those events than he'd prefer. His parents are flying down to Philly to watch the skills competition, which will be fun. But he wants this last day of practice in too, and visions that the practice rink has exploded in the middle of the night or something suddenly flood his head. Shane's heartrate ticks up.

"Yeah, yeah, that's all fine. Listen, I'm just giving you a head's up that Rozanov's gonna be off for a little while. Maybe a week. We're hoping he won't miss the first game back after the All-Star break, but it's up in the air right now."

An odd feeling runs through Shane; like when you plunge into an ice-bath all at once, and everything seems to stop for a moment. Heart, lungs. Just that brief, frozen pause.

"Is he okay? I mean, what's going on?" Shane stammers out. He presses the phone closer to his ear, fingers slipping on the case.

"He'll be fine, but his dad died yesterday morning, so he's gotta go arrange the funeral and everything. He said we could let the team know."

His dad.

Ilya's dad. The one he has the strange, complicated relationship with that Shane doesn't know much about. His dad *died*. Shane can't imagine his own parents dying. He thinks he'd never recover. And Ilya's dad is dead, just like that. And – oh, God – Ilya walked out of practice yesterday. Did he already know, then? Was that why he was upset?

Ilya walked out of practice and Shane went to a fucking bar. Shameful guilt overwhelms him so rapidly that he feels tears gathering in his eyes.

"Okay, uh, thanks for letting me know," he says to Coach Gregg, and then hangs up the phone with fumbling fingers before even checking if there was anything else. His hands are shaking; he turns around and leans down on his counter, pulling open the contact without even thinking about it, hitting call immediately, thinking of nothing other than hearing Ilya's voice, knowing he's okay.

Calling: Rozanov [Boston Raiders]

The call rings, rings. Shane chews at his thumbnail, scuffs his foot along the tiles, bounces his knee into the cabinets – the call rings out. No answer.

He googles what time it is in Russia. 3PM. Will Ilya even be there yet, or will he be on a flight? Shane googles the length of a flight from Boston to Moscow. He scrolls through three different sites and can't find a consistent answer, too much change in connections and layovers, but figures it will have been over twelve hours at least. Ilya could still be on the plane.

Shane tries calling again. It rings out.

He makes himself walk a lap around his apartment, and tries to think of what people need when their parents die. Planning a funeral is probably hard, but Ilya will have family in Russia to help with that, and Shane's all the way over here. Flowers are traditional, but Shane can't send flowers to Ilya's apartment when he's not even there, and he doesn't know the address in Moscow, or how to send flowers in a different country. Ilya doesn't like flowers, anyway. Ilya likes vodka shots and blowjobs, neither of which Shane can give him from here.

He sits on his couch and turns on the news, then turns it off again. Turns his phone over in his hands. Bounces his leg so fast it makes the couch squeak. Calls Ilya again.

It rings out. This time he lets it go to voicemail. "Um, hi, Ilya. It's me – Shane Hollander? Listen, I, um, I just heard about your dad. Can I do anything? Fuck, please call me back and let me know if you're okay."

He thinks it's an awful message, but he sends it instead of trying to re-record, because he's not sure how else he could say it better.

Thinking about it more, he opens their texts, too.

[Sent: Rozanov (Boston Raiders), 08:32]

I just heard, I'm really sorry.

I'm not sure if you're still on the plane, but please call me when you land.

I just want to make sure you're okay?

Let me know if I can do anything.

That's way too many texts to a man who apparently hates him, so Shane forces himself to close the thread. He sits there and stares at his phone, waiting to see if Ilya replies.

He waits for a really long time. Longer than he realises. He only moves when his alarm suddenly blares at him, telling him it's time to head to practice.

"*Fuck,*" Shane mumbles. He's still in his running clothes and he never even left the apartment.

He tries to call Ilya one more time. It doesn't go through.

After practice, Shane nearly dives into his locker to check his phone.

The text thread with Ilya says: *Read, 3:04PM*. But there's no reply.

Shane barely sleeps, and the next day he has to fly to fucking Philadelphia for All-Stars. He'd been pretty neutral about the whole event until yesterday. Boring hockey, nice excuse to treat his parents to a fancy dinner after the game, whatever. Now, he's dreading it so hard that he gives himself a stomach cramp, and spends the flight feeling sick and miserable, checking his phone in the air.

He sends another text when he lands at the airport; *I'm at All-Stars now but I'm still around if you need anything, you can call whenever.* He probably sounds desperate but he doesn't know what else to do. Everything in him is screaming that Ilya needs something – needs his help, or at the very least for someone to check that he's okay.

But he can't do anything if Ilya won't respond to him. He can't do a fucking thing.

He plays okay on the first day of All-Stars, knocks out a couple decent numbers in the skills competitions, but claims a headache to get out of the lunch with all the other players and the sponsors he doesn't care about afterwards. He can't stop checking his phone every two seconds. It's the first time in his life that Shane's frustrated when he's out on the ice – usually, hockey is what takes his mind off everything else. The only two things in his life that have ever made his brain shut down are hockey, and Ilya. Right now, being on the ice means he won't know if Ilya tries to call him, or if there's any news about how he's doing, and it drives Shane a little out of his mind all day, until he's jittery and snappish by the time dinner comes around.

He gets the nice dinner with his parents, because he can't back out of that plan when they flew all the way down here. Shane loves his parents. Loves spending time with them. Is even getting a little better about the crushing pressure he feels when they come to watch his games.

Tongiht, he wishes they weren't here, which is a kind of new feeling. It's a lovely Japanese restaurant that came highly recommended, but he'd rather be home eating a bland, microwaved meal-plan dinner in silence. Shane orders miso salmon with rice and presses himself into the wall, bouncing his leg in his chair, fiddling with his phone under the table even though his mom says it's rude to have it out while eating.

"You seem distracted, honey," his mom says to him halfway through dinner, in-between a spiel about a possible new ad campaign for CCM. "Did you hear what I said about your old gear? They really want to lean into the nostalgia factor, with how long you've been wearing their stuff."

Shane has two managers – his mom handles brands and commercial deals, and then Rahul deals with his hockey contracts and athletic career, along with a few junior employees who help look after the smaller parts of his career like his travel or social media – but really, his mom is the one who calls the shots. Shane's glad for it, because it takes something off his plate, and he hates thinking about all those things. It's only at times like right now, when he wants her to be a mom and she's still talking about leveraging his childhood gear for a paycheck, that he starts feeling a kind of staticky irritation over the whole thing.

"Um, yeah. Can we maybe talk about it later?" Shane asks, as he pushes the last bite of salmon around his plate half-heartedly with one chopstick. He ducks a glance at his phone

beneath the table, but the screen's still blank. It's been two days since Ilya landed in Moscow.

"Sure," his mom says, after a beat. He can hear the glance she exchanges with his dad; his eyes flick up when she leans across the table on her elbows, strokes the back of his hand. "What's going on, honey? You don't seem like yourself."

He pulls out of her grip. For the first time in days, he thinks about that fucking article he read, back when being gay felt like the most urgent news of his week. *Step three: stay true to your authentic self.* It felt like an absurd piece of advice at the time, and it doesn't land any better in his mind right now, either. The only things Shane knows to be true about his authentic self are that he's frequently anxious and terrible with emotion. His mom should actually think he's acting perfectly normal, right now, because he's doing both those things.

His voice is gummy and weird as he dodges her gaze and says into his water glass, "It's not me. I'm just, uh, kinda worried about Rozanov. His dad died this week."

Shane's mom makes a sad little noise, pressing her hand to her chest. "Oh, no, that's awful! Poor Ilya. Is that why he's not here this weekend?"

"Um, yeah, he's back in Russia." Shane finally forces down the last bite of his salmon, though it's rubbery and unpleasant in his mouth.

"I had figured it was an injury – god knows the league never misses an opportunity to get you two in the spotlight together as long as you can both stand on two feet." She's a little wry, rolling her eyes at that, apparently already recovered from the news. Shane doesn't get how that can be possible. He doesn't even know Ilya's dad's name, yet he's thought of nothing else for the last three days. "I'm surprised the team hasn't made a statement yet. I suppose they're waiting until after the break."

"Have you spoken to Ilya?" his dad asks. His voice is even, calming, like always. Shane tries to absorb it, but it doesn't touch the sides of his worry.

He doesn't meet their eyes as he says, "No, I mean, I reached out, but I guess he's busy and stuff."

"I'm sure he is. Planning a funeral is never fun. We'll send flowers," Shane's mom decides. "Someone in player management will have his home address, I'll call in the morning."

Of course. Shane hadn't even considered asking the team for Ilya's address in Moscow. His brain whirs for a moment, wondering if someone could help him get in touch with Ilya. Ilya must have spoken to *someone*, if he let Coach know he was going back to Russia.

On the other hand – if Ilya doesn't want to speak to him, Shane shouldn't force him. Right? He doesn't want to make anything harder, but he can't stand this, not knowing if Ilya's okay, if he's hurting, if he's sad, if anyone's supporting him back home. The uncertainties loom like monsters around him. Is he making it worse, by calling Ilya, trying to get him to talk? Shane is suddenly struck with the feeling that he's abysmally fucking up absolutely everything he's trying to do, and he has no idea how to fix it.

He was getting a blowjob from a stranger while Ilya was flying across the world to see his father's dead body, and Shane didn't even know.

"Oh, god," he mumbles, and puts his head in his hands. The hot-cold feverish feeling of panic is flooding his face, his chest.

"You okay, kiddo?" his dad asks, gentle concern in his voice. Shane forces himself to take a deep breath, then another. Shorter in-breaths and longer out-breaths, his therapist says, so your body doesn't think it's being chased by tigers.

"Yeah, I'm okay," he mutters a moment later, dropping his hands and trying to sort out his expression. A hurricane swirls inside him. Out of nowhere, he finds himself saying, "I'm just really glad nothing happened to either of you guys, you know?"

It's painfully and awfully true. He would never wish this experience on Ilya, not in a thousand years. He also doesn't know what the hell he would do without his own parents. He doesn't even have a concept of how Ilya might handle this; how awfully, gut-punched scared he must feel. If Shane could do anything to make it better, he'd do it, in a heartbeat. He'd burn down TD Garden if it meant Ilya didn't have to go through this right now.

"Oh, honey," his mom says gently. She rarely uses that tone of voice, but it's how she used to speak to him as a young child, when he crawled into bed with her after a nightmare. Her mom voice, not her manager voice. She holds his hand, and this time Shane lets her. "We love you so much, Shane. You know that, right?"

Shane swallows. "Yeah, mom. I know."

He makes an excuse to go back to his hotel room early. Lays on the king bed, feeling the texture of the starched hotel sheets between his fingertips, and wonders what the fuck to do.

When no answers come to mind, he turns the television on, and then takes out his card and pays for the extra cable package so that he can unlock all the channels and scroll until he finds a Russian news channel, buried deep in the back of the TV catalogue. He doesn't know what the hell he's hoping to see – it's not like they're going to be reporting on Ilya's family drama on Russian national television, and Shane doesn't even speak the language.

Still, he lets it play, listening to the harsh tone of unfamiliar Russian words wash over him. It's like how Ilya sounds when he teases Shane in Russian sometimes, answers terse phonecalls in it across the locker room, or switches over to it helplessly near the end of sex.

Ilya's still the only person in the world who seems to know how to take Shane out of his own head. His brash confidence and deep well of gentleness beneath it all; his sharp orders and the way he knows just when to tug at Shane's boundaries and when to step back. It all soothes something in Shane's mind that he can't ever seem to replicate alone. He suddenly finds

himself missing Ilya so badly that it aches, and then, a moment later, realises the feeling of missing him isn't new: it's the same as the gut-punched, sickly tension in his stomach he's been ignoring for two months.

Shane hugs a pillow to his chest, and lets the monosyllabic Russian news broadcast lull him to sleep.

The day Shane lands back in Boston after All-Stars marks five days since he spoke Ilya.

People keep trying to talk to him, but Shane just wants to get the fuck home. He gets a private car to take him from the airport to his apartment, kneading his temples in the silence for a while. When he's finally back, body aching, he dumps his luggage in the hallway, grabs an apple, opens his laptop at the kitchen island, and searches *flights from Boston to Moscow*.

It's an insane impulse, he knows, but he can't just sit here and do nothing. Nobody on the team has heard from Ilya either; he's checked. Somebody has to make sure that he's okay. Shane puffs out a shaky breath, and scrolls through options for flights. He could do it. He really could. Money's not an issue. There's two days until their next game. He could fly there, stay one night, make sure Ilya's okay, fly back.

Of course, it's the middle part of that which presents the largest problem. How is he going to figure out if Ilya's okay, and what the fuck is he going to do if he *isn't*?

Shane leaves the page of flights open on his laptop, but turns around, hands shaky, and calls Assistant Coach Greggs instead. If worst comes to worst, he can ask for a couple days off practice for the trip. Shane's never asked for anything like that before – it horrifies him, but he thinks it would probably be fine. Worth it, at least.

When Coach picks up, Shane starts by asking, “Hey, um, sorry, I'm just checking in, but have you guys heard anything about Rozanov yet?”

He thinks it probably plays off fine that he's asking. He's alternate captain with Ilya. They're teammates, friends. And they play on the same line, so if Ilya's going to be away for their next game, Shane needs to know. Shane doesn't care about any of those reasons, but they are there, at least, in the background, as he works himself into a miserable panic.

Except then, Greggs says, “Yeah, yeah, he landed back in Boston today. Says he'll be in practice tomorrow, but if he needs another day, you good to pick up the slack with the team?”

Shane barely registers he's talking about hockey. He says robotically, “Of course, sure, whatever he needs.”

He hangs up the phone, then turns off his laptop. Doesn't need the flights anymore. Ilya's back in Boston. Ignoring Shane, sure, leaving him on read for his increasingly worried series

of texts, but he's *here*. He's not stuck in Moscow having some miserable torment. He's not going to stay there and never come back.

Shane is overly aware of the breath in his mouth. It's like his whole body has flooded into his head, and everything below the neck feels far-away and disconnected.

He can't help himself. He feels the presence of Ilya's apartment above his head like a living thing, a heartbeat thumping through him. Ilya could be up there right now. Shane could see him. He hasn't wanted anything else for five days.

Shane jams his feet into his slides and goes out into the hallway, still in the sweatpants he wore on the plane back from Philadelphia. He goes to the elevator, hammers the button, rides it one floor up while he counts his breaths, trying to get them under control as they grow shorter, tighter, more painful. He's so worried about Ilya that it crystallises like panic, the first time he's ever felt these crippling symptoms of anxiety on behalf of someone not himself. All his own issues suddenly seem so small.

The walk down the hall barely takes a second. Shane throws himself breathlessly at the door, and hammers his fist on it over and over.

"Ilya?" he calls out. "Ilya, are you home?"

It takes a few minutes, but then the door swings open, and something cracks in Shane's chest. Ilya stands there. He's wet-faced, barefoot, and smells like vodka. He's swaying a little where he stands, eyes ringed with dark circles. Hair a mess. Wearing Adidas that looks like he slept in it. He looks at Shane like he thinks he might be hallucinating.

"Ilya," Shane breathes, desperately, and it feels like the first real breath he's taken in days. He doesn't even notice the name coming out – it's like it spills out in the same flood of relief as all the tension he's held in his body for the last six days, a levee breaking, an uncontrollable river spilling from his heart. He nearly collapses to the ground. He wants to be down there, hugging Ilya's legs, kissing his bare feet. Fuck, Shane is so glad to see him.

Ilya looks at him, something tentative and almost childlike in his eyes.

He says, "Shane?" like he's checking he's really there. Shane's name sounds so good in his mouth that Shane nearly cries.

The clutched-chest panic rises in Shane, and then ebbs. He stares at Ilya's face – blotchy eyes, quivering mouth, limp curls, a pathetic sight – and it's like an oasis in the desert. Shane's arms ache, and he realises it's from how badly he wants to pull Ilya into them, put Ilya's head on his chest and wrap him up safe and tight and never let anything hurt him again.

"I'm here," Shane says. "I'm – sorry if I'm imposing, or whatever, but I just needed to see you. I needed to know you're okay. You can kick me out if you don't want to see me, I swear, but fuck, Ilya. Can I do anything to help?"

Ilya wavers on his feet. His breath catches, audibly. "Help with what?" he says. "He's already fucking dead."

He sniffs and tries to cover it up like he's rubbing his nose, but Shane can see the trembling, the wet corners of his eyes. Ilya looks like he's on the brink of falling apart.

Shane thinks, *fuck everything else*, and steps into Ilya's apartment, closes the door with his foot, and wraps his arms as tight around Ilya as they'll go. He puts a hand in Ilya's curls and forces his face into Shane's neck, says, "It's okay, I promise, I'll look after you, you're okay now, it's gonna be okay."

He feels a hot, shaky intake of breath against the skin of his neck, just before Ilya bursts into tears.

Chapter End Notes

next time: the 2009 draft 🐼

i really hope yall enjoyed this chapter, it was a reeeally tough one to write and i'd love to hear what you thought 💚

you can also rb the [fic post](#), and find me [on tumblr](#) in-between chapters of this fic if you wanna know when i'm planning to update or ask anything!

Chapter 22: you were laying on my chest, i was scared to take a breath.

Chapter Notes

to the people who kept saying 'i cant believe there's only four chapters left' listen. you win. my plan has grown beyond my control and we're doing an extra 2. i was 10k into this chapter before i even reached halfway through the original chapter plan, like okay just fuck me (@me, who is doing the writing) i guess

cw: heavy discussion of anxiety, overdose, canon suicide, grief, brief instances of racism & homophobia in the past, and misuse/criticism of SSRIs that does not reflect the author's view (hey miss sertraline i love u baby). i promise the chapter is largely nicer than this list makes it sound

thank you so much again to all the commenters in the last chapter, your words are so so motivating to me even if i don't always have time to reply   and ty for the tumblr anon who gave me this chapter title !!

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

As soon as Ilya had landed in Russia, he'd turned off his American phone and buried it at the bottom of his suitcase. He had known, even then, that he was teetering on the blade's-edge of a breakdown, a frantic misery piling up inside of him like steam in a kettle, ready to blow. The thought of what he might say to Shane Hollander in that kind of state was startlingly scary. His manager had his Russian phone number, and Ilya was past caring about being reachable or responsible to anyone else.

It's only a week later, when he lands back in Boston – held together only by frayed straps of grief and anger, voice hoarse from shouting, eyesockets aching from exhaustion, trembling and dropping shit all over the place when he tries to unpack – that he begins to steel himself to the fact he'll have to turn it back on. He takes it out of the tangled heap of dirty clothes in his suitcase, puts it on the cold surface of his marble countertops. Then thinks better of it, and turns away for a drink.

The vodka is familiar, un-comforting in its familiarity, but he drinks it anyway. There's an expensive bottle in his father's office that has never been opened; his father was always saving it for an important day. He will now never try it. Alexei will certainly drink it or sell it the next time he's there.

Ilya pours another glass. He's already so sore and exhausted that the alcohol hits him harder than usual. Thank fucking god. He looks at the tangled mess of his suitcase, pulls out the clothes he wore to the funeral, and throws them in the trash. Takes another sip of vodka from the bottle. Bends over the counter, puts his head on the cold marble, barely able to breathe –

The doorbell rings.

It takes a few moments to get his feet to work, but Ilya will take any fucking distraction right now. He opens the door on autopilot, no idea who he's expecting. Perhaps Sveta has sent him takeout, or Marley has sent him a stripper. Nobody else knows he's home yet, which is how Ilya intends to keep it, until he sleeps long enough that he can plaster a veneer of hockey back over his misery and turn up to practice like nothing ever happened. For now, he's dizzy, sad, head pounding and legs shaking, and he's not thinking at all.

And then: Shane Hollander. Spilling into his apartment like moonlight on the darkness of Ilya's life.

Everything Ilya has been bottling up for a week shatters like glass on tile.

Minutes later, when Ilya is wrapped up in Shane's arms – being held by him, the strong cage of his body, gasping pathetic sobs into his neck and too out of it to even hate himself – Ilya wonders if he has ever felt this before, and can only conjure the image of his mother. This safety; the rare, expensive risk of being safe in somebody's arms. His lip quivers, he sniffs snottily against Shane's neck, his chest works up and down in great, involuntary heaves. Before he left for Russia, Ilya was convinced Shane was nothing but a curse of misery on his life. Right now, he is the only thing Ilya could ever imagine holding him together again.

"Are you okay?" Shane mutters softly, slowly, as one of his hands rubs at the soft skin of Ilya's ear, gentle tiny circles of his thumb which send ratcheting shakes through Ilya's spine. Ilya nearly laughs, though his painful, lurching sobs stop it.

"No," he gasps, wetly, into Shane's neck. He clutches harder at Shane's hoodie, grip so tight his knuckles hurt. "Obviously I am not okay."

"Oh, sorry, that was a stupid question," Shane mumbles. This time, Ilya does laugh, a thick and broken noise. Shane is so – Shane. So useless at these emotional things, yet so sincerely trying to navigate them.

Shane pets his hair, warm hands working their way through the knotted back of Ilya's curls where he tossed and turned on the plane. Ilya feels it in the roots of his scalp as Shane tugs at him, and the sharp tingle runs all the way down through his body, a comforting wave of his nerves, like a deep exhale. Ilya takes a shuddering breath in Shane's neck.

"You're shaking," Shane mutters.

Ilya hadn't realised he was, although now that Shane mentions it, he can feel the tremors racking his body. He tries to move back, out of Shane's grip, but Shane's arms tighten around his waist, holding him steady and still.

Trying to regain any semblance of sad control, Ilya sniffs, "I am not in the mood to fuck, if that's what you are hoping."

Shane taps the side of his head, then nuzzles against it, hot face in Ilya's hair. "Shut up," he mutters. "You're drunk. That can't be making you feel better. Why don't you sit down and I'll

make you some coffee?”

“I don’t want coffee,” Ilya grumbles. His wracking sobs have stopped, but left behind only a worn-out, scraped-dry feeling inside of his skull and chest; his limbs are fuzzy, slow to respond when he tries to move them, the glut of vodka sitting heavy in his body.

“Water, at least,” Shane insists, the healthy annoying freak that he is, like Ilya’s not used to hangovers, like he thinks Ilya needs coddling. Or taking care of at all. Ilya hates it, loves it. Shane rubs his ear again.

“I don’t want water,” Ilya says, voice muffled in Shane’s skin, mostly just to argue.

Shane rubs Ilya’s back with both hands, a long up-and-down motion that soothes his fuzzy frazzled nerves, then draws away from him.

“Sit on the couch. I’m getting you water and an Advil. Or do you want to get in bed? You feel cold.”

Ilya’s fucking freezing, actually, now that Shane has drawn away. Ilya misses his body like a part of his own. It’s still thick with snow outside, and he hasn’t set the thermostat since getting home. He’s groggy with alcohol and shuddery with grief.

He sniffs, “I don’t fucking know.”

Shane gives him an evaluating look, and then says, “Get in bed.”

Separating from Shane feels horrible, but Ilya is suddenly woozily aware of his own exhaustion too; head spinning, limbs heavy. He barely slept on the twenty-hour flight home, even in the quiet of his private row in first class. His mind was soupy and miserable. Sveta had come to Moscow with him for the funeral, but was on a different flight home, and he felt nakedly alone without her. At the time, he’d thought he was coming back to nothing at all in Boston – certainly not to a Shane Hollander who wanted to tuck him into bed like a child, bring him water, stroke his hair.

“Okay,” Ilya says, because agreeing feels easier than figuring out the English words to argue.

Shane reaches out and touches the side of Ilya’s temple frettingly, brushing away a stray strand of hair or something, then lingers there. His thumb rubs up and down Ilya’s skin, and Ilya’s knees go weak. He swallows the bad taste in his mouth, the hot misery clenching in his gut. Shane’s warm in the cold room. The way his dark eyes watch Ilya – carefully, cautiously, concerned – is something he couldn’t have dared to hope for.

“Come on,” Shane says, and wraps his body around Ilya’s back, hands on his chest, to guide him down the hall. Ilya’s never been walked like a puppet before, but he finds himself sinking into Shane and letting himself be wrangled, his stumbling feet getting themselves mixed up as Shane leads him all the way to his bedroom.

Ilya lets out a shuddered breath as they open the door. Instead of turning on the overhead light, Shane lets go of Ilya and goes right for the bedside lamps, casting the room in a warm

relief of orange. It's not even that late in the day, he doesn't think, but the winter sun has set outside the bleak window. Being in here, with Shane, hiding from the darkness in the soft-lit glow, feels to Ilya like a delicious kind of hibernation.

"In bed," Shane says. Ilya pouts; Shane for a second makes the face he makes before rolling his eyes at Ilya, but then he doesn't. He gently puts his hands on Ilya's shoulders and eases him down until he's sat on the bed. Then strokes his shoulders through his sweatshirt, stood up above him. "You just wait here for a second, okay? I'll be back really fast."

"Okay," Ilya says, because he doesn't know what else to say. His brain is murky around the edges. It still feels unbelievable that Shane is here at all. And focusing on that is all that's currently helping him ignore the aching pain inside his body, so he focuses on it; the warm-cedar smell of Shane's clothes, the quick, nervous retreat of his feet across the room.

He's still wearing his shoes. He never does that inside the house.

Once Shane leaves the room, Ilya thinks about moving, but he doesn't. He stays, sat on the edge of his mattress – which had been a rumpled mess when he'd left but is now perfectly made up, so he supposes the housekeeper came – and takes stock of his body. He's not the drunkest he's ever been. His stomach isn't lurching, his head doesn't hurt, and he just about manages to touch the tip of his nose with each of his fingers without poking himself in the eye when he tries. Everything's a little hazy, and he doesn't like his chances if he tried to walk across the room without bumping into anything, but he's okay. For any given definition of *okay*.

He can still smell the funeral incense, the cloying stench of the over-fresh flowers, like he's in the room. When he closes his eyes he sees the paper strip laid across his father's cold, dead forehead. The image flickers and intersperses with his mother, ten long years ago now, her thick halo of curls spilling from the edges of the coffin when Ilya bent over her to kiss her icy skin.

Maybe he does feel sick. Ilya takes a deep breath of the cold air in his bedroom to steel his lurching stomach; a second later, he hears the whirring sound of the heating unit waking up. Shane must have found the thermostat.

He's still sat at the edge of the bed. He knows he probably looks like shit; slept in these sweats on the plane, hasn't checked his hair all day. But he waits there, just as he is, staring at the dim orange-lit paint on his walls, until he hears feet in the hall again.

When Shane eases the door open this time, he's barefoot. Ilya loves him barefoot, the secret domesticity it implies to him – that Shane feels safe enough in Ilya's space to put the soles of his feet on the ground, so soft and vulnerable. He's not expecting Ilya to smash glass around him, a level of trust Ilya is not always granted. Ilya never went barefoot in his father's house. The smell of coffee follows Shane into the room; he has a mug in hand, a bottle of Advil in the other, a water bottle tucked awkwardly into his elbow. Their eyes meet over the threshold, and Ilya trembles.

"I put the heat on, so you should warm up," Shane tells him, coming closer as soon as he sees Ilya shake. "Here, have a sip of coffee first, then water. It'll sober you up a bit."

Ilya remembers saying he didn't want coffee, but right now, Shane delivering it to him by hand and watching him with that furrowed brow, he does not give a shit if he wants it or not. Ilya takes the mug in both hands and gives himself over to a deep sip, letting it scald his tongue. He looks up at Shane for approval.

"That's good," Shane tells him. His voice is so - low, gentle, like he's talking to a child. Although maybe not; Shane's terrible with children, always exceedingly awkward and boring around the kids of guys on the team like he thinks five year olds might care about hockey stats from fifty years ago more than candy and Nintendo. But he's not terrible at this, right now. "Here." He takes the mug back, puts it on the bedside table, hands Ilya the water. "Now some of this."

Ilya gulps down half the bottle. He hadn't realised how thirsty he really was until he's drinking, when he becomes abruptly parched. His noisy gulps are the only sound breaking up the quiet room for a moment, beyond the background hum of the heater and Shane's gentle breaths. Ilya feels like he might be going insane. He takes the Advil that Shane hands him next without complaining.

"Do you feel a bit better?" Shane asks, gently, after screwing the cap back on the water bottle and setting it down. He steps a little closer, near the space between Ilya's seated legs, and looks down at him.

"I don't know," Ilya says, truthfully. "Less drunk, yes. What kind of *better* do you mean?"

"Right. I guess that was a stupid question."

"No, no, not stupid," Ilya assures him. Shane looks like he doesn't know what to do with his hands, twisting them together in front of his body. Ilya misses when Shane was touching him. He thinks, fuck it, and leans forward to press his forehead to the soft plane of Shane's belly. Achingly, he says, "Thank you for coming."

"Fuck, Ilya, of course I came. I've been so worried. I was trying to call you all week, I didn't know if you were okay."

"I, ah, turned my phone off," Ilya admits. Perhaps a stupid decision in retrospect, but he just - hadn't had the space, for any of it. And he'd wanted Shane to call, so desperately, painfully. He'd thought that if Shane didn't call, if Ilya knew for certain that he didn't care, among everything else going on, it might have been something he couldn't come back from. "Sorry."

"You don't have to say sorry, fuck, no, it's okay." Suddenly, Shane's hands are in his hair again. Ilya pants into his hoodie, wraps his arms around Shane's back, clutches fistfuls of the fabric. Shane strokes from his crown down to the tender cavern behind his ears. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really," Ilya says. "English is hard, and I am a little drunk."

Shane squeezes the back of his neck. The whole world is dark and warm with his face pressed against Shane; Ilya never wants to leave it.

“You could tell me in Russian?” Shane offers. “I, uh, I wouldn’t understand, but. I would still listen.”

Something cracks in Ilya’s chest. The thought of speaking to Shane like that – it’s absurdly vulnerable, aching intimate, and he wants it, so, so badly. It’s always more important when he says things in his mother tongue. There are many things Ilya can say casually in English that he can’t bring himself to admit in Russian, and, at the same time, speaking of important things in English often feels inadequate, limited, insincere. He thinks of speaking to Shane in Russian, and it feels more naked than anything they’ve ever done in bed.

“Maybe not right now,” he says, because he is still a little hazy, too tender. “But thank you.”

For a moment, just quiet between them. Ilya wonders what the fuck they’re doing here. Shane holding him like this, when he hasn’t wanted to speak for weeks – when he’d made it pretty clear that anything he and Ilya could possibly have together was an unwanted threat to the important things in his life. And the last time they spoke, Ilya was so mad, yelled at him; it felt then like they’d never be okay around each other again.

Strange, how death makes so many things cease to matter.

“Why don’t you lie down?” Shane suggests gently, still working his hands through Ilya’s hair. “You’ve had a long fucking day.”

Perhaps the understatement of the century. Ilya is exhausted, but he doesn’t know how he could possibly find it in himself to sleep through the weird, unpleasant adrenaline running through his veins, the bursts of nausea every time he remembers the phantom smells of home. Burying himself in Shane is working, better than anything else has all week; Ilya is suddenly possessed by the real and terrifying possibility that Shane will tuck him up in bed, and then leave. Leave Ilya all alone. Dark, empty apartment, nobody there with him, like every other fucking day.

“Will you lie down with me?” Ilya asks, desperately. He looks up at Shane, clutching him harder, feeling the wetness in his own eyes. Shane’s hands still on him for a moment.

“Are you sure?” His voice is low, almost a mutter. Nothing to distract from it in the quiet room. “It’s okay if you want me to leave you alone.”

“Please.” Ilya hears his voice crack on the words. “Please, don’t leave me alone.”

“Okay, okay, Ilya, I’ll stay, that’s okay,” Shane tells him, and Ilya must be crying, although he can’t really tell, because Shane wipes his face with both hands before pulling away. “Come on, come here.”

Ilya goes wherever Shane tells him, and finds himself on his back, propped up on fluffy pillows, the warm duvet being pulled over him. Shane hovers for a moment, at the edge of the bed; then leans over and puts his knees either side of Ilya, rolls over his body, lands on the other side of him and gets below the blanket too. He could have just walked around the bed, but he chose to climb over Ilya.

Ilya says, "I missed you so much, Shane."

"You've only been gone a week," Shane points out, but he rolls over and puts his body closer to Ilya's, so Ilya takes the opportunity to grab Shane's arm and rest his head on it. Shane's other hand works beneath the blanket, finds the soft dip of Ilya's waist, like he didn't even mean to look for it.

"Not just then," Ilya breathes. "Or, also then. I mean – all these weeks. Hollander, I have fucking hated it."

It's the rawest, most vulnerable truth he thinks he has to give right now. Not knowing how Shane thinks about it, how he feels, but just knowing – it can't go on like this. Ilya can't fucking stand it. If Shane doesn't want him, Ilya's going to have to ask to get traded out of Boston. If he has to stay like this, in this half-life of wanting and being denied, he's going to lose his mind.

Shane lets out this strange, wrecked little breath against the pillow. He turns, and then their eyes are meeting, a scant couple of inches apart, in the dim orange glow of the lamplight. Ilya can smell his skin, feel the warmth of his arm beneath his head.

Shane says, "Me, too. I think I have some stuff I should tell you."

His voice is raw; almost a laugh, the way he breathes it out in a squished exhale of disbelief. Ilya aches. He wants to say, yes, tell me everything you have ever thought, tell me everything about you, tell me the first time you ate ice cream, tell me your worst broken bone, tell me your grandmother's name, tell me when you learned to jerk off, tell me if you have ever thought you hated me and how I can fix that. He wants to know all of it.

It's hard for Ilya to pinpoint the moment his feelings about Shane Hollander changed. At first, they had been so *fun*. Naughty, dangerous, a scandalous delight to distract himself with at a weird fucking time in his weird fucking life. Ilya liked dangerous things. He wanted Shane, at first, like he wanted a pack of cigarettes; potentially disastrous for his career, but addictive and delicious. But maybe even from the first time they really slept together, something had been different. There was an intimacy in the way he was with Shane that Ilya, for all the good sex he's had, never felt with anyone else. He didn't know how to recognise it, that first year or so. He'd thought it was different because of the hockey, looming like a third person in all of their sex. Maybe it sort of is.

"What do you need to tell me?" Ilya asks. "I will listen, you can say anything."

They're still looking into each other's eyes as Shane speaks.

"I, um, I think I'm gay," he says. His voice cracks on the word. It's miles away from what Ilya was expecting him to say; he feels surprise register on his own face. "I mean, like, actually, completely gay. I guess I – I mean, I guess I kind of knew for a while. But I kept hoping I'd meet a girl I liked someday, you know? I, uh, I don't think that's gonna happen."

"Good," Ilya says. He brings one hand up to Shane's chin, just holding onto his jaw against the pillow. "You are not allowed to meet any women. I would have to fucking kill her and

then I would be in prison and Boston would never win a cup, whole city would be sad.”

“Oh my god, Ilya.” Shane lets out a laugh; Ilya, absurdly pleased with himself for getting that reaction, plays innocent while Shane pinches his side. “I could so win a cup without you, anyway.”

“Eh,” Ilya says, which makes Shane laugh again. “Not so sure. I am best player in the league, haven’t you heard?”

“That was *one* magazine article. And they only used that title so they could sell more copies of that stupid picture of you naked on the Zamboni.”

“Don’t call that picture stupid. I know you liked it. You probably have it in your bedside drawer with your little dildo. Don’t worry if your copy is all sticky, I can give you a new one.”

“You’re such an asshole!” Shane tells him, but fondly – the way Ilya likes it – and something deep and sharp inside Ilya dulls a little, settles down like a clawed creature in his chest finally curling up for a nap. He hasn’t felt like this in weeks. Maybe longer. “Would you take this seriously?”

“I take this very seriously,” Ilya assures him. “Great news for me, that you’re gay. Unless you are still not sucking my dick anymore because of Hayden fucking Pike.”

Shane’s amusement dies down; his gaze flicks down to Ilya’s collarbone, his free hand picks a piece of lint off the duvet.

“I am sorry that I freaked out so much,” Shane says, quietly. “I’ve talked to Hayden, um, since. He’s okay, he’s not going to tell anyone or anything. And I – I know I overreacted. I didn’t mean to hurt you with it. But fuck. It’s just, Ilya, it’s really scary to me.”

“Yes,” Ilya says, because he can tell – he may not fully understand it, but he can tell how terrified Shane is of this thing between them, and of anybody ever finding out about it. For Ilya, it’s not the same fear. He has a practical, logical distaste of the idea of being found out, sure. But it doesn’t make him act like Shane, act like he’s being chased through the woods with a gun. “Maybe you can explain to me, why it scares you so much?”

Shane makes a wet little noise. For a long minute, there’s quiet.

“I guess I could try,” Shane says. He’s not meeting Ilya’s eyes, now. His breath is coming out in shorter, sharper bursts, the hot imprint left against Ilya’s skin from how close they’re laying. “It’s just, like – it’s everything to do with how my brain works, though. It’s not just one thing. And I’ve never really talked to anyone about it.”

“Okay,” Ilya says slowly, trying to parse out what Shane means. “You do not have to.”

“No, no, it’s – fuck. I mean, I don’t want to come over here and just throw all my shit at you when you’re going through something that sucks, you know?”

“My father sucked,” Ilya says. “My family sucks. You do not suck. I want to hear about you. I want – fucking hell, Hollander. Do you know that you are the only thing which makes me feel okay, sometimes?”

“Jesus, Ilya,” Shane breathes, and Ilya rolls a little closer and shoves his face into Shane’s neck for a second. He smells the skin there, the musky scent of sweat as they start to heat up in the blankets. Ilya wants to lick him, eat him whole, flay him open and never let anyone else near him again. “I guess, um. I guess I could tell you why I missed the draft in 2009.”

It’s not what Ilya’s expecting him to say. For a moment he just blinks against Shane’s skin; then drags his head back up to look at Shane from an inch away, staring at the vague imprints of his freckles, the tiny speckles of stubble roughing his jaw. A face Ilya knows so intimately, so well. A face that, in 2009, he had only met in person once before, and then grew familiar with on TV, zoomed-out screens and professional photos where you couldn’t see his pores the way Ilya can now.

Truthfully, Ilya’s spent less time thinking about it than probably everyone else has.

When it first happened, sure. The day he turned up to the draft and found out Shane Hollander wouldn’t be attending, Ilya thought, *great, I will definitely go first*, and then spent the rest of the day stewing, wondering where Hollander was. They didn’t usually let you pull out last-minute. If you got injured, teams just had to decide whether they wanted to gamble on your recovery or not. Something unusual must have happened, Ilya knew that much even then. Some lawyer must have bartered with the league for quite a while with some serious leverage to make them move so subtly.

But since meeting Shane, it’s been so far on the back burner that Ilya almost forgets it ever happened. Just a fact of life – he and Shane are the same age, but Shane joined the team a year after him. Enough more important shit has happened since then to keep Ilya occupied. He doesn’t like to dwell on the past; he’s not the sort of person who sits around thinking about what might have happened or what could have been. He always figured that if it was important, Shane would tell him.

Apparently, Shane wants to tell him. So it must be important.

“Okay,” Ilya says, slowly. It’s a hell of a distraction from his own bullshit, at least. “What happened at the draft?”

Shane lets out this great, shuddering breath, puts his hand over his eyes, and then talks, like that, not looking at Ilya.

“It wasn’t like it was new, you know – I mean, it was the whole of Juniors. Even since the scouting and stuff got crazy when I was a kid. I’d always been – anxious, I guess, is the word. Struggled with people, and with change. But it started getting really bad, the more attention I got. I mean, all sorts of eyes were on me that I didn’t expect. And all I wanted to do was play hockey, you know? I was fine when I was on the ice, I loved it. But as soon as I stepped off it – and the better I got, too – I mean, there were always people asking me things, or criticising me really hard, or telling me I was basically a fucking god who held all their hopes and dreams, or calling me shitty names that I couldn’t tell my mom about because she’d lose her

mind. I was weird at talking to the guys on the team, like, I didn't make friends easily, and they could all tell, and they already hated me for being better than them. And I was barely in school 'cus hockey was the priority. I basically didn't have anyone, except my parents, and then I was billeting away from them. I started – I dunno, I would get these really bad panic attacks. Kind of often. I felt like I couldn't even function when I wasn't in skates, you know?"

Ilya doesn't know what to say, so says nothing; it feels like speaking may break the spell of whatever is happening right now, even if it may be a horrible spell that he's suddenly not sure he wants to know about.

He rests his chin in Shane's clavicle, stares at Shane's avoidant face from below as he speaks to the ceiling.

"It, uh, it got pretty bad, like I just couldn't deal at all. I'd lock myself in the rink bathroom after games and pretend I wasn't there until everyone else had finished changing out. I couldn't handle being around them, not knowing what someone was gonna say, what I would have to say back. It was like it was all I could think about. And this was about the time that I – I dunno, like fourteen-ish, I guess, I started realising that the other guys were getting interested in girls, and I wasn't. And the only time I felt the sort of things they talked about with girls was, like, when the guys on the team slapped me with a wet towel in the shower. Places I shouldn't have been thinking about it, right? The shit they said about gay people in the locker room was even worse than the shit they said about Asians. Vile shit, like they'd talk about AIDS and kind of laugh, like, *heard your cousin's a fag, you're not gonna give us all butt cancer are you?* It made me so sick. I felt like it was so obvious that I wasn't joining in, and that scared the shit out of me. I kept thinking, they're gonna find out, and they're gonna fucking kill me, and then I won't get to play hockey. And all I wanted to do was play hockey."

"Fuck, Shane," Ilya says.

He knows the kind of thing Shane's talking about, of course he does. It was probably worse in Russia than in Canada, although perhaps in a different way; the idea of anyone being queer when he was a kid in Moscow was so alien that mostly people didn't even talk about it. But when they did, of course, he knows how bad it could be. Ilya just never thought of it like it might be something true about *him*, even after he started fucking men. The ugly prejudices and sickly jokes were a million miles away from his own undentable sense of himself, and Ilya liked himself, liked what he was doing back then. It was simple to separate his own fun, exciting, dangerous proclivities from the cruel, whispered derision spread around the locker room about other people.

Shane clearly found it harder to separate.

"Yeah," Shane says. He's still hiding his face, but Ilya watches the motion of his throat as he swallows, hard, steeling himself. "Eventually, my coach noticed. Like, he was kind of shitty too, but he also cared because I was the best player on his team and he knew I'd be in the league someday, everyone knew by that point, so he did want to take care of me. He made me go to the doctor. They suggested therapy but, I mean, that was just fucking ridiculous. It was like, 2006 at that point? I was a hockey player. I wasn't gonna go to fucking therapy. So

instead they gave me some meds, for anxiety. I just had to take one a day and it would calm me down.”

“Did it work?” Ilya asks.

“I mean, sort of. I stopped locking myself in the bathroom and having panic attacks. But it was also not the fucking root of the problem, right? Like, the guys were still assholes. I still thought they might kill me if they found out I jerked off imagining them passing me around the fucking locker room, and I still couldn’t stop doing it. I got a blowjob from a girl at a party when I was sixteen and I could only come by imagining my liney Justin’s face and I felt so fucking bad and miserable that I told coach I couldn’t play with Justin anymore the next day, and he moved him off my line. Which was shitty of me, because then Justin wasn’t first line anymore, but the coaches only really cared about keeping me there, so they let me do it. And I was taking my meds, but I kept thinking, like, the doctor told me they’d fix me, right? But I was still scared all the time. I thought maybe the dose wasn’t high enough, so I started, um, taking extra. I didn’t want to go back to the doctor, in case he made me go to therapy after all, so I just sort of – did it on my own.”

“That was a fucking stupid idea,” Ilya says lowly. Shane lets out this strange, whining laugh, a noise of pure regretful agreement.

“I know,” he says. His voice is thicker, wet in his throat; his breath comes in a great shudder as he says, “And then, it was getting really close to the draft. Suddenly the press was even crazier. I mean, I was playing in fucking Canada. Hockey was everything. And World Juniors happened – god, that’s when we met. You were the only person I’d ever met who was as good at hockey as me, back then. But, like, after that, people were talking about my draft everywhere I looked. On TV spots, at NHL games. People were betting on me, their real actual fucking money, whether I’d go first or not. The managers of different teams were reaching out to my mom to send me shit, arrange dinners, talk about options. Sponsors wanted to book me. The hockey was getting smaller and smaller in this terrifying fucking storm, right? It felt like what I did on the ice barely mattered, because everything else was just, like, this monster around it.”

“So you were very scared?” Ilya says.

“Yeah. And then I went to this party.”

“A party.” A party?

“I, uh, I kind of told you about it before. I guess not really. One of my teammates took me to a party with his cousin. It wasn’t a hockey party, people there didn’t really know who I was, for fucking once. And then, there was – this guy, there?”

“Oh,” Ilya says, suddenly realising where this is going. He moves his chin against Shane’s collar.

“Yeah. I don’t even know how it happened, really. But I was so fucking desperate, scared. And this huge part of me, like, this part I couldn’t seem to shove down, seemed like the biggest threat to everything I was working to build, everything I was fucking putting up with

just to be able to play hockey. I had to know, right? Before I got too deep into the league, I had to know what I was missing? So we kind of hooked up. I mean, god, it was barely anything. We were in the back yard at this party, out of view. It was freezing cold. He jerked me off and I came in like, two seconds. It wasn't difficult, like it had been with the girl I tried with before. And then I just freaked the fuck out."

"That is a scary thing to realise," Ilya says. He can feel danger building, the low dread in his stomach whispering at him, *something bad is coming*. He can't quite see the shape of it yet; did somebody see Shane with this boy? Is this why he's so fucking scared of being found out?

Except –

"Yeah, but I hadn't exactly realised it. Or, not accepted it, at least. But I. Um. I dunno what the word is. I really spiralled. The next couple weeks, it was like I could barely breathe. I played worse on the ice, and that just got more people talking about me, like, on the local news they did a whole review of what would happen if I choked and burnt out when I had first-pick potential, and I watched it and threw up. My phone was blowing up constantly from my mom, my coach, my team, scouts. I couldn't get a second away from it all."

Ilya doesn't say anything.

Shane says, "Two days before the draft, I was supposed to fly out for it. I was at my parents' house, we were all gonna go together in the morning. And it was really late at night, and I realised that I couldn't fucking breathe. All I could think about – fuck, like, all I could think about was the noise, I was so overwhelmed. And – god, it sounds so stupid – but I had these pills, from the doctor, that were supposed to fix my brain, right? And I'd already been doubling my dose, and it still wasn't working. And I was just having this full fucking panic attack in my bathroom in the middle of the night, and I thought about all the press with my face on it, and how everyone was waiting for me to flame out, and how this guy at a random party whose name I couldn't remember knew my biggest secret in the whole world and could recognise my face on TV and tell anyone, if he decided to, like literally ruin my life in a moment – and I – I mean – I just wanted the panic to stop, right?"

Quiet, a beat.

"I was trying to fix it. So I took some pills. And then I took some more, because I couldn't breathe, and I thought they would help. And I wasn't counting, I was shaking, like, I didn't know what was going on. So I took too many. Like, the whole bottle. And then the next thing I remember is waking up in the hospital a day later with my mom asleep in a chair, and I was on an involuntary psych hold because they thought I'd tried to – you know. And that was why I missed the draft."

When he's done speaking, he lets out this full-body shudder, and finally pulls his hand away from his face. They're pressed together, isolated under the blanket, confined by the walls of the room, lit by the warm lamplight like a fire – it feels like they are the only two people in the universe. Ilya has never been as close to somebody as this. He is being given everything he has ever wanted from an embrace; the whole-body feeling of togetherness, putting himself

over into Shane's clutches, his strong arms, and looking into the terrifying notches on Shane's heart.

He imagines Shane on his bathroom floor, passed out, empty pill bottle. Ilya has visited the Hollander's house in Ottawa, but in his mind, the bathroom looks like his father's house in Moscow. The orange pill bottle flickers with back and forth with a slim white box. Shane, on the floor. Would his hand have splayed open, palm-up? Was the door ajar, for him to be found, by Ilya coming home late?

Ilya finds that he can't breathe. It takes him a moment to notice, because he's gripping Shane so tight that the core of tension could be coming from any part of him. But his chest lurches, burns.

It makes so much sense. He's sick. He should have known.

"Ilya?" Shane asks, his voice muggy and far away.

"Sorry," Ilya chokes out, as he sits up. The blankets fall away from his body as he hunches over, putting his face in his hands. Shane, on the floor. His mother, on the floor. 2001, they didn't have cell phones, so he'd had to leave her behind to call the ambulance on the phone in the hall – who found Shane, his mother? Was there somebody else there, for her to yell to make the call, so she could stay on the ground and hold Shane's hand in the moments that could have been his last? "Sorry, I am okay, I just need one second."

"You're not okay," Shane tells him. The creak and rock of movement on the mattress, two warm arms wrap around Ilya's shoulders from behind. Even shaking apart like this, he's held in Shane's cocoon. Ilya rasps out a sob. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have told you all that."

"Fuck you," Ilya chokes out. "Yes, you should. I wanted to know."

He's trembling again, no cold to blame this time; the shakes are violent, racking his body as he hunches forward, wet gasps working out between his fingers. Shane shifts more behind him, rests his cheek on Ilya's back, holds him tight enough to hurt. Ilya loves the grip, wants it to be harder, wants to be held hard enough to break bones – just wants to be crushed under Shane, so he knows he's not going anywhere.

"What's going on?" Shane asks, quietly, into his back. Ilya feels terrible, hears the fear in Shane's voice. Shane just poured his fucking heart out and Ilya can't even tell him it's okay, that he's good, that Ilya –

Ilya raises his knees and rests his head on them, while Shane squeezes him and nuzzles between his shoulder blades.

"I'm sorry," Ilya chokes out. He pauses to blink into the darkness of the blanket, takes a long, difficult breath to force himself back under control. His voice is thick and slow when he says, "I also never told you how my mother died."

Apparently, it's the night for sad fucking stories. Ilya should have slept more on the plane.

Shane's quiet for a long, thick moment between them. For once, he seems to pick up a hint.

"Fuck, Ilya. She didn't..."

"She swallowed three boxes of pills on our bathroom floor," Ilya says, robotically. He can't make himself tell the story with emotion; never has been able to. He doesn't mention it often. Nobody in America knows. But back then, when he'd had to speak to family, people at the funeral, his team when he'd had to take a couple weeks off, Ilya got into the habit of talking about her death like this. Imagine it happened to someone else. Imagine it is a very boring story for Literature class that you have to do a report on, and you just want to get it over with. Don't think about her hair splayed on the tile. Don't think about the smell of the vomit she choked on. Don't think about the voice on the phone telling you how long the ambulance would be in a clinical, uninvested tone.

"Fuck," Shane whispers. He presses his face harder into Ilya's back. "Ilya, oh my god."

Figuring there's no reason to stop now, Ilya says; "My father and brother were on vacation, but I had stayed home with her, because I had hockey. I was twelve. The housekeeper was supposed to come that day, but she cancelled. She had a flu. I guess it was too late when she left her message. I took the tram home from practice with Svetlana – she liked to watch me play after school. I dropped Sveta off at her door, and then walked to my family's house, like always. When I came in the house, it was so quiet. Usually my mother always played the radio when she was home alone, very loud. And when I called out for her, nobody answered. I thought maybe she was at the store."

Ilya swallows, abruptly, interrupting his own speech. Shane whispers, "It's okay. You don't have to keep going."

Ilya carries on. "I did not think anything was wrong. I went to put my skates in the hall closet. But then I passed the bathroom, and the door was ajar. I saw her hand only, at first, on the floor. I panicked badly. I went inside and I yelled, tried to slap her face, to wake her up. I could see the empty boxes of pills on the floor, so I knew already what had happened. I called the ambulance from the hall phone and they came quickly, but she was already cold. She was hours dead by the time I had found her. It took two of them to pull me away from her so that they could take the body."

There's a long, harrowing moment of silence. The walls of his bedroom feel like they're falling away, leaving the two of them in a dark, expansive void, nothing to lean on.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Ilya, that's horrible," Shane says. His breath is hot on the back of Ilya's neck. Ilya raises his hands, to Shane's arms where they're still wrapped around him like a vice, and clings on.

"I know she did not want me to find her," Ilya says, quickly. He doesn't want Shane to think that – that she was so thoughtless, that she didn't care. Because she did. Ilya is sure, she was the only person who cared about him. "She had planned it carefully. It said in the note. She thought the housekeeper would have come before I was home."

"But you did find her," Shane says, lowly.

“Yes. I did.”

“Fuck,” Shane mutters. There’s a moment of pressure against Ilya’s back, through his shirt – not quite a kiss, but a rub of Shane’s mouth. Ilya’s heart spikes. Shane hasn’t kissed him since that horrible night with Hayden Pike.

Ilya’s voice cracks when he says, “It was a long time ago, but now you have told me about you, I cannot stop thinking about how your parents must have felt when they found you.”

Shane abruptly pulls away from Ilya’s back, and for a moment, Ilya’s struck with the terror of the idea he might do that; pull away, just leave, now, in this middle of whatever the fuck is happening to them tonight, something Ilya can’t possibly comprehend on his own. Instead, Shane crawls around the bed to sit in front of Ilya; his knees folded carefully beneath himself, hands resting on them politely, as he raises his face to meet Ilya’s gaze.

His eyes are dark and teary, the shine in them captivating, like a guiding light for Ilya to focus on. Shane says solemnly, “It’s not the same, Ilya. I was okay.”

“But you might not have been,” Ilya says. His voice sounds too big for his mouth, clumsy, uncontrolled. He sucks in a trembling breath. “When they found you, they did not know if you were.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I know, I swear. I mean, you’ve met my mom. You can see that she’s kind of – overprotective. It’s, uh, I know it’s partly cus she found me that night, you know? Now, she tries really hard to make sure that she’s got everything in my whole life managed, because she thinks if she can stop me from having to deal with too much shit, I won’t get bad again. She thinks the anxiety was her fault.”

Ilya nods. He’s very much enjoyed meeting Yuna, but he sees, now, with all the context of it, the reason that she’s always seemed a little too *much*. To almost lose someone you love that much – to blame yourself, maybe, for not protecting them from it, or not seeing it fast enough? She must never forget for a moment that this is her second chance.

“Yes. I thought how much she managed you was a little much at first, but I think now I understand.”

Shane rubs Ilya’s hands between his, his skin so smooth and warm. “Yeah. I mean, she was always kind of like that. But it got a lot more intense after – after that.”

“Of course it did,” Ilya says. “You are her baby. If I had been the one to find you like that, I would never let you leave my house again. I would have hired five bodyguards to watch you every second of every day. You would not even be allowed to take a piss without me holding you, you would find it very annoying.” He swallows, a fat lump of snot in his throat. His voice is quieter as he says, “If my mother had survived that day, I don’t know what we could have done. My father would not have changed, and she was already so sad.”

Ilya thinks about the truth of it. If she had survived, she probably would have tried again.

This is the secret part, that Ilya has never told another soul. He knows that the day she died was not the first time she tried.

“You didn’t deserve that, Ilya,” Shane says quietly, into the hot air of the space between them. “I’m so fucking sorry that happened.”

“You are saying sorry for something that had nothing to do with you, no point,” Ilya says. He pauses. Raises Shane’s hands to his mouth, and presses his lips on them, buries the scary words in the strong lines of Shane’s palm: “Just make sure it never happens again with you. This I would not survive.”

“Fuck, Ilya, of *course*, ” Shane says quickly, pulling away and wrapping his arms around Ilya’s neck, forcing Ilya to look in his eyes. “No, god. I mean – I’m not gonna say I was in a good place, obviously, but it was different. I wasn’t, like, trying to end things. It’s never something I would do again. I was just – I dunno. I was panicking because I wanted to fix myself. I just wanted everything to be better.”

Ilya asks, “And is everything better, now?”

There’s a long pause, quiet, while Shane works his lip between his teeth. Ilya’s hands find the dip of Shane’s waist, worm beneath his hoodie, feel his hot, clammy skin. Grip a little too hard. Shane spreads his knees and settles fully over Ilya’s lap, straddling him above the blankets.

He says, “Sort of. I guess lately it’s been pretty hard.”

Ilya nods, because yes, he has noticed this. Not just the horrible things between them, the impossible situation they’ve been put in by their lives and league and careers, but Shane in general, how hard things are for him with the way his brain ties him up in knots.

“You do not take medicine anymore?” Ilya checks.

“Uh, sort of. Now I just have, um, they’re like a panic suppressant? So I only take them once in a while, if I think I’m gonna have a panic attack, basically. The doctor said I could go back on daily meds if I wanted to, but, like. I don’t know. I don’t really wanna do that.”

In a way, Ilya understands. Shane doesn’t like being different to everyone else, and this is another different part of him. Ilya doesn’t know anyone else who takes medicine for their brain, or at least not anyone who speaks about it openly in their line of work. At the same time, he doesn’t give a shit about anyone else. He wants Shane to be okay. He should have whatever he needs to make himself okay.

“Why do you not want to?” he checks. “You don’t trust yourself? You are taking other medicine anyway.”

Shane gives a weird little laugh. He leans heavier down on Ilya, rubs absently at the back of Ilya’s neck. Ilya nearly purrs at the touch, like Shane’s pet, melting under his hands.

“God, I don’t know. I guess it’s not logical. I just don’t want to do anything the same as I was doing it back then. They clearly didn’t fucking help anyway.”

That much might be true. Ilya imagines that if the doctor told him they would help, Shane was either doing it wrong or prescribed the wrong thing, but it’s not like he’s an expert.

“Okay. Well, I cannot tell you what to fucking do,” he admits. “I am not exactly the picture of somebody doing great in the head.”

This makes Shane laugh again, and Ilya laughs a bit, too, kind of sharply and brokenly. He puts his face in Shane’s neck, his favourite place to be, and sighs, smelling the warm musk of his skin.

“God, we’re both a mess,” Shane says wryly from above him.

“Yes,” Ilya agrees, amused. “Maybe it is why we like each other.”

This makes Shane go quiet. Ilya’s – he’s just not fucking stupid, is the thing. He knows Shane likes him. Must like him. To be here, like this? Letting Ilya get snot on his expensive sponsored clothes? Laying in his bed, holding him the way nobody holds him, treating Ilya like his baby, the way Ilya has been desperate to be treated his whole life. This kind of care seems to come easily to Shane in moments like this, but he doesn’t give it away to anyone else. Ilya knows he must be special, in some form, in Shane’s strange and rigid world. But the world is the problem.

Then Shane says, quietly, “So you don’t hate me anymore?”

The question makes Ilya pause. It’s a word that seems briefly bizarre to use. When in his life has he ever hated Shane? Even before they met, when Shane was the name of a rival on shaky DVD footage of foreign games, Ilya found him an interesting threat, a potentially amusing diversion. Since they met, he has been nothing but amused, delighted, eventually obsessed.

He only remembers their argument on the day of his father’s death after a moment. He remembers the pain of rejection, his desperate, unrequited feelings. He remembers wanting to hurt Shane as much as Shane hurt him.

“You are so fucking stupid, solnyshko,” Ilya mutters. He reaches up and rubs a hand through Shane’s soft, dark hair, smoothing back a strand from his temples. He’s wearing it more pushed back than he was when Ilya left. It makes him look older, a little more mature, like he grew up in the past six days. “I never hate you.”

“You said you did,” Shane says – he can be so literal, so stubborn.

“Yes, I was trying to be mean. You broke my heart, Hollander.”

It’s a naked admission, stripped back of every bit of plausible deniability Ilya could possibly have left to protect himself with. But what fucking use is protecting himself, now? Let Shane

spear him through with rejection if he has to. Ilya will bare his belly like a dog. He doesn't have a choice. He can't walk any of this back, and he wouldn't want to, anyway.

Shane, apparently, does not find this as obvious as Ilya does. Ilya's kind of feeling the quiet in the wake of a storm, the settled resolution of destruction. Everything is razed bare, so he has nothing left to fret over, nothing left to lose. But Shane pulls back and gapes at him, wide-eyed. He's sitting in Ilya's lap, stroking his earlobe, and can't believe Ilya likes him. God. It's a miracle they are fucking here at all, Ilya thinks.

"What does that mean?" Shane asks. Ilya has to laugh.

"Fuck, Shane, I don't know. I know this is so fucking stupid. I know we are just asking for trouble, and I do not know what it would even be called. But I –" He swallows. The words are clunky in English, none of the soul he feels in Russian, but all he has. "I cannot go back to not having you in my life. Not like we have been lately. It hurts too bad."

Shane, quietly, thick with emotion, says, "Fuck. I, um, I feel the same."

"I like you," Ilya says, in case Shane didn't take that point.

Shane breathes, "I like you, too."

Even though Ilya knew, from context, that he had to, the words sort of shatter him. When was the last time someone said that to him, genuinely? People like his bravado, his ego, what he can do; Ilya has many, many people who want to drink with him, ride in his car, wet his dick, wear his number. He does not think any of those people would let him cry, jetlagged and snotty, in their chests – would comfort him over his mother's death, would see the true, childish, arrested misery inside him, and still want him the same way. There is nobody like Shane. His quiet, unwavering core of decency is so alien to Ilya.

It's the thing Ilya fell for, really. Ilya puts up a front all the time. And much of it isn't even a front, sure. In the good moments, he has as much fun as he says he is having; he enjoys much of his life, he loves his job, he believes in his skill, he can be the egotist and the partier with great glee. But there is always the thing underneath it all, a shameful stain he keeps out of sight. Shane is the only person who ever says: *hey, Ilya, I notice you are hiding something extremely obviously behind this exaggerated exterior. Please can you tell me what it is?*

He's just so upfront. He doesn't know how not to be. He's the one thing in Ilya's life that doesn't seem to want the outer shell.

Ilya buries his face in Shane's chest as a few more tears work out of his eyes. He's wrung out, gasping; he never cries like this, hardly ever cries at all, and this whole insane evening has worked him worse than a hangover. He hardly remembers being drunk an hour or more ago. Now he's so sober that the air irritates his skin, that his nose is painfully stuffy and his eyes sore.

"Oh, baby," Shane says, "It's okay," which, for some reason, really makes the floodgates fucking open.

Shane tugs Ilya down, so Ilya pushes him into the mattress and sprawls himself entirely across Shane's chest, his body; lets himself hang heavy, gives every bit of his weight to the solid, strong man beneath him. He wants to sleep on Shane, roll around on him; his expensive mattress is suddenly useless, pale in comparison to this. Shane strokes Ilya's back, pushing up his shirt to bare the skin.

After Ilya's tears are wiped away on Shane's clavicle, Shane says, "I really, really like you, Ilya. I'm sorry if I fucked everything up."

"You didn't," Ilya tells him. "Or, not in a way I do not understand. It is hard. We are in impossible fucking position. I want to be with you very badly, but I know it is not easy."

"Yeah. I, I want that too," Shane says. He still sounds like he can't quite say the words, *be with you*, but that's okay. They've come a long fucking way in the last two hours – Ilya can wait on the rest of it. "So, um. So, what do we do about that?"

"I don't fucking know," Ilya says, with a snotty laugh. "Why am I the one who has to know?"

"Because you're always telling me what to do," Shane laughs, poking Ilya's shoulder.

"Is not fucking true, you are the bossy one! You are always making me do shit. Everyone says poor, helpless Ilya, his center runs this team like the Gulag."

Ilya props his chin on Shane's chest, watching Shane roll his eyes above him.

"Right, whatever you say," Shane says. "Mister 'Hollander, get on your knees, flip around, turn this way, suck my cock like this.'"

"Well, that is sex," Ilya says. "Sex is different."

They haven't even kissed tonight. Ilya feels like they practically just got fucking married, and they haven't kissed since the last time, in a dark gross alleyway with Hayden Pike looming over them.

"If you say so," Shane says. Then, a pause. He's more tentative, talking to Ilya's ceiling, as he says, "So does that mean, uh. Does that mean you would stop sleeping with other people? If we were, like. Doing this?"

A pathetic wave of excitement floods Ilya's body. He thinks, in a way he hasn't previously put words to, that he has been desperately waiting for Shane to *ask* him to stop sleeping with other people. He's nearly hopelessly delighted. Ilya loves sex, and yet this – the confirmation that Shane wants him, wants a claim on him, a possessive stake, like a permanence to their arrangement that actually has words to it – is far, far hotter than any woman he could stick his dick in.

"Yes," he says, nearly immediately, probably too soon, certainly fast enough that Shane startles a bit beneath him. "I have not, anyway, since – since we have not been speaking."

It's slightly pathetic to say, but he doesn't even hesitate in admitting it. The miserable experience at New Year's is always rotating in his mind, when he thinks about trying to be

with anyone else, now. He'd never been betrayed by his dick before in his life, and the idea of it happening again is mortifying, miserable. Right now, miserable for other reasons, so deeply tired and past-drunk and grieving and sobbed out and morose, Ilya could get hard if he thought about the fact that his soft dick is laying on top of Shane's soft dick for more than two seconds. His body has made its fucking opinion clear.

Maybe this is part of why it's hard to remember when his feelings for Shane changed. Ilya has always been physical, sensory. He likes bitter, sour foods; strong-smelling cologne and perfume; expensive clothes in interesting fabrics, silks that glide along his calloused hands, worn-in leather so soft it touches like skin. He likes sharp alcohol, the burning muscles of exercise, and most of all, he likes sex. He started with sex young. Probably too young, though at the time he didn't think so. For much of his teenage years, sex was how he figured things out – his sexuality, his charisma, his friendship with Sveta, his feelings on his body, his longing for connection.

With Shane, a lot of it has been the same. Sex comes first, and tells the story for everything else.

At what point did wanting to sleep with Shane because he was attractive and dangerous become longing for Shane's body, being desperate for him, inconsolable when he couldn't have one more touch of Shane's mouth? Ilya remembers being at the cottage in Ottawa, nearly crying when he thought Shane may not let Ilya fuck him one more time before leaving. He'd been ready to do anything. Would have fucked him in the woods full of grizzly bears if he had to, just to get a taste. He hadn't thought about it in emotional terms, at the time, but in hindsight he can see the emotion laid out so bare – when desperation for Shane's body was real desperation to connect with him, be intimate with him, in any way. When other sex started paling in comparison to sex with Shane, was his body trying to tell him that his feelings had changed? Was Ilya too dumb to see?

Shane rolls underneath him, jostling Ilya off his body, then turns on his side and stares gape-mouthed into Ilya's eyes.

"Fuck, what?" he says. It takes a moment for Ilya to remember what he just admitted. "Really? But we weren't even –"

Ilya's admittedly a little embarrassed, though it's hard to care much when Shane is pink-cheeked and slightly sweaty and in his bed, burning Ilya up with his body heat, after so long apart, after hurting all this time.

"Um, yes. Because you are a fucking sex demon who put a curse on me, I think. I try with anyone else, I just think about you and then my dick is too sad to do it. All your fault."

"What the fuck, Ilya," Shane says, but he says it almost pleased, kind of like a compliment – like he can't believe. "I didn't know you. Um. Like, cared that way. Exclusively, you know."

The English word escapes Ilya for a moment, but he shrugs.

"I care all the ways," he says, because it's true, and because he doesn't know how else to say what he wants Shane to be to him.

He just doesn't have a good label to put on it. Even thinking the word *boyfriend* feels odd, in this moment; nothing and everything like what he wants Shane to be. Like he's a teenage girl. Ilya likes the word lover, in Russian more than in English but maybe both, because it is the only way he can describe what he feels is between them - a description of the feeling and the action, not an ownership.

He wants to make love to Shane and love him; therefore he is a lover, in that it's what he wants to do. Ilya has no fucking context for what else it could be. It's not like anyone has given them a roadmap. Ilya hasn't had any other gay friends since he left Russia, and all of those were coked-up club kids he only saw in secret. There's certainly no visible role model for this kind of thing. He and Shane are the first people ever, as far as he knows, to try and do what they're doing. If anything, the hockey is as important as the rest of it; Shane is his center, in every sense of the word, before he's anything else.

The label doesn't have to make sense anyway, right now, to anyone else, because they don't have anyone else to fucking tell.

He looks into Shane's eyes, and watches him.

God, it's been a miserable couple of months. Maybe it's awful that his father's death was a rotten cherry on top rather than the main affair of misery, but it's true. Ilya was miserable before he was grieving, was grieving other ways before he was newly miserable, and it has all fucking sucked.

But right now, the warmth of Shane in his bed, with nowhere else to be, is enough to take every pounding, aching cell in Ilya's tired body and set him alight.

His breath shudders, shoulders shake. Shane reaches out to him and rests a hand in the bend of his neck, just resting there; Ilya's skin breaks out in goosepimpled excitement.

"Shane," Ilya says, voice cracking.

"Yeah," Shane says quickly. "Yes, yes, okay," and rolls over again, pressing into Ilya's body, and levers Ilya's mouth open with a crooked thumb, and kisses him.

It's like drowning, how Ilya imagines to drown, being surrounded in every direction with no hope of escape and the moment of glorious giving up when you open your lungs to death. He gasps at Shane's mouth and would be happy if it was the last thing he swallowed. Shane's plush, warm lips scrape into his, while Shane makes a soft noise of despair, and Ilya grasps at him desperately, with his hands and the bend of his legs, hooks his knees around Shane's knees, puts one hand up Shane's shirt on his bare stomach and the other so tight in his hair it must hurt, and just kisses him. Gasps. Scratches their lips together, shoves his tongue into Shane's mouth as it all becomes frantic so fast, Ilya could be crying again for all he knows, the hot wide-open ache in his chest is the same and his breath comes just as quick as he pants into Shane's mouth, rolls their bodies together, rustling the sheets, scrambles the blankets away and pushes Shane over to climb on top of him, arching down against him, cock in the cradle of Shane's thighs where it's always meant to be.

“Oh my fucking god,” Shane says, when Ilya rips off Shane’s shirt, then sits up and tugs off his own.

“I missed you,” Ilya says, and his voice is thick, a little weepy, which he ignores in favour of falling back into Shane’s bare body.

“I missed you so fucking much,” Shane whispers to him, and Ilya makes a broken noise.

“Say it again,” he asks, sucking desperately on Shane’s jaw.

“I missed you,” Shane tells him, obediently.

“How much?” as he tugs down Shane’s sweatpants in a hurried tangle, abandoning them at the knee.

“So much it hurt,” Shane tells him, with a voice of shattered, desperate devotion, “I didn’t realise, at first, I’m sorry, I’m so fucking stupid, I didn’t know why it was hurting so bad, but now I do, Ilya, I promise.”

“Okay, it’s okay, I know, Shane,” Ilya promises, because he does – he knows Shane is hopeless in some ways, as he is too, he knows they have hurt each other, he knows Shane has fucking destroyed him. What does he care? If he gets to have this, now, Ilya would take it all, all the hurt, a thousand times. “I want to fuck you, now.”

Shane squeezes Ilya’s shoulders hard, digging his nails into the plane of them; spreads his legs on instinct, always so deliciously eager to let Ilya in, then says, “Fuck, I can go hop in the shower, just like five minutes –”

“No,” Ilya grunts, rolls on top of him, pinning Shane down with his whole body. His cock’s hot between his legs, stiff and eager as it rolls into Shane through his sweatpants; the sweat is building between their bodies already, prickling Ilya’s skin, his desperation a tandem with it, the need to not let Shane out of his fucking sight or his arms ever again overwhelming. “I do not care, no, I want to do it now.”

“*Ilya*,” Shane complains, in that hot, pink-cheeked, turned-on way he gets sometimes; his hands twist in Ilya’s curls, dragging Ilya’s head away from his neck, so Ilya can watch a trail of his own spit linger from lip to skin. “That’s gross, no. I’ll be so fucking quick, I swear.”

“I will die if I let you out of this bed,” Ilya promises him, seriously, because that’s how it feels. Shane laughs, kind of giddy, but Ilya means it.

“I’ll be so fast,” Shane says. Ilya goes to say no again. Then, Shane – beautiful fucking freak Shane who never gives a fuck about what anyone else has done in bed, only what occurs to him in his hot insane moments, says – “Just, I was thinking, maybe we could do it without a condom?”

Ilya’s whole world narrows and collapses into the hot, insane reality of that. He groans. Looks down at their bodies, shoves his sweats down a bit to see their cocks lined up together, imagines it like this, bare, raw everywhere. He wants nothing in between them ever, of course

he wants that. He wants to live in Shane's skin. It's not something they've ever done before, because Ilya's always been sleeping with other people too and Shane's always been pretending he might. Ilya knows if they were smarter, they'd sit down and talk about their most recent tests - thankfully frequent and comprehensive because of their job - and the last time they were with anyone else - months for Ilya, since the New Year's girl never got her mouth anywhere below the belt in the end. But they are not smart, and Ilya's cock is too stiff for him to want to be. All he cares about, in this moment, is getting as close to Shane Hollander as anyone in the world could ever be.

"You want me to?" he asks, desperately.

"Right now? So fucking much," Shane admits, hiding his face, red with embarrassment all down his chest. Ilya's pulse rages in his cock, he swears, nearly feels like he could pass out. "I feel - fuck, I don't know. I just don't want us to be apart at all, even a tiny bit. Is that stupid?"

"Not stupid," Ilya says, because instead he might do something insane like tell Shane they should get married. Gaspingly, achingly hard and deeply longing, he says, "Okay. Take a shower. Give me your clothes."

"My clothes?" Shane asks dumbly, sprawled beneath him on the mattress.

"Yes, Hollander, fuck." Ilya scoops Shane's hoodie off the bed where he'd flung it, then reaches down to yank off Shane's sweats and underwear, too. "Okay, go take shower."

Shane gives him a look, but apparently decides it doesn't matter enough to stop now. He stumbles off the bed and into the en suite, closing the door behind him. The water cuts on a moment later; he's rushing.

Ilya rolls himself up in the duvet and puts Shane's entire pile of clothes on top of his face. They're still warm from his body, a little sweaty and hot-musky-skin smelling, especially his underwear. Ilya is a gross freak and he puts the hem of Shane's briefs into his mouth and sucks on the edge of them, closing his eyes, feeling the warmth and the smell of Shane all around him while the shower cuts on next door. He's still so tired, aching with the pain of having cried tonight, the heaviness of the vodka earlier weighing on him, and the apartment is over-warm from the heating, leaving him hazy and hot. He lets himself drift in a timeless space until the bathroom door opens again in a crack of steam.

"Oh my fucking god, are you smelling my clothes?" Shane's voice says, cutting through the haze of Ilya's cocoon. Ilya rolls over, letting his little hoard fall down onto the bed, and watches the sight of Shane's naked, golden body walking towards him. He's still half-hard, swollen bulge of his cock bobbing teasingly as he steps across the room. "You weirdo."

"Yes, I am weird," Ilya agrees. "You already said you like me, though, so cannot take it back now."

"I didn't agree to that," Shane says, but he lands on his knees on the mattress, then leans down over Ilya, and kisses him again. He's kind of smiling. He smells better in person, like

Ilya's soap. Ilya lets his hands drift down to Shane's ass, running a finger between his legs, prodding at the soft opening of his hole. Shane shudders.

"You want it?" Ilya asks. It's half a sex question, half – everything else. You want it. You want me? You want everything this brings with it? You want the sex so bad you'll take the rest of me? Or you want me, somehow, against all the fucking odds, anyway?

Shane rolls onto his back, so Ilya goes with him, hovering over the top of his hot shower-damp body, their chests heaving together in the tension, their sweat rubbing off on each other, cells blurring.

"Yeah, Ilya, I want it."

Ilya nearly cries again. Instead, he gets his lube out of the drawer and buries his face in Shane's neck and fingers him open like that, all pressed together, not even doing anything but kissing Shane's jugular and stroking inside of him, using too much lube where he's not really looking. Shane gasps, rolls, pants, grabs at his shoulders. Ilya goes into another fucking world where all he can think about is this and doing it right, doing a good job, making it good for Shane, this precious thing, and – taking him, having him, *loving* him, Ilya his lover, Shane the object of the sentence.

When he's open enough Shane says, "You can do it, Ilya, come on."

Ilya's eyes are wet. He feels fucking insane. He opens the lube and pours it directly down onto his own cock, spreading it up and down with one hand, while he sits on his heels in the rumpled sheets and Shane watches him, propped up on elbows.

"How?" Ilya asks; he's barely beyond monosyllabic, English slipping out of his mind more with each moment. He can feel the warmth between Shane's legs and he's not even in it yet.

Shane rolls on his side and guides Ilya's head with one outstretched hand, tucking Ilya into the nook of his armpit. Ilya desperately lays his head on the side of Shane's chest, lines his cock up from behind him, poking the bare head against the plush, open space of his ass.

"Fucking hell, Shane," Ilya sniffs, as he pushes it inside.

No idea how long they go for, how long it lasts, Ilya is just lost – lost in this other fucking universe, as he works in slow rolling thrusts in and out of Shane's ass. Every inch of him feels good, hot, wet, tight, *bare*, like Ilya's never done it before, and he wants to keep doing it forever, so he does, over and over again, wiping his wet eyes on Shane's chest and panting, burning up the whole time.

"Yes, fuck, like that, Ilya, baby, that's so good," Shane gasps at him.

Ilya twists his body and lifts his cheek from the sweaty side of Shane's chest to latch onto his nipple, sucking it red in his mouth; he feels the tip of it harden against his tongue, rolls it around, sucks harder, moaning, while Shane twitches and groans. Pushes Shane's leg higher, getting deeper inside of him, *fuck*, like no sex they've ever had before, Ilya feels boiling, he has a fever, he has reached a critical point. He wants to eat Shane whole. He bites on the hard

bud of his nipple and watches Shane's cock spurt a milky bead of precome down onto the sheets below them.

"Fuck, you're fucking killing me," Shane tells him. "Is it good? Do you like it?"

Ilya doesn't answer for a second, stays biting at Shane's chest as he works his cock up to a frenzied heat inside of him, moving faster now, where he can't help himself – can't help but think this is his fucking reward for the misery, that he'll never complain again if this is what he gets at the end, his Shane, all his, to do what he wants to, just him, and that Shane will let him do anything.

Shane says again, "Ilya, does it feel good – fuck – doing it raw?"

Ilya comes.

After, he rolls over panting and laves hot wet kisses over every inch of Shane's burning body, and Shane's shooting off before Ilya does more than squeeze his fingers around the head of his dick, and Ilya just keeps kissing him, more like sucking on each point of contact; the cavern of his armpit, his sternum, the inner crook of his thigh, knee, the sole of his foot. Shane starts laughing about then, but Ilya is deadly fucking serious, needy, insane. Shane pushes him away with his foot and drags Ilya's body back up to kiss his mouth, and Ilya goes, feeling like he would cry again if he had anything left inside to give. He doesn't, so he just sits in the scraped-raw shudder-breathed feeling and laves his lips against Shane's and burns.

The after lasts for a while. Ilya can't find any fucking words for the longest time. They just lay there, Ilya all the way on top of Shane, all the way naked, all the way covered in each other. Ilya's cum is leaking out of Shane's ass. He plays with it a little until Shane tells him to stop, then a little more, until Shane says it again and means it.

An evil, awful part of Ilya thinks that he's almost glad his father died, if this is what he got out of it. He'd take the trade again.

Eventually, they clean up. Usually Ilya does this part, but today Shane's the one who goes to the bathroom, washes up, brings a cloth back for Ilya and gently wipes the sticky remnants off his soft dick while Ilya melts into the mattress. He likes this feeling – Shane, taking care of him. He likes it even more when Shane, clean and naked, crawls back into the sweaty sheets with him, pulls the blanket over them, and holds Ilya's hair.

Nobody ever stays the night with Ilya. Shane never has before.

"Will you stay to sleep?" Ilya asks him, suddenly desperate. Shane gives him an odd look.

"I mean, yeah," he says. "I'm not leaving you the fuck alone after this, are you kidding?"

Thank god, Ilya thinks. He kisses Shane, a series of short, sharp pecks that leave him tired and satisfied when Shane eventually pushes him back down into the bed and lays on his chest.

Then they're just – there. In the dark, warm cocoon of the night. The words have been said. The sex has been had. Ilya's body and mind are both equally wrung, sated, satisfied and exhausted. He feels the dark cavern of sleep calling him with alarming lure, his mind starting to slip under the cloak of it, the woozy half-falling feeling jerking his limbs.

Quietly, into the scratch of hair on Ilya's chest, Shane says, "Fuck. I don't even know what to do now. Do we need to, like. Talk about what we're gonna do next, or something?"

The thing is that Ilya knows his man, inside and out. He knows what will make Shane the happiest in the whole world to hear.

He says, slowly, "I will make you a deal. Why don't we talk about it after we win the fucking Cup?"

Shane laughs, and Ilya falls asleep to the sound, the feel of it shaking both their bodies.

Chapter End Notes

next time: the morning after 

i told a moot i was calling this chapter the fic's spiritual cottage (#mycottage) because it was the emotionally intimate bottle episode, but that was before i wrote it and oh boy did it get more emotional and more bottle-eppy the longer i wrote. this was an intense one and i hope it delivered on the catharsis from the last few for yall, i would love to know what you thought !!!

[fic post](#) / [my tumblr](#) for fic snippets & update timelines between chapters

Chapter 23: punctuated by moments of tenderness.

Chapter Notes

important news for this chapter: i looked up the music charts for the week the last scene of this chapter is set and oh my god. we are young by fun, boyfriend by bieber, SOMEBODY THAT I USED TO KNOW, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, starships by nicki, what makes you beautiful, and fucking Call Me Maybe were all in the top ten. if that list is not an iconic period piece i don't know what is

this chapter is supposed to be a bit of a deep breath after all the Everything, so i hope u enjoy ! and tysm again for all your lovely comments last time, i read and appreciate every single one 

a lovely anon on tumblr asked me about the use of first names in this fic and i ended up writing a big thing about their headspace regarding how & when they switched to first names, so if anyone wants to read that feel free to see [here](#) !

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

Consciousness returns to Shane slowly. He's usually woken by his alarm, a sharp blaring alert which rises him at 6AM every day, regardless of practice or games or days off. It startles him awake every time, plunging him into the waking world like the feeling when you drop into an ice bath. He's not used to waking up *slow*.

Today, the first thing he becomes aware of is how warm he is. There's something soft and hot and heavy spread over his body like a heated blanket. A little noise works its way out of Shane's throat as he tries to drag his brain back into his head. He takes a deep breath, and a familiar smell fills his nose – nice laundry powder, someone else's shampoo, musky sweat. It's a delicious combination. His mouth falls open and he takes a deeper breath of it as he finally blinks his sore, confused eyes open.

Then the world rushes in all at once. Thin winter sun is filtering through the window, and Shane has six foot of solid Russian muscle sprawled all over him like he's Ilya's personal mattress; Ilya's completely naked, leg frogged over Shane's hip, open-mouthed drooling onto his chest and gripping one of his biceps hard enough to hurt, even unconscious.

Shane's heart thumps. His lips curl up helplessly, stupidly fond. He works his hand through Ilya's matted curls and tugs; Ilya makes a snuffling, grumpy little snore into the meat of Shane's chest, a wet string of his saliva pooling onto Shane's skin.

"Ilya," Shane mumbles. "Wake up, you're being gross."

But he makes no move to shove Ilya off. Truthfully, Shane would kind of like to be covered in Ilya's spit all the time. Whether he's conscious or unconscious.

He runs his hand over Ilya's head a couple more times while Ilya snuffles a few more groggy, quarter-awake noises. He's near cherubic like this, but he's also fucking heavy, and Shane kind of needs to pee, and he has to imagine Ilya's alarm will be going off soon. Yet some part of him hates the idea of getting up, which isn't like him. He sinks deeper into the mattress, into the weight above him.

Shane has never woken up in the same bed as someone before.

He finds Ilya's ear and tugs on his earlobe gently. Never slept the night with someone – not since he was a kid who crawled into his parents' bed with regularity until past when he was a little too old for it, really. Since he's been a teenager, though, Shane has always been alone. He's not used to this. Sharing rooms on the road, sure. Blocking out Dubek's snoring with a pillow wedged over his head. Even staring at Ilya from a mattress away, wanting him in the night and resisting it. But not this. The warmth. The closeness. Every one of his senses being filled up with Ilya's body. Their stomachs rising and falling with breath together. No space between them.

His breath shudders a little; he tugs harder at Ilya's ear.

"Mm, mm," Ilya breathes out. He rubs his nose a little harder into Shane's chest. Shane feels his muscles tense and then relax; his arm moves up to rub at his face, the bleary awakening process. He mutters into Shane's chest, "Good morning. Why is it so early?"

"It's not early," Shane murmurs lowly. "It's nearly seven."

"Horrible," Ilya mutters. His breath is hot, wet against Shane's skin. "So early is torture."

"I know you're a professional athlete too, you know. This whole undisciplined hedonist act doesn't really work on me."

"Why you are giving me English dictionary words at five in the morning?" Ilya groans.

"Ilya," Shane says, and it comes out half with a laugh, far too fond. He jostles Ilya against his chest, squeezing the warm, hard muscle of his back in one hand. "I just said it's nearly seven."

"Four. Fucking three-thirty," Ilya groans, and finally rolls over, flopping onto his back dramatically across the mattress and stretching out his arms above his head with a groan.

Shane's almost buzzing with energy. It's not how he expected to feel after last night. By the time he fell asleep to the sounds of Ilya's breathing, he was tired down to his bones, emotionally scraped dry inside, adrenaline crashing harder than after losing the fucking Stanley Cup. He'd expected to feel like absolute shit today. More hungover than he's ever been from alcohol. The kind of way he felt waking up in the hospital in 2009.

Instead, he's, like – giddy. Bright. He wants to laugh. He wants to roll out of bed and stretch his whole body. He wants to wake up Ilya's soft cock flopped in the honey-brown curls at his crotch and wish it good morning inbetween his tonsils. He wants to get breakfast together, maybe even out in public, which, Shane thinks, wouldn't be *that* weird. If they went to

Dunkin for coffee together, people would probably just think it was sponsored, not gay. There's a lot they could do. If they wanted to.

"Hey," Shane mutters. He rolls onto his side, and Ilya finally, properly meets his eyes. Ilya does look tired; curls a mess, eyes bloodshot and bruised from exhaustion and crying. But he's so fucking pretty. Shane says, quietly, "Thank you for talking to me about all of that, last night."

Ilya stares at him, for a minute. The pale sunlight is filtering into the room, casting long, contemplative shadows across Ilya's bare skin. He's milky-pale, his smattered moles catching Shane's eyes like an instruction manual for where to press his tongue. He wants Ilya's body. He wants a lot of Ilya, right now.

"Thank you," Ilya says, lowly. His accent is thicker than usual, maybe from the week in Russia or his exhaustion; Shane knows, without being told, how hard Ilya pushes himself most of the time to sound as fluent as he can in English, to not be misunderstood or dubbed stupid for existing in his second language. It's kind of nice to hear him unfiltered. Like he doesn't need to try so hard for Shane. "For staying with me all night."

"Of course," Shane whispers. It's clearer to him now than it was before, maybe, how much Ilya enjoyed having another body in his space; maybe any body, maybe particularly Shane's. Ilya had clung to him all night, like a child. Shane puts a hand on Ilya's chest. Rubs the thick plane of muscle above his heart. Finds the golden chain Ilya always wears, warm from being pressed between their skin all night, and rubs it with his thumb. "I really like you, Ilya."

Ilya's eyes shine at him. He swallows. He says, "I like you more, Shane."

"There you go again, always making it a competition," Shane grins, and Ilya rolls his eyes, and Shane rolls on top of him, and they don't leave bed for a while.

After practice that afternoon, Shane has dinner with Hayden and Jackie – planned weeks ago, Jackie's already grilled enough salmon to feed a small army. He can't exactly cancel, even though he feels like his whole body is buzzing and floating and a lurching feeling in his stomach is desperately dragging him back towards Ilya. Can't cancel, so he goes. Smiles at the baby. Pretends not to be traumatically disgusted by Jackie talking about labour, because he knows he's supposed to think it's natural and beautiful or whatever, even though he secretly doesn't. Plays a round of darts with Hayden in the den and beats him pretty embarrassingly. The usual stuff.

By the time Shane's home, sipping water at his kitchen counter and trying to motivate himself to do his evening stretches, the buzzy adrenaline's mostly crashed out of his body. What he's left with is the feeling of being wrung-out in a good way; a warm, soft relaxation in all his muscles, like a hot bath after a hard workout. His breaths settle deep in his belly. Practice went well today; they have a game tomorrow, but he feels good for it.

His phone beeps. Shane nearly smashes his glass of water in his hurry to look.

From: Rozanov (Boston Raiders) [9:18]

where are u

Sent: [9:18]

Home, about to go to bed, like a normal person

Why?

From: Rozanov (Boston Raiders) [9:19]

many things wrong with this text

first only very old grandmothers have bedtime this early

2 cant believe you can sleep after seeing pike house and the fifteen babies it is like a horror movie

3 i am only upstairs and you have not come to see me (((((i am so lonely, you don;t care?

Shane's throat catches on a tiny, disbelieving laugh. He puts his water glass in the sink.

Sent: [9:20]

You saw me less than four hours ago, and the rest of the entire day. You can't be that lonely



Shane moves out of his kitchen, wanders into his bathroom. Picks up his toothbrush.

From: Rozanov (Boston Raiders) [9:20]

oh, you are counting now? Is a bit desperate no?

Sent: [9:21]

Fuck you

From: Rozanov (Boston Raiders) [9:21]

if your ass is not too sore ;)

Shane puts his toothbrush in his gym bag with a spare pair of sweats. He finds his sneakers in the hall.

Sent: [9:21]

What if it is? You don't want me to come over anymore? Thought you were lonely, not horny

He shoves his feet into his shoes without unlacing them.

From: Rozanov (Boston Raiders) [9:22]

i can be two things

just if i look at you i forget any emotion other than horny 🍆🍆🍆

Shane rolls his eyes. He finds his keys. He really, truly wasn't planning on going over tonight – not sure what the new lines they've drawn even mean, focused on the game, all of that. Like, sure, he thought about Ilya today. A lot. But Ilya hadn't said anything when Shane headed off with Hayden after practice, and they didn't agree to be fucking joined at the hip.

Going home alone tonight felt pretty open-and-shut. He knows, because he'd played out the scenarios in his mind extensively on the drive home.

His phone buzzes again. Shane's mouth curls into a helpless little smile as he looks at the new texts; tone of flirtation suddenly gone, something more serious and earnest beams through the phone at him, past Ilya's terrible grammar and weird non-emojis.

From: Rozanov (Boston Raiders) [9:23]

come even if u do not want to fuck

Bed is cold ((

Fuck. Shane goes.

Shane's never felt so fucking alive for hockey. He's running on sunshine the next two weeks. The Raiders were still thoroughly upper-middling the division and confident in a playoff spot, but the hockey the last couple months had been, for maybe the first time in Shane's life, a slog.

It's not that now. He vibrates to get on the ice two days after he and Ilya first talk. Everyone in the locker room keeps giving him amused looks; Marleau calls him a puppy with the zoomies, which is nothing like how the rest of the team usually think of him. They're usually calling him a good little Canadian robot. Shane doesn't have much to argue with, though; he can't stop bouncing, crossing back and forth across the room to bring random objects to people just for an excuse to move around. Finding reasons to walk past Ilya's stall and grin at him. Ilya always grins back. Pokes him with his stick sometimes. Makes a dumb joke.

Hayden corners him after the game that clinches their playoff spot – 5-1 win, two goals for Shane, including a beauty that had him spinning and landing hard on his back on the ice to land a shot – and gives him an awkward look. “So, uh, you're in a good mood,” Hayden says.

“Yeah,” Shane agrees, breathless and smiling. His back's fucking killing him; he'll be bruised blue all over and need some heat therapy for the next couple days, at least. He wants to do it again. He tells Hayden, “Uh, things are, like, good right now.”

“Okay,” Hayden agrees. He makes a weird circle with his eyes like he doesn't know where to look in the room, winces, and says, “Rozanov seems pretty pumped, too.”

Ilya also scored two goals tonight. He's plastering himself on Marley right now, thumping him around the head with a sweaty shoulder-pad and exclaiming in Russian. It doesn't look all that affectionate, but Marley's got a sharp grin like a piranha, obviously not annoyed.

“Yeah,” Shane says, rolling his eyes. “He's an idiot.”

This doesn't seem to give Hayden the response he's looking for, but Shane doesn't know how to express it – certainly not in the middle of the locker room like this, and words are hard at him for the best of times. He and Ilya didn't even decide on a name or anything for what they're doing, anyway; how's he meant to talk about it? Would he want to, with Hayden, even if he could? Hayden's his friend, one of his best friends, but Shane still can't imagine talking about this thing with Ilya to someone who isn't actually in it. It's still insane enough they've decided to be anything together at all.

Shane tries, eloquently, saying; “We’re, uh, okay again.”

“Okay,” Hayden says. He glances around, too. Clearly not so dumb he'll ask about it right fucking here; he just claps Shane on the shoulder. “Well, I guess that's good, man. As long as you're, like, happy.”

“I'm really happy,” Shane assures him. “I mean, we're going to playoffs.”

The happiness is true and real; it looms, though, in tandem with the intensity of pressure staring down at them. A final-two team, losers in the last game of the playoffs last year, who've had a good-to-rocky season this year and are currently on a hot streak to end the regular season with. There are eyes on them. People are paying attention. The barn's packed every night they play and the other teams are letting them fucking have it, like they're trying to get a few good injuries on the books before playoffs, not letting the Raiders coast.

Shane has a 7-game scoring streak. Whenever he scores he feels sweaty and breathless and sated as right after sex; it helps that Ilya's always there, slamming his body against Shane's, in either regard.

It's not like it's all perfect. The idea of anyone finding out about him and Ilya is petrifying, too bad to consider. The Cup hangs like an anvil above his head, something which could crush him if he doesn't reach it. They all remember the brutal race last year, the crushing disappointment at the end of it; there's a heavy determination to the whole team. Shane's dodging calls from his mom and can't physically eat enough chicken fillets in a day to bulk up any more before playoffs. But. Shane didn't know that life could feel this good.

The end of the regular season is almost upon them. Only a few more practices to go after this one before they're officially in playoff territory. Shane, sitting in his stall and lacing his skates, finds himself oscillating rapidly between nervous dread over the hockey and giddy endorphins when he accidentally presses down on the bruise Ilya left inside his thigh last night. He's so distracted by the sensation as he leans on it with his elbows that he hardly notices anything else in the room.

Then the door slams into the wall, a frustrated grunt coming from Feller, limping his way through on crutches. He flings himself into his stall, then, sharply and suddenly, throws the crutches at the wall. Everyone stops talking, listens to them clatter to the ground.

“Dude, worse tantrums than my toddler,” Hayden says.

Heikky, trying to get his pads on in his huge goalie stall across the room, calls out, “It was bad news, then?”

“Yeah, I’ve fucked it,” Feller groans. He’s not geared up for practice like the rest of them are; a telling sign in itself. One of his broad hands spans his own knee as he grunts out, “Physio says surgery, for sure.”

A startled panic runs through Shane. He checks, “Wait. Surgery? I mean, after playoffs, right?”

They all know Feller’s knee has given him a recurring trouble for years, and that a bad fall a few weeks ago was the worst one yet, but nobody’s really been talking about it. Officially the team’s calling him ‘day to day’ with an unspecified lower body issue. Everyone’s supposed to act like he could recover any moment, even when he’s limping around with his knee as swollen as a pumpkin – but, like, it’s *playoffs*.

“Dunno,” Feller groans. “Doc says we can try another cortisone shot to hold me together for a couple games, but it’s not gonna last.”

Shane glances over his shoulder, catching Hayden’s eyes; they share a worried look. It’s not that Feller’s a top-three player on the team, but he’s a solid piece of their strategy, and one of the longest-running vets in Boston. He’s, like, non-negotiable. Part of the team puzzle.

“But we need you in playoffs,” Shane says, struck a little dumb. Hayden elbows him in the ribs, which usually means he’s been insensitive, but – it’s *playoffs*.

“Fuck you, man, you think I don’t wanna be there?” Feller grumbles. Someone tosses a dirty sock at Feller’s head; it takes Shane a second to realise it was Ilya, just entering across the room. Feller fights the sock away and says, “But I’m fucking thirty seven, dude. See how you feel when you get to my age. Half my joints are held together by a fuckin’ prayer.”

Shane’s brain whites out. Marley leans around Feller, claps him on the shoulder, which is good, because nobody else seems to be great at comforting him.

“Don’t worry, dude, we got you,” Marley says. “So you take a couple weeks for surgery shit, who cares? We’re going all the way to fuckin’ finals. You’ll be back on the ice with us for that last game, man.”

Shane’s not so sure, but, to avoid more of Hayden’s elbows, he keeps that worry private in his gut.

He doesn’t want to imagine being Feller’s age. Not that he cares about age, as a number, but he cares about the lifespan of his body and his hockey. Hockey players have longer careers than a lot of other athletes, despite how brutal the sport is, but it still seems so shockingly, achingly short – he’ll play until he’s forty, he always tells himself, but that’s only, what? Twenty-one years of his life in the NHL. He can’t conceptualise still being alive after retirement. It’s a black wall in the plan of his life, a void that swallows up all possible

speculation. Shane loves to think about how many cups he might have by then, but a hard border draws down when he tries to think about anything that could be in his life post-hockey.

Across the locker room, Ilya makes a noise. Shane looks up; their eyes meet.

Feller says, “Yeah, we better fuckin’ win, man. Doc says this could be my last season, for sure if I get another concussion. Way my body’s acting up, I kinda see it.”

It’s grim news, to any player. A couple of the guys go bump him on the shoulder, make sympathetic noises. Shane stays stock-still and grim in his stall.

Feller and Shane aren’t exactly *close*, but they’re teammates. Shane remembers watching him on TV in Raiders games long before he was drafted – remembers Feller being the first teammate to invite him to something when he joined, that fucking barbecue. The idea that he could leave the team, a vet who’s been on this team since Shane was in Timbits, is startlingly scary. If they don’t win the cup this year, his last season could fizzle out, just like that – legacy gone in an instant.

Ilya catches Shane’s eyes across the room again, makes a weird face. Exaggerated shrug. Like he’s asking what Shane’s being so weird about. Shane flips him off and flees to the ice.

That night, Shane lingers outside Ilya’s apartment door. It’s silly, he knows. Very silly. They haven’t made plans to see each other. For all he knows, Ilya’s not even home – it’s not like they’ve got some kind of established arrangement. They haven’t spent *every* night together in the last couple weeks. It’s just –

Fuck it. He knocks. If Ilya’s not home, he won’t know Shane knocked; safer than texting, in that way, of saving a bit of his own needy embarrassment.

Ilya answers, like, two seconds later. Shirtless. Broad, hairy chest, gold chain bouncing between his tits. Curls slicked back at the sides of his head. He grins when he sees it’s Shane and Shane nearly passes out on the spot.

“I knew you could not keep off my cock for two nights in a row,” Ilya says, teasingly, pressing his hip into the doorway and running his tongue across the jagged edge of his teeth. Shane rolls his eyes, pushes through the door – but Ilya catches him around the waist as he tries to get past, spins him into the back of the door as it closes and leans into him.

He smells so good, like a fresh shower. He’s warm to the touch. Outside, winter has finally retreated into the breathless gasps of spring, and in here, Ilya’s body presses against Shane from toe to chest.

“Shut up,” Shane says. “Who said I’m here for you? I need to borrow a cup of sugar. Like, neighbour stuff.”

“You don’t eat sugar,” Ilya reminds him. Shane swallows; Ilya leans in, rubs his nose in Shane’s neck and lets out this soft, happy little sigh. “You are terrible liar.”

“I’m not lying,” Shane lies.

“Oh, what would you call it then? Is this supposed to be sexy roleplay?”

Shane’s never said the word *roleplay* outloud in his life, but he can’t deny that he’s watched a lot of outlandish scenarios in porn that he thinks Ilya would probably be pretty sexy pretending to copy. Maybe it’s an idea to bookmark for later – for the summer, when Shane’s earned some time to relax.

“If we were gonna roleplay, I’d think up something better than borrowing *sugar*,” Shane insists. Ilya would be a rival warlord defeating Shane in battle and claiming his body as a ritualistic reward or something. Shane would have to make notes first. Ilya laughs, and then leans in, and Shane can’t help but give up and kiss him. His hands fit around the back of Ilya’s head without him even meaning to do it. God, he tastes good; his lips are hot and so gentle with Shane’s, tugging at his mouth, smooth motion like waves lapping at him.

When they pull apart, Ilya looks a little softer around the eyes. He nuzzles the side of Shane’s face, kisses the hollow of his cheek.

“Will you stay tonight?” Ilya asks. Shane remembers the texts, after that first night. *Bed’s cold*. Like Ilya wanted his company, but didn’t know exactly how to say it. Something hammers inside Shane’s chest as he thinks about Ilya alone, in his big bed, without Shane.

Shane loves a king sized mattress and a white noise machine and not being disturbed by anyone else. He’s never thought of sleeping alone as *sad* before. But for some reason, when he pictures Ilya doing it, he kind of can’t bear it.

Arms winding around Ilya’s neck, Shane says, “Sure. I really need to get a toothbrush to keep here, if you’re gonna keep inviting me, though. It’s a pain to have to run back up to my place every time.”

“Mm. I think we can manage to buy you another toothbrush. I don’t know if you heard, but I am very rich.”

Shane finds himself laughing, as he pushes Ilya back from the door, stumbles into the apartment with him. “I use a pretty fancy toothbrush, you know. It’s electric. Five different settings. You might go bankrupt.”

“Hollander, I will risk it for you.”

Later, sprawled together in bed that night trying not to act weird about cuddling, Shane asks, “What are we gonna do about playoffs this year?”

He's not even sure exactly how he means it. The travel, the hotel rooms, the sleeping arrangements, the plays, the hockey, the injuries, the rest, the meal plans, the team building, Feller's surgery, winning the fucking cup? He means all of it and none of it. He kind of wants Ilya to just – make it all be okay. The anticipation, excitement, fear, terror, pressure. He wants it taken out of his hands, even if just for a moment.

Ilya stretches out beneath him and says, “Only thing I know is we are not following your fucking sex ban this year. Is probably why we lose.”

And because Ilya just bought the most expensive electric toothbrush available on the American market while Shane was in the shower and then proudly showed him the email receipt when he got back instead of immediately ripping him out of his towel, Shane says, “Yeah, alright.”

They lose their last game of the regular season, which sort of makes Shane feel like drowning himself in the showers, but their playoff spot has been secured for a while so it's not the end of the world. They have a desperately needed couple of days off, which everyone mostly spends carboloading and napping, preparing to start a race against their own bodies. Shane bulk-orders every chicken-based dish that his meal service provides and stockpiles them in both his and Ilya's freezers. He ups his protein shakes to five a day.

His mom calls on the day of their next practice, when Shane's warming up in the gym. He glances at Hayden, on the bikes next to him, and inclines with his ear.

“I'm gonna take this real quick,” he says. He hasn't talked to her in a couple days, and he's sure she wants to figure out which games she and Dad are flying down to watch. He feels bad that the idea of them staying with him right now makes him miserably nervous. Not for the reasons it used to, but for new, weird, far scarier reasons. Reasons who won't let Shane sleep outside their bed for more than one night at a time lately.

Hayden nods his head, barely paying attention as he cycles, an earbud hanging down his neck – Shane can hear his music blasting out. A horrible pop song he vaguely recognises from every Starbucks speaker the last few months, *now you're just somebody that I used* – Shane escapes before he has to listen to any more of it.

“Hey, mom,” he answers in the corridor, covering his other ear with the hand not holding his phone. He kicks his feet against the floor a bit, listening to the echo.

“Hi, sweetie, how's practice today?”

“Oh, you know. Good, same as ever. The guys seem really focused.”

“That's good! That's great, Shane. I hope you're feeling okay about everything. I think you guys have a really good chance this year, you know?”

“You’ve said that the last two years, too,” Shane points out, rolling his eyes a bit. He hears her huff down the phone. There’s background noise, like she’s doing something while talking, probably leafing through a contract or something – his mom never can just sit still.

“Yes, and I was right both those times, too. It was just bad luck. Listen, we’re going to fly down for the opener, of course, but Dad has to work the rest of that week and the one after. Should I just stay with you while he’s busy? I could look after the apartment when you’re travelling, and then be there for all your home games.”

Shit. Shane swallows. This is kind of what he’d been dreading.

“Uh, I dunno, Mom,” he says. Guilt settles low, heavy in his stomach. “I mean, obviously I want you to visit, I just – um, it might not help me focus? I kind of like. Being alone, in the apartment, sometimes. To get in the zone.”

Fuck. He’s a horrible person. It’s not that it’s a lie, exactly, because Shane does like being alone, but it’s not the reason he doesn’t want her to stay – he just can’t tell her that he doesn’t want to sleep at his own place during playoffs, because he has a secret fucking – Ilya – right upstairs.

“Oh. Okay, honey,” his mom says. Shane leans forward and puts his head on the wall, closing his eyes for a second. “I just want to make sure someone’s taking care of you, that’s all. I know it can be a really stressful time. Even if it’s just having someone there to vent to after a tough game, or heat up your dinner for you and bring in the mail. I can do whatever.”

He feels even worse. He knows, of course, how she worries. “I know, mom. But really, you don’t need to do any of that. I’m – uh, the team are really good, you know, about looking out for each other? They’ll be around.”

His excuses are fracturing. Does it even make sense, he wonders, if she can’t stay for weeks because he wants alone time, but then he’s supposedly with his team all the time, too? Maybe he should have said there was a burst pipe in his building instead. Maybe he should have just let her come.

“If you’re sure,” she says, not sounding sure at all.

“I’m sure,” Shane lies. “But come down for the first game, definitely. I mean, let’s see how the first round goes before we make any more plans, right?”

“Oh, come on,” she scoffs. “You’re making it past the first round. You think *New York’s* going to take you out? Fuck them! They’re horrible this year, everyone knows it.”

“Mom,” Shane laughs, but it does make him feel a little better. He stands there and lets her rattle off stats at him for a while, soothed by the same-brain way they work sometimes, her ability to read hockey stats off the inside of her own eyeballs. The tension looses a bit in his shoulders.

Then, his dad’s voice appears muffled down the end of the line; “Don’t let her talk your ear off too long, kiddo. Remember to have some fun, too!”

Shane swallows. He is having fun – more fun than he’s ever had in his life – but he can’t tell them about it at all. For a brief and absurd moment, he wonders what it would be like if he just told them, *I’m actually kind of seeing someone*.

That’s the closest thing to a label he can put on it at the moment, but it still feels monumental. He’s never mentioned anything remotely regarding a dating life to them before – he has no idea what they think about that, hopefully just that he’s awkward and focused. It would probably blow their minds if he just dropped the news. He thinks his dad would be overjoyed, proud, ask him for details, ask to meet his person. Then he imagines how they’d react if he said, *I’m gay and it’s Ilya Rozanov*. The idea becomes far more chilling and less appealing.

“I’ll have fun after playoffs, Dad. I’m locked in right now,” he says instead. “Listen, I gotta go, we’re at practice.”

“Okay, honey. Train hard, alright?” his mom says.

“And we love you,” Dad calls out.

“Love you guys,” Shane says, a little gummily, and then hangs up.

He stands in the hallway a minute longer, trying to sort out the whirling in his mind, get himself back in the zone. But before he can manage it, the door opens right into him, and Hayden’s standing there. He shifts his weight between his feet a couple times, wavering with his water bottle.

Oh, fuck.

“Hey,” Shane says, hoping this isn’t going where he thinks it’s going. Hayden glances up and down the hall, making sure they’re alone. Small mercies, at least.

“Hey, dude,” Hayden says. “Listen, I was just thinking. Uh, you wanna, like – talk? About stuff?”

“Like, playoffs?” Shane suggests, hopefully.

“Come on, man. No, I mean, like –” His voice lowers ridiculously, like he’s in a spy movie for kids, one where they can’t actually talk at a whisper in case the audience lose track so just have to pretend. “Like, you and Rozanov not being cold war central anymore.”

Obviously, he’s noticed. The whole team probably have, to some degree, although Shane has no idea what anyone thought was wrong before – he heard a few betting pools going around about who slept with whose girlfriend, thanked his lucky fucking stars hockey players were so dumb, and mostly ignored it from then on. Everyone just seems happy they’ve patched things up, now, enough to play well together on the ice. They’re not overly stuck-together at practice, or anything. Ilya usually hangs out with Marley and Connors and the younger rookies; Shane sticks with Hayden and the coaches. But obviously, everyone knows they made up.

Not everyone knows what Hayden knows.

“Um, yeah,” Shane agrees. That awkward two-sentence exchange in the locker room a couple weeks back is the closest they’ve gotten to talking about any of it, until now. He glances around too, double-checking they’re alone. “Yeah, listen, about that. We’re. Um. We’re back to being – good. Which is good. You still can’t tell anyone, okay?”

“Dude, of course,” Hayden assures him, a little too quickly. Shane thinks, *fuck, he’s definitely told Jackie*. “I’d never.”

“Right.” It’ll only be Jackie. Hayden will have sworn her to secrecy, too, feeling guilty; Shane trusts Jackie not to run her mouth. He thinks. His stomach churns. “You’re not gonna be weird about it, are you?”

“Come on, man, of course not. I mean, I don’t get the whole *Rozanov* thing, but –”

“That falls under being weird about it, Hayd,” Shane tells him, rolling his eyes. “You can’t be a dick about him.”

“Okay, no fair, he’s a dick to me *all* the time.”

“That’s his way of bonding,” Shane lies. He actually thinks Ilya doesn’t like Hayden at all. But it’s not like Shane’s crazy about all of Ilya’s friends either. “Anyway, we’re not, like – I don’t know. Defining it, or whatever. I know it probably doesn’t make sense, but we’re, um. We’re happy.”

It feels fucking insane to talk about it out loud. To even attempt to vocalise one tiny fraction of the things he and Ilya came to understand, baring their souls and bodies to each other in Ilya’s bed back in February; half of what they communicated to each other wasn’t even said aloud, and Shane still wouldn’t know how to phrase it. He’s not going to stand here and tell Hayden he’s got a *boyfriend*. He certainly can’t tell Hayden any of the emotional details – Ilya’s mom, his own past – or the intimate ones – because Shane would be quite happy if Hayden didn’t even know he had an asshole at all.

Yet, despite barely having the words – it’s kind of nice. To be able to say it, to someone, even if Hayden’s making a face like a concrete wall. Shane feels this weird kick of excitement, a cold-breathed flutter in his lungs.

That Ilya likes him enough for Shane to be able to say it this way. That they’re happy. To even use *we*, at all, in description; he and Ilya as a private unit of two, allowed to speak collectively. It feels daringly intimate. Almost more exciting than the details of the sex.

“I really am happy for you, man,” Hayden says, punching Shane in the shoulder. “And not even just because you’re fucking kicking ass at hockey right now, although that definitely doesn’t hurt.”

“Who is talking about ass without me?” a familiar voice asks from the equipment room doorway behind them. Ilya grins sharply as he pushes his way into the hall, hefting a hockey stick over his shoulder and raising his eyebrows their way. “Seems like a little conversation I should be in, no?”

Shane rolls his eyes, but can't help the flood of warmth in his cheeks. He's absurdly aware of Ilya's body as he approaches behind them; even a meter away, it's like the hairs on Shane's body stand up in his direction.

"Rozanov," Hayden says begrudgingly.

Ilya, because he's an asshole, says, "So formal, Pike? You can just call me Captain."

"You're not even the captain!" Hayden protests. "You're a fucking alternate. And if I have to pick, my captain is *Shane*."

"Mm, mine too," Ilya agrees. "I tell him this all the time."

Then he leans in, and rubs his lips against Shane's cheek.

Shane startles back like he's been electric shocked, shoving Ilya away. "*Ilya*," he hisses, pressing himself back into a wall. They might be in a random fucking hallway with nobody around, but that doesn't mean – fuck, it's still kind of *public*, a team building this big, anyone could come around the corner any second, fuck, Shane nearly passes out thinking about it.

Ilya looks only vaguely sheepish as he says, "What, it's just Pike. He already knows."

"Okay, you know what," says Hayden, "I'm gonna leave you guys to – this." He gestures between them weirdly for a moment, then gives up. "Uh, good talk. Happy for you. See you on the ice, dude."

Then he turns and walks away like he thinks Ilya's cooties might be catching. Which, honestly, the way Ilya acts sometimes, they might be.

Shane waits until Hayden's disappeared around the corner before he shoves Ilya hard in the chest. Ilya pouts, rubbing at the sore spot where Shane hit him as Shane warns him, "Seriously, Ilya. Not at the rink."

"Okay, okay," Ilya agrees, letting out a sigh. Shane can see the moment his daringness kind of gives way to sincere regret, which is a relief, to know Ilya feels the threat of it all too, even if he gets carried away. "Was just too funny to do it in front of Pike. His little face. He looked like I killed a cat in front of him."

"That's not a good excuse," Shane protests, even though – well, Hayden's face *was* a little funny.

"It's a great excuse," Ilya says. His grin's immediately wide and silly again; he's spotted that Shane's not really mad. Fuck. He seems extra giddy as he says, "Anyway, you are my good luck charm for playoffs, so I cannot resist. I need to get extra lucky so we will win."

He winks, a big, salacious wink that makes Shane shove him again.

"Don't even start bringing luck into this," Shane groans. "We need hard work. Practice. Feller's fucking knee to hold out. A backup goalie who's not AHL filler. Fuck, what if this isn't our year?"

“It will be,” Ilya says, confident as anything. “Sveta says so. She is always right. I spoke with her this morning and she says San Francisco will lose to us in finals.”

Right. Svetlana. “Oh,” Shane says, eloquently, nerves flooding his stomach.

It’s a name he’s never exactly thrilled to hear. He knows he met her that one time, and has heard of her by reputation through Ilya’s stories, of course. He knows she’s Ilya’s best friend, and was even in Russia with him for the funeral. Unfortunately for them all, the only thing that ever pops into Shane’s head when her name is mentioned is Marley telling him, “*Yeah, year before you were drafted, we walked in on Roz going down on her in the locker room. Fuckin’ wildcat, man.*” He’s never gone down on *Shane* in the locker room.

“She will come see the first game of playoffs,” Ilya tells him. “Stay for a couple of days with me. She wants to meet you before then.”

Discomfort itches below Shane’s shirt. “I already met her,” he points out. “At New Year’s.”

“That was more than a year ago,” Ilya scoffs. “And it was not a proper meeting, it was a club. Could not even hear anyone to talk to them.”

“Yeah, it was your terrible music they were playing, I remember.”

“You call *my* music terrible? You only listen to weird washing machine noises and podcasts about the gym.”

“Well, your taste is enough to put me off most music for life,” Shane gripes.

“You are dodging the question, anyway.”

“There was a question?”

Ilya gives him an unimpressed look. “Will you have dinner with Svetlana?”

Shane thinks, *no*. He does not want to spend the night before playoffs making smalltalk with someone else who knows what Ilya looks like when he comes. He does not want to sit nicely at a table and imagine her naked and wonder what Ilya’s favourite parts of her body were and whether Shane’s measure up and if she did anything in bed that Shane hasn’t done or isn’t good at. He doesn’t want them to have inside jokes or little asides in Russian that he won’t understand. He wants to get his head in the game for the most important playoff run of his life; take care of his nutrition, get plenty of sleep, meditate on success. He doesn’t want to be arrested before he can win a Stanley Cup for burning down the building with them all inside of it.

Ilya, very carefully and subtly and away from the view of any doorway around them, runs his hand down the length of Shane’s side, tucking it for just a second against his waist and squeezing. Endorphins flood Shane’s body; the gentle touch makes more impact than a full-body check into the boards.

Shane says, “Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

next time: games and friendships ✍️

thank you so much for reading !! i hope u enjoyed a more relaxed chap that we deefinitely earned after the last few lmao. i would love if you'd let me know your thoughts in the comments 🧡

+[fic post](#) & +[my tumblr](#) for fic snippets or update timelines between chapters :)

Chapter 24: and there we are, standing in the shooting stars.

Chapter Notes

some of the teams in this playoffs series are not divided accurately by the divisions and conferences as they would have been in 2013 and i'm not going to change that but i do want anyone who cares abt hockey to know that i did my research FIRST 🙌 and then decided to ignore it and do what i wanted SECOND

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

Their first round of the playoffs is against New York; the first game is a home game in Boston. The night before the game, Svetlana flies in to stay with Ilya. She claims that she 'refuses to root for Boston when she's watching in New York', since she lives there, and therefore has to come visit if Ilya wants her to cheer for him.

It's a weak excuse that Ilya is thankful for. They haven't seen each other in person since returning from the funeral in Moscow, but she's been checking up on him through increasingly aggressive texts ever since, and having her presence around again is a soothing, childlike comfort.

Ilya leans across his kitchen counters, sipping a coke as he orders dinner on his phone. There's a low-level current of weirdness in his body that he's been trying not to think about since February. It's not getting worse, but not necessarily getting better. He scrolls through GrubHub, picking out dishes from Sveta's favourite Russian restaurant in Boston, and swallows as he scrolls past the blini, which look just like the ones they served at his father's funeral.

It feels like an aching lifetime ago, and also no time at all. Ilya has not yet stopped expecting the weird, erratic calls from him to come through; still always jolts a little when he hears his phone buzz.

He rubs a hand through his hair, trying to push those thoughts out of his mind, and adds some other dishes to the order instead. He's got no idea what Shane will eat, given how picky he is, but the hard part was getting him to agree to come to dinner at all; now that he's locked in to attend, Ilya isn't too concerned with what they actually eat. Shane will follow it up with some nasty protein shake, regardless. The whole team are all desperate to keep weight on for playoffs; eating is their only hobby outside of the rink for the next two months. Shane can handle some non-macrobiotic dinner.

He remembers all over again, while he's putting through the order, that he's about to have dinner with Svetlana and Shane. It's so bizarre that it almost makes him laugh every time he thinks about it. Ilya may have no living parents and a brother he can't stand to be in a room

with and a horrible knot of resentful grief in his chest, but the two most precious people in his universe are about to be under the same roof, making smalltalk for his benefit.

“Ilya,” Sveta calls out, as she strides casually out of the guest room where she’s been unpacking her luggage and finds him in the kitchen. She says in Russian, “Zip me up.”

Sveta turns around, showing him her bare back, the open sides of a tight dress gaping around it. She’s dressed beautifully, and far too fancy for dinner at home, which he knows Shane will hate if he feels underdressed – Ilya levels her with a flat look as he does her zipper. Her tits are half-out in this dress. It’s not something he’s ever complained about before, but Ilya’s currently dating a jealous freak as skittish as a horse, and he’s not oblivious to the fact that Shane kind of wants Svetlana to disappear off the face of the earth.

“You are doing this torment him,” he says. Sveta rolls her eyes as she turns around, fiddling to put in an expensive earring.

“I’m doing it to torment *you*,” she tells him. “It’s very funny to me that you are so uncomfortable now, like a twelve year old with a first crush.”

“Fuck you,” Ilya grumbles, which makes her laugh. He figures he’s not gonna have any luck with convincing her to change into some old sweatpants and possibly a paper bag on her head, so he just says, “Is the guest room set up okay? The cleaning service moved some of the things you left laying around last time, because you’re a fucking mess.”

“It’s fine,” she says; then, “You know, your boyfriend is very lucky that I refuse to have sleepovers with the men I fuck. If I was used to being in your bed when I visited and you suddenly relegated me to the guest room, I’d be very annoyed.”

There’s an amusement to her voice, but Ilya can see beneath it, to the challenge. He meets her eyes, unimpressed. He knows she’s not – not exactly *thrilled*, maybe, that he went from sobbing on her about Shane to suddenly asking her to play nice with him. He doesn’t think there’s more to it than that, but there is, admittedly, a little overlap in Shane and Svetlana’s roles in his life that he doesn’t know how to address to either of them and is sort of hoping they sort out on their own. He’s stopped fucking Sveta so he can fuck Shane. His comfort from spending nights with Shane alleviates Sveta from having to hold him together in a way she never really liked. It’s all a little messy in his head, the roles they do and don’t play for him, beyond the fact that he needs them both, achingly sincerely.

“Don’t say shit like that when he gets here,” Ilya warns her. “He’s already jealous.”

“He should be,” she says, which doesn’t exactly fill him with confidence for how the evening will go. “Does he know what a mess you were, after what he did last time? Did you tell him?”

The doorbell rings.

For a second they both stay where they are, a stand-off, staring at each other. Then Ilya jolts to attention, leaving her behind him to go answer the door.

Shane's standing on the doorstep, awkwardly shifting his weight around, holding a bottle of wine in front of him like a weapon. He's wearing a nice shirt and walk-in suit pants. Ilya suddenly feels absurd, the only one out of the three of them in Adidas and a tank top. Why did nobody tell him this was a formal affair? It's his fucking dinner!

"Why do you have wine?" Ilya asks, instead of a greeting. Shane gives him a look like he's trying to manifest a death laser. "You do not drink. And we have a game tomorrow, so I know you won't let me drink either."

"When you're invited to dinner, you have to bring something," Shane grits out, like Ilya is a horrendous moron for not understanding this. Of course, Ilya knows the social convention, perhaps even more important in Russia than it is here. But the idea of Shane, who usually comes up from his own apartment in his slides and gym clothes and last week stood completely naked in Ilya's kitchen re-organising his fridge for him, bringing a *host gift* is so absurd that Ilya just gapes at him for a second. Shane says, "Are you going to let me in?"

Suddenly, Sveta is behind his elbow. The door has barely swung closed behind Shane before she moves around Ilya, and kisses Shane once on each cheek. Shane's eyes go wide, like a prey animal being hunted, and Ilya tries to ignore the little flutter of happiness in his stomach he gets about seeing the two of them together.

"Hello, Shane Hollander," Sveta says. It's odd to hear her speaking English; she's much more fluent than Ilya, having an American mother, but they so rarely speak it to each other that he sort of forgets that sometimes. Shane nods at her, his head bobbing a bit too hard like it's slightly out of his control.

"Uh, hi, Svetlana," he says. "Nice to see you again."

She lets out a peal of laughter, patting Shane's arm. "Oh, you don't have to lie," she says. "I know this is very weird."

"Sveta," Ilya complains, prodding her in the ribs; she shoves him, hard, before looking back to Shane.

"It's not weird," Shane says weirdly. "I'm happy we're doing this."

He never has been a very good actor. Whenever Ilya sees Shane's most recent commercial on TV he has to pause whatever he's watching just to laugh at how woodenly Shane says *with my Rolex I never miss a second* like he's being held at gunpoint. He looks the same now as he does in that ad, although unfortunately he's wearing more clothes now.

"Whatever you say," Svetlana says, with a viperous smile. "Shall we have a drink, then? Ilya already ordered the food."

She turns, and leads the way back into the apartment. Shane catches Ilya's eyes. He does not look happy. Ilya gives him an innocent face, shrugs, and delights in Shane's pissy little exhale of breath before he storms off after Sveta.

Shane drinks water – because he’s Shane – and Ilya drinks water – because he wants Shane to give that little *good job*, Ilya look – and Sveta cracks open the expensive wine Shane brought and pours herself a glass. Food arrives not much later. They unpack it onto plates at the kitchen counter, Shane making little faces as he asks what each thing is, looking dubious.

“You will like this,” Ilya guesses, as he piles a few things onto Shane’s plate; vegetables, fish. “And this. And this is good for protein, will make you play well tomorrow.”

That’s the magic phrase; Ilya could have guessed it would be. Shane says very seriously, “Okay, did you get more?”

He’s so cute. That earnest little furrow of his brow. His nice buttoned-up shirt like he’s going to Sunday church. Sveta is stood just a meter away, arranging her own plate, but Ilya can’t help himself from leaning over and kissing Shane.

His mouth is always so hot, soft, makes everything else in the world shut down. Shane allows the kiss for a second, a delicious second that makes Ilya buzz all over, before he pulls away, casting a frantic glance Svetlana’s way.

“Don’t stop on my account,” Sveta says, a little too sweetly. “I’ve seen Ilyusha kiss men before, it’s nothing new.”

“Sveta,” Ilya says lowly, because he’s not exactly sure how Shane would take the news of precisely what he, Sveta and Sasha got up to all together in their teen years, but knows it wouldn’t be chill. Then, he rubs a hand over Shane’s waist and says, “I promised I would not do it again at the rink, but I have to kiss you at home. I will die otherwise. It’s okay here, is just Sveta.”

He can see the cogs working in Shane’s mind for a moment. And it’s not like Ilya doesn’t understand – this huge, claustrophobic secret of theirs has been building for three years. Letting it be open in front of someone else, even in a safe place, is completely strange. Every part of Shane’s body must be screaming at him that it’s dangerous for anyone to see this.

He’s right, of course. But as Shane worries his lip between his teeth and says, “Okay, I guess you’re right,” Ilya can’t help the wild thrill that goes through him – of being able to kiss Shane in front of someone. To have somebody witness this thing between them, to know for sure that he hasn’t made the entire strange affair up inside his head. To know Shane is real, and really wants him, enough to let it go onto this kind of official record; witnessed by Ilya’s best friend, his family.

Unable to help it, smiling, Ilya leans in and kisses Shane again. He gets a little closer with his body and smooths a hand over Shane’s hair and rubs their lips together wetly, feeling a happy shiver run through his whole body. This time Shane puts up with it for several seconds, even tucks one of his fingers into the waistband of Ilya’s sweatpants, before he pulls away when he feels Ilya’s tongue on his mouth and says, “Okay, it’s still *rude* to make out in front of someone, oh my god Ilya.”

Ilya laughs at him as he retreats to the table, and Sveta catches his eye behind Shane’s back, raising an eyebrow at him. He pulls a face at her, and then follows Shane.

They eat at the big table, Sveta making a valiant attempt to get through the bottle of wine by herself. Shane picks around some of the food, but likes the fish, and even tries to pronounce a couple of the Russian names when Ilya explains them to him. His pronunciation is horrible – he sounds more French than anything else, blurring together the vowels and trailing the words off half-finished at the ends. But it's cute. Ilya sits next to him, opposite Sveta, and isn't oblivious to her watchful eyes.

Shane makes a face while picking around the golubtsy on his plate like the cabbage leaves have personally offended him once he sees the red meat wrapped up inside of it. Ilya tells Svetlana, "Usually he only eats brown rice and salmon, so this is big meal for him."

"Fuck off," Shane says, his eyes drifting to Svetlana for a half-second before he focuses back on Ilya. "Not *only*. It's just what my nutritionist usually sends. I'm not a baby about flavour or anything. I bet I've eaten Japanese food you would think is insane."

"Mm, you will have to show me sometime," Ilya says, kind of charmed by the idea. He's not really clocked Shane eating much Japanese food, outside of the endless supply of miso soup in his fridge which he seems to treat like a comforting snack. When Ilya went to stay with the Hollanders last summer, David was always cooking, and to Ilya it was all what he thinks of as American food. Maybe technically Canadian food under the circumstances. Burgers, spaghetti, lasagne, chicken and salad. Shane rarely talks about his Japanese family; Ilya wonders, sometimes, how much of that is his decision, and how much of it is how Yuna raised him on purpose, and how much of it is something hockey has forced him into to succeed.

"So he doesn't eat junk and he doesn't drink alcohol?" Sveta says, as she finishes the last dregs from her glass of wine. "What do you even have in common, Ilyusha?"

She sounds like she's joking, but Ilya can always tell when there's an edge behind Svetlana's words. He glances sideways at Shane; Shane goes still for a moment, looks down at his plate.

"Stop it," he warns Svetlana in Russian. Then, quickly switching back to English; "We are two best hockey players in the world, we have the same job, we work out the same, we are both very hot, our lives are both difficult, and we have the best sex ever. What more do we need in common?"

"Oh my god, Ilya," Shane mutters, but he's looking up again and not hunching over his plate, which Ilya considers a win.

A warm explosion of fondness goes off inside Ilya's chest. He stretches one of his arms around to the back of Shane's chair, laying it across Shane's shoulders, and meets Svetlana's eyes across the table. She looks back at him.

They have known each other long enough, by now, to have this kind of secret language. He can tell when she sharpens and softens from a glance; she always knows when he's serious, when he's joking, when he's hiding, when he's sad. Right now, as he looks at her, Ilya tries to tell her, *I want this to go well. Please just be friends. I need you both.*

Svetlana looks at him for a long, irritated moment, before sighing and resting her chin in her hand. She looks Shane's way, speaking to him directly for maybe the first time all dinner.

"Well, are you going to tell me the full story of you two, now? Because Ilya only ever said bits and pieces. He is lucky I'm very smart and put it together."

"Uh," says Shane. "I mean, I guess? What do you want to know?"

"I mean, I know Ilya wanted to sleep with you since you joined the team. He told me back then, even if he didn't use your name. So when did it start for you?"

Shane takes an awkward sip of his water, casting his gaze about like he's not sure what to say. Ilya, desperately curious on his own, doesn't come to his rescue. Eventually, Shane says, "I mean, I guess about the same time, if you mean, uh, like, physically? We were still kind of – rivals, I guess back then. But, um. Yeah, I found him attractive."

This is incredible news. Ilya *knew*, of course, when Shane first joined, that he thought Ilya was hot. He wasn't very subtle, and Ilya has a good eye for these things. But to hear Shane say it aloud is delightfully ego-boosting. Ilya puffs his chest up a little, feeling like a proud bird. He wants to present Shane to Sveta and say, *look, I did a good job at being sexy for him, do you approve?*

Then, it's sort of like Shane can't stop talking. He goes all in a big earnest rush as he keeps going, "And obviously it started as a physical thing, and I was really scared because I could lose everything if anyone finds out I was sleeping with a guy, but I just couldn't stay away from him, I mean, literally because we live in the same building and play on the same line – uh, you know what I mean, but also like, personally. But it took me a long time to realise what that meant, I guess right up until, um, when his dad died. And then while Ilya was gone for the funeral I sort of realised a whole bunch of shit all at once because I was so worried about him, like, all I wanted was for him to be okay, so I kind of decided, like, fuck it? Like, if he's not okay, nothing else matters. So. That's the story, or whatever."

A burning warmth spreads in Ilya's chest. His face feels kind of flushed in a way he can't understand, and suddenly, he's almost embarrassed to meet Svetlana's eyes, burnt up by the heat of his adoration for Shane. Fuck. Hearing Shane talk about him, like this – *to* someone else, like Ilya's not a secret for him to hide away in his shameful closet – strikes something so tender that it almost makes Ilya upset.

Ilya feels sometimes like a poor dog who keeps getting returned to the shelter, injured and rejected, only to finally now be taken home by someone who maybe, possibly really wants him. *Don't leave me, don't get rid of me*, Ilya wants to beg. *Please keep me forever*.

There's a beat of silence, as Ilya leans over and puts his face to Shane's shoulder. Shane startles a bit, but lets Ilya rub his face on him and kiss Shane's shoulder through his shirt, smelling the warm scent of his cologne.

Svetlana finally says, "He missed you in Russia. He didn't speak about you, but I could tell, when we were at the funeral. Half his mind was back here."

Ilya doesn't even care that they're speaking about him like he's not there. He doesn't want to talk about his father's funeral, or his family, or anything outside of Boston or outside of this building or outside of this room.

"He talks about you a lot," Shane tells her, as if he suddenly thinks he has to compete with her for most-earnest-Ilya-confession. "When we all met you at that New Year's party, we had to make a tally on a whiteboard in the locker room of every time he threatened someone not to fuck with you. He thought every guy on the team was gonna hit on you because he kept telling us how 'cool' you were."

A peal of laughter escapes Svetlana, while Ilya briefly pretends to be wounded and retreats into embarrassed silence. It's not exactly how he remembers it. He certainly didn't want anyone on the team to hit on Sveta; not because she can't handle herself or reject them if she wanted to, but because he had the feeling of a child with a favourite toy at a shared daycare or something. The knowledge that he had no ownership over it, but still didn't want his time infringed upon. It's maybe a rude way to think about his closest friend, but it's not that he views her as some sort of object – more that he views himself as a hopeless child, when he gets attached.

"Well, he was very wrong," Svetlana says, with her sharp grin as she stabs a bite of her dinner loud enough to make a noise of fork against plate. "Nobody hit on me at that party. All I did that night was find out you were gay."

Shane's face drops. Ilya lights up with glee. He remembers his worry after they got home from the bar that night and Sveta said *I think Shane Hollander is gay*; back then the thing between him and Shane was barely solidified, and he knew Shane would be horrified if anyone suspected his sexuality. In retrospect, it's mostly just very funny. It only took her one conversation to figure it out.

Shane clearly does not find it funny. "What? When?" he asks, his fork falling down onto his plate in dismay.

"You don't remember?" Sveta says, grinning. "We spoke at the bar. I showed you my silk lingerie and you checked your phone."

"You did?" Shane says, sounding mortified. "I didn't notice."

"Yes." Svetlana reaches across the table and very gently pats Shane's hand, like she's introducing herself to a scared pet. "That is the point, Shane."

Shane's mortified expression persists, and he lets out a groan, putting his head in his hands for a second. Ilya, unbearably fond, reaches up and strokes the back of his soft hair, laughing around a mouthful of his dinner. God, what did Ilya do to deserve this man.

It's hilarious to imagine a Shane not noticing Sveta trying to suss him out – she is one of the prettiest women on the planet, and Shane was so determined not to make eye contact with her that he didn't even look at her breasts? Ilya's never had that problem with Shane, that's for sure. If Ilya unbuttons a couple buttons on his shirt and then plays with his cross where it sits

between his pecs, he can sometimes make Shane spill a drink or pop a full boner in public without even touching him. No wonder Svetlana realised he was gay in seconds.

On the other hand, Ilya knows that to everyone else they know, none of Shane's behaviour would read as gay for a single second. Sveta's a club kid who spends all her time in New York nightlife; she's used to noticing if a man is into her or not. Ilya's been fucking closeted men since he was sixteen, and learned the signs. But everyone else they know – their team, fans, staff, even Shane's parents – exist in such a different space. The world of hockey, where everything is about the game, and what's expected of you. It's considered exotic in hockey if you marry a girl who isn't blonde. The idea of a player being gay would be so ludicrously unthinkable to the rest of the guys that Ilya knows it would just – never occur to them. He could kiss Shane in the middle of the ice and they'd just roll their eyes about weird Russian rituals or something. If he and Shane are acting suspicious, people would assume all sorts of things before they got to queerness; gambling, steroids, collusion, trades, coke, prostitutes, alien invasion. The culture that forces them to be closeted there is the very same thing keeping their closet walls as thick as a bank vault.

In a way, it's kind of a blessing that Svetlana figured Shane out so quickly. It's a reminder that their strange, oppressive little corner of the world is not all that's out there.

Of course, he'll likely not have much luck convincing Shane of that. But Shane has settled a little in his seat, anyway, and he seems to calm down when Svetlana asks abruptly him, "So, who do you back between San Francisco and Anaheim? I'm torn. The entire Pacific Division is such a mess."

This is the magic question. "I mean, Anaheim barely limped into a playoff spot," Shane says immediately, all hint of awkwardness forgotten. "They fired their head coach like, two months ago, and they've been a mess ever since with line changes. Plus they have that *awful* goalie, Morden, like, barely point eight six save percentage? I can't see them making it past the first round."

"They are more experienced, though," Svetlana points out, leaning back in her chair a little and spinning her glass between her fingers. "San Francisco have not been to the playoffs in seven, eight years? They have too many young players who have never seen a single playoffs game before. They may burn out fast, struggle to line match, get tired."

"Yeah, but young can also mean more energy and staying power. Half of Anaheim's roster is over thirty, they'll be slower. Plus Overton's out with an injury, and I think Sulaymanov is day-to-day right now, too."

"Maybe you are right, but do you remember that awful game between them in January—"

Ilya leans back in his own chair, and listens. Their conversation is boring, the last thing he wants to talk about before a day where he has to go and care about his own team against someone entirely else, but he feels so full that his heart might explode. Shane's passionate face, a line worked between his brow as he thinks, seriously, about these bad fucking teams that won't have any impact on their own wins. Svetlana's analytical, skeptical mind, always wanting to trash talk with the air of someone who knows their own authority and is confident they will be exactly right. The two of them, together. In Ilya's home.

In the end, Ilya is the one who loads the dishwasher while Sveta and Shane finish their power ranking of the Eastern division. By the time he's done, it's dark outside and the deadline of Shane's bedtime-alarm is looming. He returns to their new spot on the couch, and puts his hands on Shane's shoulders, rubbing at his neck.

"Well," Sveta says, taking the hint. "I think it is time for bed. I want to watch good hockey tomorrow, so you can't stay up too late. Goodnight, Ilya, goodnight, Shane."

She unfolds her legs from underneath herself and stands up, stretching this way and that in her tight dress. Shane really doesn't look interested at all, which pleases Ilya; even though he knows Shane is gay, the reminder of how highly Ilya falls in his scale of attraction compared to people around them never goes amiss.

"Uh, goodnight," Shane says, oh-so politely. "See you at the game tomorrow."

She gives him an amused look, then leans over and kisses Ilya's cheek. In Russian she mutters in his ear, "He's on thin ice, but I like him."

It's the closest to approval he could hope to get from her, he knows. Ilya's chest is warm as he pats her arm and she draws away. She takes a moment scooping up her phone and getting a glass of water in the kitchen, while Ilya leans closer to Shane and says, "You will see her in the morning too, you know. Unless you're not staying the night?"

He tries not to sound quite as pathetically desperate as he feels about that idea. They've not spent every single night together since they made up. Ilya has just wanted to. Truthfully, every time he now faces down his bed alone, the grand expanse of his mattress feels like a grim, isolated wasteland. He sleeps fretfully without Shane's warm body to anchor himself to. Misses the huffed noises of his breath and the smell of his laundry power. The way Shane holds him all night, tight like a vice; he's a little too fixated, maybe, on how much he wants to keep hold of Ilya, but it works out perfectly, because Ilya desperately wants to be trapped and never let go.

Shane shoots an odd glance to where Svetlana is retreating to her room and says, "Uh, I mean, I guess I still can. I'll have to leave pretty early – my parents are flying in before the game."

"All the more reason to stay tonight," Ilya points out, and Shane gives in.

In the bathroom, Ilya brushes his teeth, takes a piss, and strips down to his underwear while Shane hops into the shower. Normally Ilya would take the excuse to shower with him, but tonight Shane bullies him out, so instead Ilya goes and collapses onto his bed. He plays a bit of Temple Run on his phone until eventually Shane emerges, redressed in a plain t-shirt and sweats from the gym bag he left at Ilya's place last week. Of course, he has his white socks on. He's so cute. Ilya opens his arms, and Shane crawls right on top of him in the bed.

"Thank you for tonight," Ilya mumbles, feeling the fabric of Shane's clothes rub against his own nearly-naked body. He sort of likes being nude while Shane's dressed; it feels lewd and naughty, like Shane is something for him to corrupt. Ilya kisses his jaw, spreading his legs underneath Shane's, and Shane sighs. "I was happy to have you both here."

“Uh, yeah, of course,” Shane says. It’s his awkward press voice. His off-script voice. Ilya snorts a little laugh into his skin.

“You can tell me if you hate her,” Ilya promises. “Will not change anything, but you can tell me. Were you very jealous?”

“I think she’s great,” Shane says. “She’s really cool, and clever, and she has perfect opinions on hockey, and she cares about you a lot, she’s your best friend ever who you used to fuck, and she’s gorgeous.”

Said in the voice of a man who definitely does not think all those things are *great*. Ilya runs his palms up and down Shane’s back, working beneath his shirt to the warm expanse of his skin. “I thought you were too gay to notice that part,” he teases.

“When’s the last time you fucked her?” Shane asks, suddenly. Ilya swallows. He feels like he’s in dangerous waters, but he doesn’t know if it’s worth it to lie.

“Maybe eight, nine months,” he guesses. It’s not like he’s been keeping track, but there had certainly come a point where things between he and Svetlana shifted – their sexual relationship had always felt like a fun, teenage indiscretion, a form of rebellion between the two of them when they were kids, and it played less and less into their dynamic as they grew. By the time he was so deeply into things with Shane, it felt almost like an insult to her to distract himself by sleeping with her. Svetlana clearly lost interest in him the more romantically mopey he became, too. Unfortunately, he knows none of this will help allay Shane’s jealousy.

“Was it good with her?” Shane asks. He shifts a little, bringing himself onto his elbows above Ilya to stare down at his face. “Was the sex hot?”

“Fuck, Shane,” Ilya groans. “I don’t know what to say that will not get me in trouble.”

“Just tell me,” Shane grits out.

“I mean, yes, it was hot. But it was not like it is with you, I mean, not special like this. Mostly just for fun.”

“But it *was* hot. Did you do anything with her that you haven’t done with me?”

Jesus. Ilya hardly remembers. He’s had a lot of sex in his life, done a lot of things with a lot of people, and plenty of it blurs together by now. Most of the specific memories he has of Sveta are of their early encounters, the firsts they shared; she was his first kiss, the first pussy he licked, the first threesome he had. Their later sex was fairly routine, often drunk; she was usually the one in charge, which is certainly different to how it is with Shane, but he doesn’t recall exploring any deeply wild kinks with her at least.

“No, solnishko,” Ilya says, maybe half a lie, but what he thinks is a generous comfort. “I mean, only some things that are different because you are a man.”

He pushes them over and rolls on top of Shane, looks down at Shane's serious, frustrated little face, spitting jealousy with the intense focus of a generational athlete who's never met a problem he can't hard-work his way through. Shane's hands go to Ilya's shoulders instinctively, letting Ilya crush his weight down on top of him, while Ilya tries to decide if he should be scared or turned-on right now and settles somewhere between the two.

"Okay," Shane mumbles. And then, just when Ilya thinks it's over, "Did you sleep with her in this bed?"

Ilya groans, putting his face in Shane's neck. "Shane," he says. "I am sorry, I have slept with many people in this bed. None of them more times than you. I will get a new bed if you want. I would do it tomorrow, right away, but we have to play a fucking playoff hockey game, yes, you remember?"

Usually bringing up hockey is a great way to distract Shane. Especially high-stakes hockey like the kind they're about to play; like the reason they can't be up late tonight, and need their energy. But right now, it doesn't work. Shane just lets out this irritated little huff of breath, and his fingernails dig into Ilya's shoulders, face sour and conflicted. Ilya knows that Shane is trying not to be awful about how jealous he is. Ilya also feels a sick hint of pride over it, if he's honest; that Shane wants him *this* much, that Ilya takes up this much space in his mind. But at the end of the day, he wants Shane and Svetlana to get along more than anything else.

"I will come up with a list," Ilya says, wildly scanning his brain for ideas. "Kinky things I have never done before. We will do them together, yes? Send me your browser history from porn sites, we will do all the things you have ever looked at. Will that help?"

"It's not just about *kinky*," Shane grumbles, but he doesn't push Ilya off his body, which is some kind of win. Ilya, testing his luck, rolls his face further into the crook of Shane's neck, and presses a wet kiss against his skin. Shane lets him, tilting his head further for Ilya to reach as he says, "I don't care about other people you've fucked, but it's weird when it's your *best friend*. I mean, Jesus, how would you feel if I'd been sleeping with Hayden since I was fucking sixteen or whatever and then suddenly I was expecting you to make nice with him and sleep in the bed where he, like – sucked my cock a few months ago?"

Ilya's been sleeping with Sveta since he was fourteen, but decides not to correct him. The thought of Hayden and Shane ever sleeping together is so disgusting it's nearly laughable, but not remotely threatening in Ilya's mind; he knows Shane's type too well. Shane would be turned off in two seconds by that pathetic-puppy energy and the fact that he was a second-round draft. Now, if there was someone else out there who was big and strong and cocky and as good at hockey as Shane, Ilya might understand being worried.

"If you did not want to get dinner with her, you could have said," Ilya says.

Shane scrunches his face up in frustration, letting out a little groan. "Ugh, it's not *that*. I wanted to meet her properly. I'm – I mean, I'm glad, that she's there for you, and that you have someone who loves you that much, and she helped you while you were in Russia. I want to like her. I don't want to be – like this, but I just am. Fuck."

“Do you want us to go and sleep in your bed instead?” Ilya checks. It’s irritating to get out of bed and walk downstairs at this time of night, but he’ll do it, for Shane. If it means Shane will stay, hold him, and also maybe let Ilya rub one out before they have to fall asleep tonight.

Shane stews for a second and then says, “No,” and then abruptly and violently drags Ilya into a kiss. “I want you to fuck me,” he says, while his hands knot in Ilya’s hair. “Right now. ”

“Oh, fuck,” Ilya mumbles, and then Shane begins devouring his mouth, lashing his tongue between Ilya’s lips until Ilya gets with the program. He barely knows what he’s saying when he pulls apart for air a second later and mumbles, “You mean fuck for real? We have game tomorrow.”

He’s losing his English determiners, his mind is so immediately gone. He thought he’d a blowjob tonight at most; Shane’s usually so skittish about ending up with sore muscles the night before a game. Tonight, he apparently doesn’t give a shit.

“So?” Shane asks, as he shoves his warm hands into Ilya’s underwear. “You’re the one who told me my sex ban was why we lost playoffs, aren’t you? Don’t you wanna fuck me so good that we win our first game?”

“You are insane,” Ilya tells him, mad with lust, as he gives in and rips Shane’s shirt over his head. Their naked chests press together and Ilya nearly loses it immediately, the heat in the room overpowering in a second; sweat prickles all over his body as he mutters a swear in Russian and he and Shane scramble to get Shane’s sweatpants down his legs at the same time.

Everything is a hot mad rush, broken only by frantic kissing; Shane moaning into his mouth and rubbing Ilya’s cock through his underwear while Ilya scrambles to grab the lube and condoms, sending a few spare condoms scattering across the floor in his haste; he’s two fingers deep in Shane’s ass while Shane sucks a furious hickey onto his neck a minute later, and all Ilya’s nerves light up from his jaw to his clavicle, tingling through the upper half of his body, throbbing in the rest. Shane’s tongue works up Ilya’s jaw. He sucks hard on Ilya’s earlobe and Ilya squirms, makes a noise embarrassingly like a squeak.

“I want it hard,” Shane tells him, in a rough, frantic push of breath as Ilya struggles to roll the condom down over his swollen cock. Ilya’s barely nodding in frantic agreement before Shane pushes him over and onto his back, swinging one thick, strong thigh over Ilya’s hips and settling his ass down in the cradle of Ilya’s pelvis with a groan, the sheets twisting up Ilya’s legs.

“Oh, fuck,” Ilya says, as he struggles to free his foot of its blanket prison, while Shane, feral-eyed and gorgeous in the lamplight and shivering with need, fumbles to get Ilya’s cock in his hand and slowly work it into his ass. He’s burning hot inside, so tight Ilya feels it spread out from his cock and all over his entire body like an embrace. His eyes squeeze shut, lungs heaving. “*Shane*, solnyshko, you are so fucking good.”

“Hard, Ilya,” Shane pants out, as he pushes his hands into Ilya’s shoulders and uses them to take his weight, dragging off Ilya’s cock, slamming back down onto it. Ilya’s not one who needs telling twice. He grabs Shane’s hip roughly with one hand, snapping his hips up into

him; his other hand raises to Shane's face and slaps his cheek, an impulse in the moment that makes Shane shudder, his cock jumping into Ilya's stomach. Ilya does it again, wishing they had nowhere to go tomorrow so that he could do it even harder, leave a mark. He pinches Shane's nipple. Shane bounces on top of him in a frantic pace, so fast it almost hurts.

"You want it?" Shane asks, into the burning air between their bodies; leans down, moaning, towards Ilya's face. "Tell me, tell me it's good."

"Fuck, Shane, it is so good," Ilya groans, his eyes scrunching closed, his toes curling in the sheets as he fights not to come too soon, to give Shane what he wants.

"Tell me again," Shane says, as he plants his hands on the headboard either side of Ilya's head; his strong biceps bracket Ilya's skull, and Ilya kisses at one of them, but Shane shakes him off, starts rolling his hips faster, harder, shaking the mattress. "Fuck, Ilya, come on."

The headboard slams against the wall with the force of their bodies, and Shane's grip on it. And it occurs to Ilya, in a flash of inspiration among his lust-addled mind, what Shane is doing.

"Shane," Ilya says, delightfully scandalised, around the grunts of breath being forced rapidly out of his lungs. "You are trying – to make me – be loud?"

"Fuck off," Shane mumbles, the motion of his hips slowing for a second; he's pink-cheeked as he licks at his lips. "No I'm not."

"Mm, you are not subtle," Ilya says, delighted. The difference between now and when they were at Shane's cottage and had to fuck in silence because of his parents is so stark it makes him laugh. Of course, being overheard by your parents is different than being overheard by an ex-something, but the fact Shane wants it like this is both sweetly funny and searingly hot. Shane *wants* to be overheard. He might as well piss on Ilya if he's staking his claim this hard. That's one for the list of kinks Ilya's never tried with somebody else, he supposes.

He grips Shane's hips and rolls them both over, slamming Shane's back into the mattress. Ilya puts a hand around him and slaps the side of his ass, listening the little noise Shane lets out at the sting when Ilya starts to fuck him again, lets his chain bounce into Shane's face and a string of saliva land on his neck. Shane grabs his hair so hard it feels like it tears at the roots, makes Ilya's eyes water and his cock leak.

There's a little hotness to Ilya in imagining Sveta hearing them through the wall, but he knows saying that to Shane would make everything a thousand times worse, so he buries the thought away deeply and immediately (wonders if she'll touch herself listening to them, like she used to when she watched him fuck Sasha; swiftly reminds himself he is now a monogamous man). Instead, he focuses on the gorgeous body underneath him. Shane wants him this badly, to be so possessive he's stupid about it. He wants Ilya badly enough to make a scene when he usually hides himself away with desperate shame. Ilya could get used to the brazen version of Shane.

The bedframe creaks, loudly. One of Shane's legs hitches up and knocks the bedside table when Ilya forces it up towards his head, sending a lamp rattling. "Ow," Shane grumbles,

grabbing for his own ankle, but Ilya keeps fucking him through the pain, which Shane seems to like, because a second later he's got his head thrown back against the pillow and he's coming out of nowhere, his cock shooting between them, a few fat spurts of cum landing hot on Ilya's belly and making him squirm.

It doesn't take him long after that, never does; he goes crazy for the feeling after Shane's finished, when he's all lax and pliant and Ilya can do fucking anything to his body. He chases into the burning warmth of Shane's body and Shane sucks his earlobe again and Ilya comes so hard his vision goes black and spotty and he's saying insane things in Russian into Shane's hair, so desperate he's almost crying, when the feeling in his legs comes back.

Fuck, that was good.

Ilya pulls out when his cock starts going soft, but doesn't go far. They lay for a minute, gasping and sweaty, in such a mess of bedding that Ilya doesn't know which side of the sheets is which.

"Do you feel better now?" Ilya asks, when he's caught his breath a bit. Shane groans, puts a pillow over his head.

"Maybe," he says. "I guess. Sorry."

"What are you sorry for? I try to make you be louder all the time," Ilya points out, with a laugh. He tosses the used condom off the edge of the bed, stretching out his sweaty, pleasantly exhausted limbs. "I would fuck you in the middle of the rink if you wanted. Is cute that you are so needy for me. But you are going to get along with Sveta now, yes?"

From under the pillow, Shane says stiffly, "Sure, of course. I mean, she seems great. I get why you like her."

He's clearly still seething with jealousy, but Ilya thinks he also does mean it in some way. Pleased, Ilya presses himself down into Shane's chest, kissing him over his heart.

"You and her will be best friends in five years time," he predicts. "Probably ruin lives of bad hockey players everywhere together."

"Okay," Shane says, not removing the pillow. But one of his arms does sling around Ilya's back, warm and steady. "Maybe more like ten years. And you do have to buy a new bed."

"I will buy a new everything," Ilya promises. "Actually, I am still planning on buying a house. That will be all sorts of rooms where I can fuck only you. Maybe you will help me look, after we win the cup?"

This is the first thing that makes Shane, red-faced and sweaty and still covered in lube and cum, peek out from beneath the overstuffed pillow. "Really?" he asks, suddenly boyish and cute with earnest interest. "I mean, yeah, I'd love to help you look. I have some thoughts about Boston real estate."

“I know you do, lyubimy,” Ilya mumbles. He snatches the pillow and tosses it off the bed entirely, so that he and Shane will have to share the same one while they sleep. “Now, should we go to fucking sleep and get ready to kill New York in cold blood tomorrow?”

They half-heartedly clean up and then Ilya works his way into a tight enclosure inside all of Shane’s limbs on one cramped side of the huge mattress. Shane falls asleep before Ilya. Although he’s tired and fucked out and sated and his heart is so, so full, Ilya can’t quite make his mind shut off. The dark room looms around him. The intensity of emotion he can feel overwhelms him, sometimes; it can be a little scary. Both the good and the bad roar inside of him, neither enough to cancel the other out.

It’s mostly good. God, it’s mostly so incredible that Ilya never dared dream he would have this. His most precious people under the same roof, both protective of him in their own ways, Shane jealous, Shane holding him through the night in his bed, not letting Ilya stay alone, Sveta cautiously opening their little unit of two up to Ilya’s new person. He could live on this feeling for a thousand years.

Despite himself, the other half of it creeps in. Svetlana knows, and Pike knows by accident; this, already, is more people than they ever should have let found out. Although they’ve agreed to not talk about it yet, Ilya can’t help the swirling thoughts in his mind as he rubs his face into Shane’s chest, listening to his even sleep-breathing and smelling the scent of his skin. How the hell are they going to keep this going in secret beyond this year? Ilya already feels cracked apart with the enormity of hiding it. Is there ever a time where it will stop needing to be like this? Or are they going to be sneaking between separate apartments, hiding from their teammates and families, for the rest of their lives?

The next morning, Svetlana emerges from her room in her black silk pyjamas and fluffy slippers while Shane is making them protein shakes at the counter, and says, “Good morning. I am going to bet one hundred dollars on New York to win tonight, since Boston’s star players are going to be too tired to even stand up in their skates. Thank you for the free money.”

Shane disappears shortly after breakfast; his parents are flying in for the game, and then they have to be at the rink to warm up. Their third year in a row at playoffs, the team are at least familiar with this part by now. There's an air of quiet determination in the room, different from the rowdy excitement of the year before. Even Marley is quiet and serious, slapping Ilya on the shoulder before the head out to the ice without more than a raised eyebrow to say to him.

They win their first game of the playoffs. 2-0. Embarrassing for New York.

Shane invites Ilya to dinner with the Hollanders afterwards, but Ilya begs off to eat with Sveta instead. He can't quite imagine going back to that soft, same intimate environment of family meals with Shane without being able to kiss him, hold the back of his neck, the way he did in front of Sveta last night. He worries he might be so obvious that Shane's parents realise something, and Shane would never forgive him.

So instead he eats Chinese with Svetlana, and then the next day comes, and it's practice again – no resting on your heels because of one win when there's a whole round to go. The team eat breakfast together, two plates each. They skate. They go hard on the stationary bikes. They get worked over by the massage therapists and PTs and they all sign the bandage on Feller's knee as they send him off for surgery and try to pretend like they're not worried about the third line without him.

He tries to wheedle Shane into his bed that night, but Shane's parents are still there. The next day is practice again, all day. Another night without Shane. The day after that, they fly to New York for the second game of the round.

Everyone has their own hotel room, except a few rookies sharing. It's not hard to lose the eyes of the team and slip into Shane's room past curfew; Shane kisses him so deeply and roughly that it hurts, ruts against Ilya in bed while telling him they *don't have time to fuck* until eventually he talks himself into it with no help from Ilya and they fuck. They're a little tired the next day, but invigorated. New York are a mess this year; their captain, Hunter, seems distracted and grouchy on the ice, the rest of the team flailing without him. They're easy to beat.

By the time he's back in Boston, Sveta's no longer there and neither are the Hollanders, though apparently they're coming back the next week to see another game. Ilya gets Shane all alone in his apartment for three nights in a row. He drinks and eats of Shane's presence, his warm body close to Ilya's, his weird strict rules infringing on Ilya's routine, his determined voice as he lists hockey stats and line matchups to nobody in particular while he walks around.

They win the first round in five games, sending New York packing. Only three rounds to go.

Chapter End Notes

next time: the closet 📖

thank u so much for reading ! i was expecting this chapter to be more hockey-centric but honestly i wanted to give the sveta/ilya/shane dynamic a big proper Moment and shane then insisted on having sex about it so here we are. pls do let me know in the comments if u enjoyed! i read and treasure every single one of your comments every time 🧡

you can check [my tumblr](#) between updates for posts about this fic or when the next chapter will be etc

Chapter 25: the path that you're going on, everybody can't go.

Chapter Notes

interesting info for ppl new to gay hockey history; the nhl officially partnered with the organisation 'you can play', which was set up to combat homophobia in sports, in april 2013. this was also the year the first 'pride nights' were hosted by any hockey teams, though it was not common yet. the nhl was first of the four major usa mens sports leagues to partner with an lgbtq organisation like this, and at this time none of those leagues had ever seen an active player come out as gay. at the time, the announcement of this partnership included the quote 'i have no doubt that we will be the first [league to have a gay player]. the culture of the sport, when it comes to LGBT issues, is so far ahead of the other sports that i have no doubt that there will be openly gay athletes in the NHL in the near future.' 13 years later, the NHL is the only one of the usa big 4 men's sport leagues with no out gay players, active or retired, in history

anyway, this is a chapter of a fanfiction. please enjoy

oh also if anyone saw me vibing on hr threads for like two days, i disappeared bc meta decided to perma delete my account without giving me any option to appeal and also didn't tell me Why. and i had made two posts and they were both about hockey fanfiction. so can someone kill zuckerberg for me

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

Shane crashes over the boards and collapses onto the bench, a lit-fire of exertion burning in his lungs as he pants for air. The barn is cacophonous with the life of the game; bright lights flashing overhead, their names being cheered and booed from different directions, fans hitting at the Plexiglass behind his head. An overwhelming battalion on the senses that Shane parcels up and squishes down and channels, in his mind, back into the hockey, as he tries to catch his breath enough to get back on the ice in a minute.

Third period of their third game against the Toronto Beavers. Boston won the first game of the round, and lost the second; Toronto are hungry for it just like Boston are, and things feel more balanced than Shane would like. Without Feller, who's now recovering from knee surgery, their third line is limping. Shane's pulling more ice time per game than usual, and it's leaving him hollowed out with exhaustion, fighting pulled muscles and deep bruises and a sprain in two of his fingers that he's not going to talk about. The game sits tied. It's a long slog in either direction to win the round, but nobody wants it to go to seven games.

Shane's birthday was a couple days ago. Twenty-two years old. Cake with his parents at his apartment in Boston, then fucked into the mattress by Ilya after they left; it's a funny kind of curse, to Shane, that his birthday will always sit dead in the middle of playoffs. Any year he's in them, he won't care about his birthday because he's focused on hockey; any year he's not

in them, he also won't care about his birthday because he's bummed about hockey. Right now, sucking down his water bottle and a panting sweaty mess, he's filled with a thousand times more excitement and potential and dull-throbbing want than he was for celebrating another year around the sun.

A small, tear-open packet is wafted towards Shane from down the bench. He takes it thankfully, bringing the salts up to his nose and taking a sharp inhale, wincing as air floods his lungs like a slap to the face. It wakes him up a little, gets his oxygen pumping. The strong, unpleasant smell of them always reminds him of his mom scrubbing the kitchen floors when he was a kid, that chemical-wrongness of bleach.

"Thanks," Shane huffs out, as he tosses the packet back to Berry. An elbow jostles beside him, huge bodies shuffling with a couple irritated words, and then Ilya is squishing himself onto the bench beside Shane, his stick spinning between his hands.

Shane tries to keep his eyes face-forward on the ice, tracking their limping third line for the last seconds of their shift. No progress towards the goal, the puck's stuck behind Toronto's defence. Shane rattles his stick against the boards, shouts, "Fucking shots on goal, Panda!" as Panders goes skating past like he doesn't even fucking know there's a game happening around him. Shane's eyes sting from the smelling salts. A thick elbow digs into his padded side, and when he glances over, Ilya is tilting his head Shane's way, nearly close enough to knock helmets.

"We are going to win," Ilya tells him lowly.

"Don't jinx it," Shane warns, but the tone of Ilya's voice does something to settle his hyper-frayed nerves, in a strange way.

Ilya in playoffs is more serious than Shane's used to. For all Ilya can be a shithead and completely unserious in his personal life, he loves this game; he cares, like Shane cares, the way you only really can when you're the best in the world at something. They both want this win like an internal organ, a transplant they might die without. Ilya likes stroking his own ego and being able to back it up, so he takes winning seriously. If Shane was anywhere else right now than a rink with seventeen thousand people screaming at them, he might think about how hot that is.

But they're here, so Shane is locked the fuck in as Ilya tilts closer, holding his glove in front of his mouth so the cameras or the other team on the ice can't see what he's saying, and tells Shane, "Their goalie is hurt. Left side. You will see when he lunges. Perfect for deke."

Ilya smells like rank sweat and hockey gear, a concentrated punch of *locker room boy* where he's pressed against Shane. It wakes Shane up more than the smelling salts. His lungs flood with air as he turns his gaze to the Toronto goalie, piecing together the saves he saw in the first two periods.

The need to win is almost like a sex drive. Primal. He feels like he's skating from between his legs as the second line tap out and Shane hits the ice again. Emotion and thought don't go into it – just the animal feeling of his body as he pounds it into the rink, follows the puck like the scent of blood is on it, grabs it onto his stick. He's slammed from behind and comes out

quick, scrabbling for the puck, managing to hit it between the Toronto defence's legs and pick it up again on the other side. Precious seconds out here to make count. He paces them to his heartbeat. The loom of bodies surrounds him and he eyes a gap in the line, sends the puck whizzing over to Marley just as he's collided with again, rough ache as the bone of his hip collides with the boards.

Voices are calling out from every direction; clock ticking down above their heads, Marley sends it to Rozanov. Shane ducks out from the body of the Toronto wing and takes off, flying down the ice, too fast for the Beavers' sluggish defence to catch. Cold air whips through his lungs, catching rough in his throat as his thighs scream. He follows his own momentum in the curve around behind the goal, escaping the scrum around the puck.

He's just rounding the other side when Rozanov slams the puck towards the goal. It would look like he's aiming to score, if you didn't know how good he is when he's really trying. Instead, the puck sails wide by an inch, landing buttery smooth on Shane's blade, for Shane to whip into the goal through the gaping hole of the goalie's left side.

Roars erupt around them. Shane throws his arms in the air as his momentum on the ice carries him around towards the bench; Hayden says, "Dude, sick," and slaps his hand from the bench, just as Ilya appears behind him and plasters himself over Shane's back.

"Fucking beautiful," Ilya growls, as he grabs around Shane's neck. Shane feels himself reddening with the praise; his blood pounds with the goal. Marley knocks the side of his helmet. A couple hands grab at him, jostle him in excitement. A few minutes to go and they're leading.

It's a brutal game of keep-away for the last few minutes, but they manage it, Heikky holding the goal like a brick wall. The final seconds tick down to roaring screams.

Boston wins the game.

"Two more to go," Ilya says, with a nasty grin, as they pour onto the ice to celebrate.

After a playoffs win is what Shane imagines it feels like to be high. The buzz runs through his whole body and distracts him from everything else. He jams a cap backwards over his sweaty hair and gives a few press answers in the locker room with his head spinning, barely paying attention to what he's saying – "Yeah, team are gelling well, making good passes, definitely a team effort," all things he's said a million times before, and his heartrate won't slow down, adrenaline tingling up and down his body.

Across the room, his eyes meet Ilya's; Ilya has a camera shoved into his face as well, stood there shirtless and sweaty, probably giving more exciting answers than Shane is. Ilya winks at him.

Thankfully Shane's still so flushed from the game that nobody can tell when he blushes. The press are chased out eventually to let them all actually get undressed, and when the cameras are gone Shane dawdles for a minute, replying to his parents' texts of congratulations. It's just one game in a series, of course – there's still two more to win this round, and two rounds to go to the cup. He can't let himself get too giddy on it, but still.

There's this special feeling when the hockey is *good*. Not just that they won by luck, but that they really played for it, and earned it. Shane feels it deeply, viscerally, kind of like the feeling he gets in bed when Ilya tells him *good boy* after he does something filthy. A reward for pushing his body to an unusual limit. Shane's buzzed on the win in a way that makes him kind of horny, not helped by the way his eyes keep catching on Ilya, shirtless and sweaty, wrestling with a couple guys across the room. Their broad bodies pressing into his. The meaty sound of muscles slapping.

So it's no wonder Shane's a little distracted when Berglund, half-dressed and scrolling through something on his phone across the room with a weird look on his face, calls out, "Yo, Marleau, when the hell did you give this quote?"

Marley shrugs as he dumps his foul-smelling gear into the equipment bin and then wanders past Shane's face with his entire dick out. Shane quickly looks down and pretends he's not there, as Marley says back, "I donated some cash to them last year, so they reached out when they were doing the whole partnership thing 'cus they wanted a few players to support it. No big."

Shane, unsure what's going on, doesn't say anything in the moment. There's always some kind of gossip in the locker room, and it rarely has anything to do with hockey, so he rarely cares. It's playoffs – they should be focused. He keeps his mind on his breaths, stretching out a sore knee as he sits in his stall, trying not to get a semi in the locker room because he's looking at Ilya too much. He needs a second to calm down before he hits the showers.

So of course it's Ilya, victor of the wrestling match and now scrubbing a towel over his sweaty armpits in his stall, who shouts across the room; "What are you fuckers talking about now?"

Berry says, "It's that You Can Play thing. You know, the gay sports charity or whatever? League just announced they're partnering with them."

Shane's blood goes cold as the ice.

He freezes for a second where he's slouched in his stall, and then forces himself to keep his eyes down while his heartrate rockets. His fingers fumble pulling off his socks as he tries not to give away his moment of shock. He's heard of the charity in the past year or so, but only vaguely, around the edges of anything related to his own appearances and events; never heard the name said in the locker room before. He desperately hopes nobody's looking at him.

"Oh. That is good," Ilya says, casual as anything, as they all keep getting undressed, sweaty and winded and high off their win. "But why the fuck they want a quote from Marley?"

"That's what I'm saying, dude. Not exactly Shakespeare, is he."

"Hey, assholes, I got important shit to say, you fuckers are just too dumb to get it," Marley says, smacking Berry's junk with a whip of his towel.

"What is the quote?" Ilya asks across the room, while Berry tries to smack Marley back – like it's a casual question, like it doesn't mean anything to him. Shane's blood pounds. He doesn't

know how Ilya's even speaking right now. Shane's tongue feels swollen and awkward in his own mouth.

Dubek, already out of the showers dripping water everywhere and now holding Berry's dropped phone, rattles off in a terrible impression of Marley's broad accent, "'Doesn't matter if you're gay or straight or whatever, we're all brothers if you can score a sick bar down on the ice.' Wow, big words, Marley. Real poet shit."

"Fuck off, man, I'm speakin' from the heart."

Shane finally gets his rank socks off and drops them to the floor. He sets about working off his Underarmor layer, cold sweat itching at his body. Nobody's looking at him. He's sure, nobody's looking at him. They're all more undressed than he is and half of them are heading into the showers already; who cares if Hollander's being slow, tucked half out of sight in his stall? But he still feels it. The eyes. The desperate, scrabbling need to grab his own phone and read every word of this fucking press release.

"You really think that, though?" a voice says across the room, from inside a cloud of Axe. It's Mullins, a defenceman they traded for earlier in the season, who Shane hasn't really exchanged two words with off the ice yet beyond learning that he likes to fish and everyone calls him Mullet. "I dunno, would be kind of weird if there was some faggy dude in the locker room checking out our dicks, wouldn't it?"

"I seen what you're packing, dude, nobody wants to check out that moldy hot dog," Marleau says, which makes a few of the guys laugh and Mullins flip him off.

Nobody calls him out on saying *fag*, because of course they wouldn't; it's far from controversial language in the locker room. It's usually just not used when actually talking about gay people, because gay people never really come up. Mostly it's a generic insult for anything that happens to offend them in the moment. This goes closer to home. Shane's worked off his Underarmor and grabbed his towel, but when he tries to make his feet move across the room to get to the showers, they won't do it. His mouth tastes like metal. He sits right where he is and takes a quick, quiet breath.

"I did not know this was a thing you care about, Marley," Ilya says. His voice is suddenly closer to Shane. Shane doesn't want him to come over here. Doesn't want to be anywhere near this conversation. He doesn't look up, rooting through his toiletries bag with numb fingers, looking for nothing in particular as the blood swirls in his ears.

"Yeah, dude," Marley calls out, his booming voice filling the whole fucking room, so casually. "My cousin did the whole sex change thing couple years back, so she got me thinking. We were on all the same kiddy league teams together and she seemed fuckin' miserable when she was a dude, you know? Now she's all happy and shit, but everyone's up in her business about it even though she's just chilled the fuck out being an accountant in Toronto, like, who cares what she did with her dick? I just don't wanna do my own taxes. Anyway, I figure it's the same with hockey. Who cares if you suck dick at home so long as you score some filthy goals?"

Yeah, Shane thinks, kind of hysterically. He presses the heels of his palms into his eyes for a second, the sight of the locker room disappearing from view as the voices fade away on their retreat towards the showers, Mullet and Loops grouching something about *weird perv shit*. Who cares, right? Except for absolutely everyone, everywhere Shane goes.

They win the fourth game of the round in Toronto. They're in a nice hotel, spongy king beds and thick walls, but the team are spread out all over the place rather than being confined to one corridor like usual; apparently there's some kind of business conference going on downstairs which has them filled up. Shane isn't sure why anyone would host a business convention during NHL playoffs, but there's a whole world of weird people with bad priorities out there.

He's aching and so tired that his body feels like soup when he finally gets into his room that night. His suitcase is perched neatly on the edge of the dresser, left there by player services; the bed looks crisp, the air-con is whirring softly. Shane could pass out and sleep for a thousand years.

He hesitates in the doorway, not taking his shoes off yet. It only takes a minute of pretending not to wait before his phone buzzes.

[From: Rozanov (Boston Raiders), 11:14]

Cum upstairs ;)

Shane texts him back a middle finger emoji, but he opens his suitcase, shoves a change of sweats and his toiletries into his spare gym bag, and creeps back out into the hall as soon as Ilya texts his room number.

Of course, he takes a moment to make sure none of his teammates are lingering in the hall. But they're spread out all over the hotel, and anyway, they're all fucking exhausted – long past the point of the season where wins are celebrated by late-night drinking and picking up women, it's all most of them can do to keep their bodies in check at this point of the round. Nobody's going to be out prowling the halls. Shane heads down the hallway to the quiet embrace of the elevator, leaning his head back against the cool metal walls as he waits for it to take him upstairs.

The whole building feels quiet; it's dark outside, night has set, and the city is heading into sleep. Shane takes a deep breath, feeling the air get deeper in his lungs than it has in a few days. He's so sore that there's a constantly low-level thrumming in his body, like all his muscles are beating to a rhythm. He's almost restless with exhaustion, the way extreme tiredness can loop back around into a level of tension that keeps you on edge. The thought of Ilya's warm mouth against his skin is the only thing powering Shane's legs to keep moving

once the elevator dings; he glances around before heading off down the dim hallway, glancing at room numbers to try and find 513.

503, 505, 507. A corner in the hallway, view blocked by an ice machine. Shane turns it.

“Hey, dude!” Hayden says, standing up with *crunch* as a metal scoop full of ice drops from his hand. He’s in flannel pyjamas and slides, a purpling bruise from the Beavers’ six-five defenceman blooming on the fat swell of his left eye, ragged stubble of his playoff beard making him look unkempt and overtired. “You can tell it’s playoffs when there’s a queue for the fucking hotel ice, huh. What’s bothering you, knee again?”

“Um,” Shane says. He can’t quite make a good answer come out quickly enough. He can see the second Hayden’s gaze catches on the fact that he’s carrying a bag, that he’s not changed out of his street clothes yet, and frets around the edges of the information.

“Isn’t your room on the bottom floor, though? Thought it was just me and Rozanov who got shoved all the way up – *oh*,” Hayden says, as it lands, all at once. Then, they just stand there for a second.

A slow flood of embarrassment works through Shane’s exhausted body; less urgent or mortified than usual, perhaps simply by virtue of how run-down he is. But it’s still there, the anxiety of it all worming its way through the gaps left in his hockey-centred mind.

“Uh, yeah,” he says, for lack of anything else. Then, the urge to defend his hockey kicks in. He mutters, “Listen, it’s not, like, distracting me or anything, so it doesn’t really matter what I do with my nights, okay?”

“I can tell, dude,” Hayden says quickly. “You’re playing like you’re on fucking fire. Nobody thinks you’re distracted.”

This soothes Shane’s frayed nerves maybe a little. He sucks in a breath and rocks back on his heels, mind gone blank again. He hates the awkwardness in the air between them, when a few months ago Hayden had been one of his closest friends; he hates that he doesn’t know how to talk about it, too.

Hayden tries again. He says, “So, uh, you read the presser about that You Can Play thing?”

A tinny taste in Shane’s mouth as he swallows.

“Yeah,” he says.

He’d read it the second he got home the other night, in a private tab on his laptop like someone might come check his fucking browser history. The language of it had been fairly clinical; a brief statement from the NHL commissioner about how they wanted to set a standard of acceptance in sports. Three brief quotes from active players, including Marley, saying they were cool with the idea of a gay player in hockey. The article had specified that the partnership will take the form of educating players on LGBT issues, holding inclusivity seminars at the rookie symposiums, and giving public service announcements for fans. There will apparently be the chance for players to seek counselling or advice about their sexual

orientation through Behavioural Health, which sounds laughable to Shane. Being gay has nothing to do with his *health*.

Shane will, frankly, believe half of it when he sees it, and he'll believe any of it mattering even less. They could only scrounge up three active players to give nice quotes in the article. Instead of a welcoming step forward for acceptance, Shane feels it more like a loaded gun pointed at his head. That anyone's even talking about this is a threat.

He kind of thought nobody knew there might be gay players in hockey. Certainly, nobody ever acts like they think about it; gayness is a chirp or an insult, so absurd as a suggestion it makes everyone laugh. He doesn't think any of the team really care about social issues. Most of them don't even vote. Don't even *recycle*, which would make Shane's dad angry. They don't think for more than two seconds about anything that comes out of their mouths - how the hell would they manage to be welcoming if they found out someone on the team was gay?

Shane doesn't think he sounds particularly thrilled when he says, "It's, uh, good, it sounds good."

"Totally," Hayden agrees, a little too quickly. "I mean, I totally support it. Good to have, like, backing from the league, right?"

For a second there's a deep and unpleasant silence between them. Hayden's brows are quirked downwards like a worried puppy, trying to dance around Shane for response. Shane doesn't know what he's supposed to say.

Hayden breaks the silence for a second time with a low sigh. He leans against the wall and tilts Shane's way. "Listen, man, I feel like we're not close anymore and it's bumming me out. I'm sorry if I was weird about this stuff or whatever."

The apology is unneeded, but he's also not wrong about the way they've drifted recently. The thing is it's not Hayden's fault, or at least not solely his fault; Shane has been too mortified to even consider talking to him honestly about anything to do with Ilya, and that's been such a huge part of his life the last few months that he's stopped knowing how to talk to Hayden altogether. Not that Shane has ever been the best conversationalist. And not that he *wants* things to be weird. But Shane wants lots of things he doesn't get.

"No, it's not—" Shane tries, shuffling his weight between his aching feet. "It's really not your fault, Hayd. You've been pretty chill about everything. I'm just, uh. I guess I'm still not sure how to act when someone knows about — this."

"Is it 'cause I don't like Rozanov?" Hayden asks. "Because dude, I hate *both* my sisters' husbands and I still manage to eat Thanksgiving dinner with them every year. Like, we can figure it out, okay?"

The idea of forcing Hayden and Ilya to sit down to Thanksgiving dinner — even a regular dinner like Shane had with Svetlana — is so abruptly funny that it makes Shane snort outloud.

Shane doesn't want to avoid Hayden. Dinner with Svetlana a couple of weeks ago drove the idea into his mind, in a way – that even if only a couple of people can know about them, Shane could at least learn to be open in front of those particular people. There's not necessarily a reason to hide anything from Hayden anymore.

The problem is that his body hasn't caught up with his brain. He thinks he wants to strive for that, but the thought of even breathing Ilya's way in front of Hayden still racks him with a cold-blood petrification. Hayden has been as chill as he could have possibly hoped, but they've not exactly rubbed it in Hayden's face. He and Hayden have only barely discussed it; implications and half-sentences. What if they try to all sit down to dinner together, and seeing the actual evidence of Shane and Ilya and their *gayness* is too much after all? What if seeing it, really seeing how gone Shane is for Ilya Rozanov, makes Hayden decide he actually can't tolerate or understand it?

Shane swallows thickly, looking at the flickering of the city lights out the dark hallway window to avoid Hayden's face. Hayden says, "Maybe we all get dinner together next day off, or something? I won't be a dick if he isn't."

"Yeah, maybe," Shane says, but he doesn't mean it. "Um, listen, I'm actually gonna head back down to my room. Make sure you ice your face properly before you go to sleep, okay?"

Shane turns around, and flees back to the elevator.

Ilya's still waiting on him, but Shane just can't do it. Can't walk past Hayden with Hayden *knowing* he's going to Ilya's room to have gay sex or gay cuddles or gay bed-sharing after a brutal game of hockey. What if someone else sees him in the halls? They're in a fucking huge hotel with players and probably fans and reporters and all sorts of people who know his face. Something in Shane's chest swings shut like a swollen door in a warped frame, wedged airtight.

On the way back down to his own room, Ilya texts him, *where are you?? Take such a long time i get cold ((*

Shane replies, *coast wasn't clear. Going back to my room.*

*What does even mean, coast wasn't clear? Who cares if you are visiting? Maybe you are coming to my room to make strategy about our epic goals
maybe we took wrong gym bags by accident
maybe you lost bet and have to have sleepover on my floor
Million reasons for you to come here, why are you panicking?*

The problem isn't the reasons. The problem is that if someone did question him, Shane knows he wouldn't be able to get out any of those excuses without sounding like he was losing his mind. The more anxious he gets, the worse he is at lying. The more he overthinks it, the more hyper-aware he is of every small, strange choice he makes; every shift of his body, every stammered syllable. In some ways, admitting that he's gay and that he wants Ilya so badly has made this even harder. He has so, so much to lose, and he's so aware of it.

He gets back in his own room and shuts the door and takes off his shoes and sits on the edge of the bed, and his hands shake. His stomach is tight. The dark room gapes and yawns around him, but Shane doesn't know how to make himself start going about his nighttime routine. His phone buzzes in his hands. Ilya again; *i am coming to your room instead if you are this boring about it.*

His fingers are shaking as he types back, *no don't come down here.* But Ilya doesn't reply. Shane folds his hands over the back of his neck and forces himself to take deep breaths, and a few minutes later, there's a sharp knock at his door.

Even slightly panicking, Shane isn't immune to the magnetic call of Ilya's body. He gets up and opens the door, glancing out in the hallway to make sure nobody's watching them before he hurries Ilya inside and locks the door behind him, checking it twice to make sure it really closed.

Then, Ilya turns Shane and backs him up against the wall, his strong hands spreading across the thick muscle of Shane's waist, worming underneath his Raiders t-shirt. He looks older with the thick-growing start of a beard, rough and masculine in a way that makes Shane's groin clench even while he's panicking. He peers into Shane's eyes, forcing Shane to stare back at him from an inch away; he smells like nice shower gel and he's warm, like he'd already been in bed. Shane shudders. Lets out a torn-up breath.

"You are freaking out," Ilya prognoses. "Why? We played so good today, your goal was so sexy."

"That's half the fucking problem," Shane admits, shaky and morose. He leans his body into Ilya's, tucks his face into Ilya's neck, wraps his arms around Ilya's shoulders and hangs on tight. "The better we get, the more I remember how much we have to lose."

Ilya's hands rub up and down his back in comforting waves; it reminds Shane of the smooth swish of a stick on fresh ice as they pass back and forth for drills, an unbroken chain of cooperation between their bodies as they keep the puck to a rhythm.

"This is about the gay charity," Ilya decides, which is only maybe half true, but certainly part of it. "That is a good thing, Shane. They try to make the league more accepting, less scary for us."

"Yeah, but all it's doing is making people talk about it," Shane says, into Ilya's skin. He swallows thickly, his breath ruffling Ilya's curls. "Most people didn't even think about that shit before. And I just – fuck, I don't know. It's not just about that, although it's shitty timing. I just don't know how we're meant to keep this up. The hiding. We go everywhere with the team – I mean, fuck, my parents are meeting me back in Boston, like – when are we supposed to be together without anyone hanging over our shoulders?"

For a moment, nothing interrupts them except the repetitive hum of the air conditioner and the matching sounds of their breaths. Ilya's body is warm, solid, even for Shane's heavy weight to rest against. He holds Shane tightly, rubbing at him, soothing him. His body is so deliciously comforting that Shane wants to get lost in it.

Fuck. Shane drops to his knees with no warning, wrapping his arms around the fat swell of Ilya's ass and nuzzling his nose into Ilya's crotch through his loose basketball shorts, where Ilya smells the most like himself, hot and sweaty and sexy. The soft warm imprint of his dick pillows Shane's sore face, and Shane lets out a shuddering breath as he just kneels there, breathing it. Ilya's hands work into the roots of his hair after a moment, and tug gently.

"It's okay," Ilya mumbles lowly, as he soothes Shane's scalp and the back of his neck. "It's okay, Shane, we are safe here. Nobody knows, okay? Nobody can see us in this room. Not the team, not your parents. You do not need to worry right now."

Like this, it's a little easier to let Ilya's words work into him. If Ilya tells him not to worry while he's on his knees, Shane won't worry. He lets Ilya rub at his head, and tell him soft things, and then take him to bed eventually. They give into the deep exhaustion pulling at their muscles together, falling through the mattress into sleep.

They lose the next game – Dubek's playing through a stomach flu he caught from his girlfriend's kid, and they just don't have enough depth with him feverish and shaking in his skates, throwing up in the bathroom between periods, and Feller still out.

It's not enough for the Beavers to take the round, though. Boston pound out an exhilarating 5-1 victory in the sixth game, with a buzzer-beater goal from Marleau sealing the deal; they have officially taken the conference semis.

Marley breaks his stick against the boards and howls as they all swarm around him, the crowd losing their minds, cheering so loud it feels like the rink stretches all the way up to the sky. The hot jostle of sweaty hockey bodies after a win is familiar to Shane; the pounding of gloved hands into padded shoulders, wild grabbing hugs that would be seen as weird and gay anywhere off the ice. He's flushed with excitement from winning, he couldn't care less. In their frenzied celebration, Hayden slings an arm around Shane's neck, and for a second, Shane manages to forget that he's not just like everyone else.

By the start of June, they're all dropping weight like popped balloons, bruised and sore, and Shane has two of his fingers taped together because a shooting pain goes up his arm whenever he tries to bend them, but it's not bad for halfway through playoffs. Shane agrees to go to dinner at Hayden and Jackie's on a rest evening before the third round begins. He'd rather be at home, watching tape of the Pittsburgh Polar Bears on loop with two servings of nutritionist-prepared salmon and Ilya's head in his lap. But Hayden gives him puppy eyes and Shane thinks about him saying *we're not as close* and he does want to go, really, or at least he

wants to hang out, wants to remember how to be friends without constantly looking over his shoulder at the shadow of his own gayness.

Hayden does say, stiltedly and weirdly, that Shane can bring Ilya if he wants. But when asked, Ilya says he would rather swallow a hockey puck, which settles it easily, since Shane didn't really want to bring him anyway.

"So, Shane," Jackie says, when they're all sitting down to dinner – baby being rocked on her chest and the toddlers already in bed upstairs, the closest thing to alone you can get at the Pike house. "How are you doing lately?"

Before she's even got her sentence all the way out, the baby monitor beeps on the table in front of her, and she peers down at the big plastic screen. Hayden says, "I can get it, babe."

"No, hon, it's okay, I think she's settling again." She watches eagle-eyed for a second as she strokes Arthur's back; they have one of those fancy monitors that looks right into the nursery with a camera. Seems kind of creepy to Shane, but he's not a parent. Shane takes a sip of ginger ale and waits.

"It's always Emma," Hayden tells Shane, conspiratorially, when the monitor finally goes quiet again. "Hates sleep. She's a little monkey. Every single night we wake up at like, 2am with her jumping on top of us."

"Hah," Shane says, because Hayden is grinning, not because he thinks that sounds particularly fun. Shane hates sleeping without his white noise machine and perfectly calibrates his schedule around a solid 9 hours a night. How does Hayden reliably build muscle if he's not getting enough hours of REM? "Uh, must get annoying."

"Oh totally, yeah, but it's also pretty cute. You'll understand one day when you've got kids, man," Hayden says.

"I mean, maybe not," Shane points out, and then takes another sip of ginger ale while Hayden and Jackie exchange a glance.

"Right," Hayden agrees quickly. "I mean, obviously, dude, you don't have to. It's, like, your choice, right?"

"Oh my god, babe, you are so awkward sometimes," Jackie tells Hayden, with a fond eye-roll. She turns to Shane and says, "Shane, I know Hayd promised not to tell anyone, but I wheedled it out of him – it's not his fault, I promise. He didn't give any details! But, like, just so you know, I do know about you being gay."

"Yeah, I kind of figured," Shane admits. He'd honestly kind of forgotten they hadn't had that conversation explicitly yet. He doesn't see Jackie all that much – a dinner every couple weeks in the season, waving to her at games when she comes to sit in the WAG box – and in his mind, she's just blurred together with Hayden knowing. Shane does admire that about their relationship, in a way. They're kind of gross with pet names and don't seem to actually share any hobbies or interests, but they are definitely a team. As much of a team as you can

be when one of you is travelling half the year and the entire house is run by nannies and housekeepers, at least.

Shane likes the idea of being a team. It's how his parents are. How he pictures every good relationship to be.

"So you know that we love you, right?" Jackie says. One of her hands is smoothing up and down over the baby's back while she holds him in the other arm, a practiced motion of easy caregiving. Shane doesn't know much about what Jackie did before she was a mom; she was already pregnant when he first met her. She's only a couple years older than him. He remembers her mentioning something about a marketing course once, but he's pretty sure she didn't finish college. He's thinking about that as she says, "And whoever you wanna date, it doesn't matter to us."

"I've told him that," Hayden says, defensively, which makes Shane laugh a little.

"Well I just know how guys are, babe, I bet you didn't *really* say it right."

"No, uh, I appreciate it, Jackie," Shane tells her. The baby fusses in her arms and spits up a yellow-white string of drool onto her flowery dress. "And you, Hayd. I'm sorry I freaked out so much at first. I sort of hadn't worked through it myself yet. I still don't really wanna talk about it."

"Don't apologise, man, I get it," Hayden tells him. Shane manages a deep breath, and lets himself meet Hayden's eyes; not as awkward as he was expecting it to be. "If there's anything I can do to, y'know, make it easier, let me know."

"Thanks. Uh, it's all good, really," Shane says. "Just, um, not telling anyone, still. I really don't want the team to find out. I mean, you've seen how some of them are, and I'm not trying to be a spokesperson or anything. I really just want to keep playing hockey."

"Well, duh, dude – you're the best at hockey," Hayden says. "You shouldn't be doing anything else."

This is perhaps the most comforting thing Shane has ever been told. He doesn't think he should be doing anything else, either. He doesn't think he should ever have to think about a single thing other than puck and dick.

"Well, I think its great," Jackie says, grinning at him with her pearly-whites while she wipes baby sick off herself with a napkin. "Now I can set you up with cute guys! Did Hayd tell you my hairdresser is gay? At least, we're pretty sure he is. He dresses really well."

"Uh, we maybe put a pin in that babe," Hayden says, eyes flickering to Shane. It's a soothing confirmation, at least, that Hayden hasn't told Jackie everything. She knows the what, but not the who. His messy tie to Ilya is still out of the landscape of his sexuality, to her, even when to Shane it sometimes feels like the entire core of it.

"Wait, why?" Jackie asks. "Come on, I want Shane to have someone nice waiting at home for him. And then we can have double dates."

For a second, Shane looks at the two of them and imagines it. The big house they're sat in, decorated not by a pre-booked interior designer like Shane's is, but mostly by Jackie – this he knows because she'd complained about how Hayden would only have *an xBox and a La-z-Boy if I left him to his own devices!* The squirming, bald baby in her arms that means she can't hold her knife and fork at the same time to eat. The green-flashing video monitor on the table for the other two to keep watch over. Woken up at 3am by someone jumping on you or peeing the bed or whatever. The big, shiny diamond on Jackie's ring finger, carefully judged by the other WAGs in relation to Hayden's salary, posted from every angle on Instagram.

When they do fluff pieces about the team on TV or for social media, Hayden's wife and kids are always shown, linked to his name. They live in this house together, share the bed every night, host their parents for visits and then complain about in-laws to their friends. When Hayden's kids were born or Jackie was sick with the pregnancies, nobody questioned Hayden needing time off, because that's his person. Everyone knows everything about them as a couple. Public. Shared. Easy.

For a second, Shane tries to work his way past his squirming discomfort with their relationship and imagine himself onto their path.

Not the big white-dress wedding and the screaming babies and the boring Episcopalian church services, but the solid, established normality of it all. Him and Ilya living in a house like this. Sharing their lives out in the open. Anniversaries of theirs public in the locker room, joint photos on Instagram, visiting his parents and going to sleep together in the same room.

"I. Uh," Hayden says, while Jackie still looks at them, expectant of an answer to why Shane can't get a cookie-cutter suburban boyfriend who'll join her wine club. Hayden's clearly not good at lying to his wife. That's probably a good thing, in the grand scheme of life.

"I'm just not really interested in anything outside of hockey, Jackie," Shane tells her. It's sort of true. Ilya is hockey. The rest of it isn't worth thinking about.

Then, the only thing that stands between them and the Stanley Cup Finals is the third round, and the Pittsburgh Polar Bears.

"You've been playing well, honey, and Pittsburgh only scraped through to this round because they played Ottawa for the semis and they were just horrendous. You don't have anything to worry about," Shane's mom tells him while she moves things around in his kitchen cabinets, lining his wine glasses up in neatly specified order. Shane's not quite sure what was wrong with the way he had them organised before, but he lets her keep doing it, because he knows it'll make her happy, and he never fucking uses his wine glasses.

"I think so too," Shane agrees, kneading at the sore muscles of his thigh with one hand. It may sound big-headed to say it, but nobody expected Pittsburgh to get this far this year, and the Raiders have been consistently outscoring them. Their round starts tomorrow evening,

and Shane already feels pretty good about the first game. His knee hasn't been giving him any trouble, and Dubek's over his flu; the team have been focused, keeping their heads down. Shane spins in the stool at his kitchen island and asks his mom, "What do you think of their goalie, though? Terrible save percentage in the regular season, but then he's pulled two shutouts so far in playoffs. He can turn it on like a switch."

"Well, sure, that's impressive in a vacuum," his mom says. Finally happy with the glasses, she closes that cupboard and turns to his wall instead, flicking through his calendar. "But consistency is what matters, and Williamson is about the least consistent player in the fucking world, so I don't think you need to worry."

Shane makes a little hum, watching as she notches her glasses down onto her nose and takes out her phone; cross checking her schedule for him with the written calendar that she keeps updated every time she visits, even though Shane's also got the shared calendar on his phone for his photoshoots and press and events and appearances.

"Ilya thinks their second-line center is hurt," he says idly, while she scribbles things down. Shane takes out his own phone and flicks back to the video clip Ilya'd sent him earlier, slowed down to half speed to highlight a wince on the player's face as he pulled out of a hit last week. He lets it loop a couple times, squinting down evaluatingly. "Ribbs, maybe."

"Well, Ilya's a smart player, he knows what he's talking about," his mom says, not looking up from her pen. Shane's heart blooms in his chest for a moment. Yeah, Ilya's smart. He likes that his mom knows it, even if she wouldn't know in a million years why Shane cares.

There's a noise from the hall behind them as Shane's dad knocks into a doorframe, says, "Oops," and then appears. He comes up behind Shane and pats him warmly on the shoulder, where Shane's aching, hockey-pushed muscles are always tense these days.

"Sure you don't wanna come with us, kiddo?" he asks.

"No, no, you guys enjoy lunch," Shane says. "I'm not eating anything off my meal plan until the end of playoffs now. I'll just heat up one of my pre-prepped and I have tape to watch, anyway."

"Well, I do want to try the new sushi place. But maybe we should get our food to go, come back and eat with you."

"Mom, seriously!" Shane laughs. She's so like him, sometimes – never takes a hint. "I'll survive alone in my apartment for one lunch. Please just let me focus."

"Okay, okay, I get it, I'll stop hovering," his mom says, which is certainly a lie, but his dad manages to wrap her jacket around her shoulders and coax her towards the door anyway, winking at Shane behind her back. Shane loves his dad so much.

The first two games of this round are home games for Boston, so of course his parents wanted to visit for them. It's great having them here. Really. Their familiar presence soothes Shane's peculiarities and warms up his rigid world and gets him out of the stuck worry in his head, sometimes. He feels safe in the way you're safe as a child, released from having to

think about your own practicalities. It's just a little – stifling isn't the word, but it's close. They've been here two nights, and he already needs air. Maybe not air. He needs Ilya's air. He needs to breathe out of Ilya's lungs. And he can't do that when his parents are staying in the next room over from him.

Shane waits three minutes after they've left for lunch before he pulls up his texts. He told himself he was gonna wait at least ten, but, well – three is nearly halfway to ten, if you think about it, and halfway's not bad.

[Sent: 12:42]

They're gone, you can come over now.

[From: Rozanov (Boston Raiders), 12:42]



[Sent: 12:43]

*Would you learn to text like a fucking adult?
Is that explosion supposed to be my asshole?????*

His doorbell rings before he gets a response, which is maybe for the best. Shane leaves his phone abandoned on the kitchen island and rushes to the door, opening it and finding a strong hand on the centre of his chest, pushing him hard into a wall before he's even had a chance to say hello.

The door slams shut, and Ilya's mouth is on his, the rough gripe of Ilya's stubble scratching against his chin. It's maybe more than stubble, now, his thick hair settling into the beginnings of a proper beard. Shane's pretty proud of his own facial hair, which doesn't grow nearly as fast as Ilya's but which he thinks looks kind of nice shadowing his jaw in black; he hates how it feels, though, the itchy sensation of it when he rubs his face. This is only possible to forget while kissing Ilya, because everything else feels so good that he doesn't care. Ilya's lips crush wetly at his, warming Shane up from the centre. He goes gooey as his whole body is pressed by hard muscle into the hard wall, wedged deliciously immobile, and their mouths work together. Shane licks Ilya's teeth, tasting sugar on his tongue. Ilya makes a low, helpless noise and works a hand between them to squeeze Shane's dick through his sweatpants like it's his personal stress ball. Shane squirms, the sensation a little too tight to be comfortable but also unbearably erotic, like much of what Ilya does.

"Fuck off," he mutters, smiling, into Ilya's mouth, as he tries to both escape and lean into Ilya's hand at the same time. Ilya laughs, biting Shane's lip and rolling it into his mouth before he finally pulls back a little.

"No," he says. "When you keep me waiting for two whole days, I have to kiss you like I am going to die. I think you want me to die, actually. That's why you have me sleeping alone like a sad orphan in a fairytale. You want me to get eaten by a wolf."

“Two days is not a long time, Ilya,” Shane says, rolling his eyes as his hands catch around Ilya’s biceps. Unfortunately, he knows what Ilya means. It’s become a surprising agony for him, too, to sleep apart, and Shane never even expected he’d enjoy sharing a bed with anyone at all.

Half the problem is that he and Ilya still spend all their time together. All day at team meals, practice, games, warmups and cooldowns, coaching and strategy, shared rides from their apartment or buses to hotels. Having him so close in public places is almost worse than not seeing him at all; the way he’s so close through a pane of glass that Shane can’t reach through to touch him.

Right now, Shane can touch him. “We have ninety minutes max,” he mumbles into Ilya’s mouth, as his hands work beneath the tight fabric of Ilya’s tank and press into a thick bruise on his side, making Ilya groan, low and pained. Shane’s dick gets hard.

“You are evil,” Ilya tells him. “Take me to bed.”

Shane's bed, because Ilya still hasn't bought a new one for his place, and Shane refuses to be fucking in the ghost of Ilya's other hookups when they have such limited time alone together right now anyway. He needs to do without his own jealousy, even if it means dancing on the knife-edge of getting his parents to go out so he can sneak Ilya in.

“We can’t be too rough,” Shane reminds him, as they start stumbling down the hall, Shane backwards, being led by his hips. “I’m already bruised all over and I can’t put weight on my knee in case it gets fucked up again before the game.”

“Yes, sure, the most vanilla sex. But remind me how many more games we are winning this year without your stupid sex ban?” Ilya points out, and, well, he’s not wrong. Shane puts his face in Ilya’s neck and huffs the scent of his skin as they tumble over the threshold to his room. Shane gets the door closed, just about, but Ilya’s moaning into his neck and rubbing his broad hands up Shane’s sides and god, Shane’s so weak for him. He tilts back into Ilya’s arms, scrapes his teeth on Ilya’s skin, biting a little too hard.

They tumble to bed. Shane gets naked down to his tube socks and sucks Ilya’s cock so thickly and deeply and enthusiastically that his whole face is wet with tears by the time Ilya grabs him by the hair and pushes him down so hard he can’t breathe and floods his mouth with the sour taste of cum. Shane’s ears ring. His nose is snotty, his throat is sore. He feels lighter than air. He’s so hard that all Ilya has to do is suck on his fingers and make a tight ring around the head of Shane’s cock for him to fuck into for a few seconds, and then Ilya kisses him and Shane feels the scratch of his beard all over, and he comes.

After, they sprawl sticky and sated in the bed. They definitely didn’t need the whole ninety minutes.

“Fuck, Shane,” Ilya mumbles, carding his hand through Shane’s hair and breathing hard. His stomach’s splashed with cum. Shane wraps one of his hands around the thick swell of Ilya’s pec, squeezing at the bulging muscle, feeling the give of it beneath his hands.

Shane says, “Mullet’s been favouring his left side. You don’t think he fucked his ankle when he tripped over Grafton last week, do you? I rewatched the fall and it does look like he came down on that side first, but he got up and skated off fine.”

It's quiet for a moment. Then Ilya says, “Oh my god, shut up about the team right now, I have barely finished coming.”

He sounds so genuinely confused that it makes Shane laugh. It’s maybe not the time to talk about playoffs, except that everything they do, right now, is the time to talk about playoffs. They’re living it, breathing it. There’s no days off; today’s supposed to be a rest day and they still spent the morning at the practice rink, getting checked over by physios and rolled out by the sports therapist and having plays drilled into their heads by coach. They’re not supposed to be individual people, right now. They’re products of an entire team. A whole city.

Ilya flicks Shane’s temple to make him stop thinking, so Shane does the next best thing to talking about hockey, and puts Ilya’s fingers in his mouth. Just two of them, the thick index and middle, down to the second knuckle. He presses them into his tongue and sucks a little bit; not trying to turn Ilya on, just enjoying the feeling of them filling up his mouth. Saliva floods and pools in his cheeks. Shane lets out a contented sigh, and tension melts out of his body as he lays on top of Ilya's chest.

“Jesus, Shane,” Ilya says, looking down at him with a nearly wounded expression. He presses his fingers down into Shane’s tongue a little harder. Shane gnaws lightly with his teeth, not enough to leave a bite mark, just enough to really play with the idea of having Ilya trapped inside him, enjoying the hard give of his body. He holds onto Ilya’s wrist so Ilya can’t take his hand away, and just leaves them in his mouth. Ilya says, “Fuck, and you wonder why there is nobody else for me? Who else am I going to find who tries to eat me when I am just laying in their bed?”

Shane can’t think of a single response to that, except the happy feeling he gets from thinking that Ilya’s not doing this with anyone else but him. That probably nobody else ever did do exactly this, to Ilya, even back in his past. Other people sucked Ilya’s dick and swallowed his jizz, but other people didn’t use his fingers as a calmativ e afterwards. He’s finding, lately, that he has no embarrassment about doing insane or weird things with Ilya, as long as he knows he’s the only one who’s done them.

Tilting his head further onto Ilya’s shoulder, Shane lets himself enjoy the sensation. The musk of Ilya’s fingers as he tongues at them, still picking up the taste of cum and his own dick there; the ragged sounds of Ilya’s breath, the sweaty smell of his skin.

Then, the low thud of a closing door.

“Shane, honey?” his mom’s voice calls out from the hall.

Shane jolts up like he’s been zapped by electricity. His heart lurches and dips and for a second he feels like it stops altogether, his breath clenching in his throat, making him choke – the white-hot feeling of panic grips him from every side as he scrambles off the bed, grasping wildly for his clothes.

A low creak, muffled steps. “Shane?” his mom’s voice again.

Hot breath lands on the back of his neck as Shane slips, fumbles with his sweatpants, failing to get them over his legs; Ilya whispers against him, “It’s okay, don’t panic.”

“My fucking *parents* are here, Ilya,” Shane hisses, whirling around; white spots of frantic stress blot at his eyes. Fuck, he can’t go out there like this, shirt all twisted, still smelling like sex, cum on his breath, tear tracks on his face – he’d die if they saw him like this. His dad’s low voice, chatting about something unintelligible to his mom, floods down the hall and works through the crack under the door.

“Tell them you are getting in shower,” Ilya whispers – barely a breath, really, saying it right into Shane’s ear, other hand cupping his neck. He must be able to feel the way Shane’s pulse rockets and jolts, maybe can even notice the ice-cold flood falling down Shane’s spine. Ilya pats his neck, quickly. “Quick, go on.”

Shane stumbles towards the bedroom door. Behind him he hears Ilya padding quickly into the en suite; a second later, the shower cuts on, a muffling patter of water hiding the noise of another body in the room, of Shane’s panicked breaths.

Shane cracks the bedroom door open just a hair and shouts through the gap, “I - I’m in the shower! I’ll be out in a minute!”

“Oh, okay, hon–”

Shane closes the door tight, clicks the lock on it. He’s abruptly grateful the bedroom door has one, even if it always felt a little unnecessary when he was living here alone. Ilya appears back in the door of the en suite, pressing his finger to his mouth; still naked, splattered with Shane’s cum, standing unabashedly nude while Shane’s panic melts and squeezes inside of him. He scrunches his eyes shut for a second, takes a shuddery breath.

Ilya’s next to him again. He drags Shane into the en suite and then rubs a hand over Shane’s back, pulls him in, presses their bodies close until Shane’s belly is following Ilya’s as they breathe together. “Don’t panic,” he says again. “It is all okay. They don’t know.”

“Fuck,” Shane mutters. “Shit. That was so close, though.”

Ilya squeezes the back of his neck, and the tension floods out of Shane’s body. He doesn’t know when Ilya got so good at that. Guilt gnaws at him, remembering this is the second time in as many weeks Ilya’s had to talk him down from a total panic attack; surely, this isn’t what Ilya signed up for when he first wanted to hook up with Shane, thinking he’d have some fun corrupting the uptight hockey prodigy. Ilya didn’t ask for this broken, pathetic part of him. But Ilya just stands there for another few long seconds, and holds Shane in the language of bodies that they both speak better than anything.

“Okay,” Shane mumbles, once his heartrate has settled in his chest again. He knows they don’t have the luxury of time – ten minutes at most before he needs to have showered and be ready to act like a normal person to his parents, find out why they’re back early from lunch,

whatever, but the immediate danger is gone. He swallows, and tries to drag himself back together. “Shit, okay. Fuck, I’m sorry about this.”

“It’s okay,” Ilya mumbles. His hands grip at Shane’s body, up and then down his arms, like he’s testing his own strength. The rhythmic noise of the shower fills the room, a rapid metronome. Then, more slowly, Ilya says, “You know, Shane, you could tell them. I do not mind. They are your parents, they would be okay about it. And then you would not need to be so worried about hiding.”

“What?” Shane asks. “What? No. No, I can’t do that. Shit, Ilya, are you crazy? They can’t find out.”

“Okay, it was just a suggestion,” Ilya says quickly, placating. Shane draws back a little, blinks at him. Fuck, is Ilya insane? Shane can’t tell his parents. He doesn’t even know how he’d find the words. He doesn’t want them to think about him having sex, or to look into this painful part of himself that he tried so hard to change. He doesn’t want them to think there’s something he’s failed at.

“You don’t get it,” Shane insists. “My parents gave up so much for my career, Ilya. It cost them a fortune, getting me through hockey. My dad turned down a promotion he really wanted so we could stay in the right area for my Junior team. My mom left her job completely to manage my career. They drove me places every day, made their whole schedules around me for years, barely had their own lives with how much shit I had going on, and it was all to get me to this point. I can’t tell them I’m doing something so fucking dangerous that I could lose my whole career if it comes out.”

“But maybe we would not lose our career,” Ilya says. “I am not wanting to fucking come out to the whole world either, but worse case scenario. What about this whole charity thing now? League officially partnered with them just to say it would be okay if there are gays in hockey.”

“Just because the league says it’s theoretically okay, doesn’t mean it wouldn’t be hell,” Shane says. He feels veering on an edge of hysteria even thinking about it. “They couldn’t kick us out just for being gay, but we could get the shit kicked out of us on the ice by every homophobic player in the league until we’re so injured we can’t ever play again. We could get traded to shitty bad teams on different sides of the country because Boston doesn’t want a pair of fags on the starting line. Everything isn’t magically okay just because the commissioner made some bullshit press release with a charity half the guys have never even heard of.”

He knows he's being unfair; the people who run that organisation are probably doing great things to try and make Shane's life a bit easier. They're probably making great progress in many places. But the brutal part of him just truly doesn't give a shit. It's every trembling, hideous worry he carries around with him all the time. Shane rubs hard at his face, the sharp catch of stubble under his palms grating at him until it feels like his nerves are all on fire, sending hot-cold flushes of nausea through his body like a flu. Ilya rubs his hands up and down Shane's arms, callouses catching on his skin.

“Okay, okay, you are right, I know that. But we are not talking about the whole world. Is just your parents, yes?”

“Ilya, I *can't* tell them. What would that fucking say to them? Like, I don't appreciate everything they did? Especially with –” He swallows, a thick glob of saliva that nearly chokes him. “Especially with what happened when I ended up in the hospital. I can't worry them about another thing. I just can't, I'm sorry.”

“Shane, they just love you, I do not think they would be worried about you being happy,” Ilya says, but Shane barely hears it. They're wasting water by running the shower without being in it. He's on a clock and he needs to get Ilya out of this apartment before his mom decides she needs to re-organise his sock drawer or something and wanders in here and everything goes to hell.

“Look, we've got to shower,” Shane says. “Then I'll get dressed and go and distract them. I'll text you when it's safe to sneak out, okay?”

He gets into the huge, open shower stall and starts rapidly scrubbing himself down beneath the boiling spray, pinkening his skin with the loofah as he works off every trace of what they were just doing. Ilya gets in behind him after a long, quiet second. He takes his turn under the water when Shane's done, washes the cum off his stomach and then pisses down the drain, which usually makes Shane get annoyed and tell him how gross he is; right now, though, neither of them say a thing.

They win the first two games of the round smoothly. Pittsburgh's goalie isn't pulling any of his miracle saves, and it does seem like they have more injuries than they're letting on, the team playing cautious and defensive – not a good strategy for playoff hockey. Then, they fly to Pittsburgh.

Shane feels awful that he's happy to be away from home. It's just so much easier to sneak into Ilya's hotel room than to sneak him into an apartment where Shane's parents are also staying, and not worry about being caught. Ilya doesn't mention the idea of coming out to anyone again in the following days, and Shane holds him tight in bed each night, their heavy, aching bodies sprawled together, Ilya breathing wetly into Shane's neck. The comfort is easy in the dark. They've got more important things to focus on right now.

On the ice, Shane channels all his itchy, anxious malaise into his stick.

He's glad that he learned how to make hockey a part of himself a long time ago – it doesn't break with his mood, but rather gives him somewhere to put the bad things, to use everything that scares him like a driving fuel. He rams hard into Pittsburgh's players, shouldering them into the boards, snapping between their legs with his stick, pounding relentlessly into the ice. Every cell of his body goes into it. He skates through every bruise and pain, pushing himself harder, faster. Let them call him a fag. Let them try and trade him. The miserable worst-case

scenarios burn up so hard inside him that Shane plays like a demon, smashing goals into the net and imagining it hurts it. Crashes back into the bench, stings his nose and makes his eyes water with a sniff of salts, forces the flood of air into his lungs, pushes against Ilya's hard body on the bench, smells his sweat, hops the boards back onto the ice and does it again, working his jaw around his mouth guard and shouting so hard his throat goes hoarse.

They knock out Pittsburgh in the fourth game of the round, not letting them take a single win.

Shane catches Ilya around the neck and squeezes him tight among the celebratory huddle of Raiders at centre ice, as the crowd screams around them, mostly boos; they're on Pittsburgh's turf, after all. Ilya flashes his grin sideways at Shane, his crooked teeth shark-like and captivating. In the cover of excited bodies where anything can look accidental, one of Ilya's hands works down Shane's side a little too slowly, and Shane lets it. Marley lands on them, Connors, Hayden, a muffled shout of voices barely audible over the sound of the fans, the sweat-stink and hot collision of their bodies more noticeable – Shane and Ilya twine at the centre of their entire team, and the promise beats through them all like a rapid, matching heartbeat as they shout.

“Let's fucking go, Hollander,” Ilya growls into his ear as they pour off the ice into the tunnel, gloved hand squeezing the side of Shane's head. Shane grabs him back, shakes him roughly from side-to-side, which makes Ilya laugh, a nasty pearl of a laugh.

“No fucking it up this year, you all hear me?” Shane says, as the straggle of their team pour into the locker room together. “This is our *fucking* year. We're taking it home if it kills us.”

“Hell yeah, Hollzy!” Marley whoops, scruffing Shane's head. “That's the fuckin' spirit, brother!”

“Those cocksuckers in Chicago aren't gonna know what hit them, am I right,” Connors shouts, to a chorus of rough shouts. Ilya comes up behind Marley, still grinning; rosy-cheeked and pink he looks such an absurd cross between a Renaissance cherub and an ancient Greek warrior that it makes Shane's stomach twist and flip to even look at him. They're surrounded by hollering teammates and Shane still sort of wants to get on his knees for Ilya right here. This is his third fucking season and he already doesn't know how he can keep up all this hiding; Shane wants to play for twenty more years, and he can't stop looking at Ilya.

Happiness and the terror war inside Shane as he retreats to the showers. The Stanley Cup finals loom ahead of them, and the shadow of something else stretches up behind.

Chapter End Notes

next time: three words 

eagle eyes may notice this fic is now part of a series. we are really close to wrapping up fsfoeo, but there are a couple of missing scenes and a possible (shorter!!!!!!!!!!!!!!) sequel in the works, so you may wanna subscribe to the series if you're interested :)

thank you so much as always for your gorgeous comments!!! i love love love reading them all and pls do let me know what u thought of this chap 🧡 if i could make a tiny treatise upon you all, please can we try not to call me 'girl/miss' etc in comments bc that happens a lot - i know ppl assume fanfiction is all written by women, but you can picture me irl as sort of like if a swamp goblin had a shaved head and access to power tools, so these terms do not ring true 😂

[fic post](#) | my [tumblr for snippets/info](#) 🧡

Chapter 26: i like to reel it in and then spit it out (part one)

Chapter Notes

thank you to everyone who was patient waiting for this update! we went on holiday to celebrate my partner's granny's 90th birthday - she's a german jewish ww2 survivor so it was very meaningful to celebrate her reaching such a milestone age, and obviously it slowed down my writing schedule to spend a week away doing that

i decided to split this chapter into two parts, as this was over 10k already and is only the first half of it lmao i rlly don't know how to be concise ;-;

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

The Stanley Cup finals start on home ice for the Chicago Cyclones, with Boston visiting. Ilya never likes starting a round on an away game. There's always an element of back-footedness about it. No matter how nice the hotel they're put up in, there's a limit to how much you can sort out your mindset away from the hard-won comforts and familiarity of your own home.

Shane, despite all his peculiarities and superstitions, is better at it than Ilya is. He has this intense, focused headspace he can lock into at a moment's notice. All his preparations travel with him, and nobody questions it because he's Shane Hollander; he can cart as many neck pillows and yoga mats and foam rollers and protein powders and gels and braces and tapes with him as he wants. The whole team knows better than to question Shane's methods, because he's outstripping everyone but Ilya so thoroughly in their season that it would be embarrassing to ask.

"What's this?" Ilya asks, picking an object out of Shane's suitcase and waving it in the air. "Dildo?"

Shane snatches it out of his hands and places it on top of the dresser, then goes back to folding his couple of spare shirts, because he's the kind of weirdo who actually unpacks all his shit at a hotel when they're there for a grand total of four nights. "It's a mini acupressure roller, Ilya, you've seen one before."

"Mm," Ilya says neutrally. He's reclined on his elbows on Shane's bed while Shane unpacks; the large hotel room is comfortable but bland, the same as every other hotel room they've ever been in, fan whirring lowly above their heads. He thinks Shane should be paying attention to him rather than the boring luggage, but stating this hadn't gone over well a minute ago. He plucks something else out of Shane's bag and fits his hand around it. "And this is vibrator, then?"

"That's a massage gun, oh my god." Shane pulls the suggestively-shaped plastic gun away from him and puts it in a drawer, slamming it shut a little too hard. "It's for pulled muscles. I

know you use one too.”

“Right, of course.” He rolls his neck to each side for a moment, something cracking with a satisfying rush of endorphins. His whole body’s sore with strain and exhaustion, but he’d always rather have a massage from a real pair of hands than a weird vibrating hairdryer. Ignoring Ilya’s stretching, Shane unpacks four identical pairs of underwear with great focus and drive. Ilya quickly gets bored, and goes for the next treasure in the sprawled-open luggage, rolling the bulbous glass head in his hands. “Oh, I see, fancy. You have new shape of butt plug.”

“Ilya,” Shane says, rolling his eyes. “That’s a scent diffuser. You can plug it in if you’re gonna just lay there.”

Ilya blows a raspberry and drops the little plug-in air freshener onto the bed, declining to be helpful. Of course Shane travels with his own fresh-linen scent in case the hotel deigns to smell like flowers or some shit and it distracts him by nought-point-two percent and they lose playoffs because of it. He’s so strange. It’s odd that Ilya finds it so attractive.

Shane finishes unpacking his measly amount of clothes and grand amount of treasures, and then sets about hanging his walk-in suit in the closet and working out any wrinkles in the fabric. He’s cute in his travel clothes – Raiders t-shirt and sweatpants and his white tube socks, sleepy-eyed, working himself up into a fret about the Herculean task ahead of the final round. The more he folds things, the more worried Ilya knows he is. He can almost see the plays running on the inside of Shane’s eyeballs.

Ilya grabs something else.

“Oh, I for sure know what this is,” Ilya says, confident. “This is the thing you suck on to give you extra protein before games, yes?”

Shane turns around, sees Ilya holding his own dick up out of the front of his shorts, and immediately throws a pair of socks at his head.

“Oh my god,” Shane says, but he’s laughing, “You are so ridiculous, shut the fuck up.”

“You like it,” Ilya says, grinning, but he puts his dick back in his shorts for now – there’ll be time for that later. They have nice big hotel rooms in Chicago, no roommates, same floor. Ilya isn’t planning on spending the night in his own room.

Finally done with his folding, Shane comes over to the bed and falls down on top of him, a heavy sprawling weight that he doesn’t pull back to spare Ilya the pressure; he wrestles Ilya over and pins him down with an elbow in his shoulders while Ilya loudly cries out complaints.

“You are bullying me! You are trying to take me out of playoffs so you can score all the goals yourself!” Ilya accuses, squirming under Shane’s warm hands, not trying all that hard to get free. Shane leans down over Ilya’s back, and bites his ear. “Ow!”

“You’re being annoying,” Shane says. Ilya grins. This, he knows, is how Shane likes him best.

“I am not doing anything,” Ilya says. “I am just watching hockey!”

Because, of course, there are highlights playing on mute on the hotel television. It was the first thing Shane queued up when they got in the rooms, Ilya sneaking into his behind him after the rest of the team had vacated the hallway. Not that it would be weird, if Ilya went to hang in his co-captain’s hotel room and watch tape or something before a game. But it might get someone else thinking they wanted to come and hang out too, which would ruin Ilya’s entire afternoon. Better they keep it secret, not invite scrutiny.

Like everything else.

Shane rolls off his body and takes the TV off mute, letting the commentators’ bland voices babble lowly through the room. Ilya turns back over and pouts, missing being pinned; though they usually do it the other way around, there’s always something exciting about being slammed by Shane, whether it’s on the ice at practice or in bed when Ilya’s annoyed him enough to make it worth it. He debates trying to get something started, but when he looks up, Shane’s sat on the edge of the bed, watching the TV intensely. He’s flipped into hockey-mode.

Ilya sighs like a war widow and pokes Shane with his toe. “Chicago lines?” he asks, because it’s better to give into it.

“Yeah, they dropped their third line center in the third game of last round and Coach isn’t sure why,” Shane says, keeping his intent eyes on the television screen. One of his hands catches Ilya’s foot where it ends up in his lap, tugging on his toes, so Ilya can’t pout too much. “They’ve bumped up 71 now. He’s huge, one to look out for.”

“Slow as a cow, though,” Ilya shrugs. Shane’s not the only one who studies tape. “And had three injuries last year, so he probably plays more careful now.”

“Mm,” Shane says thoughtfully, without looking back at him.

“Want to help me stretch?” Ilya offers hopefully, as he sits up a bit on the bed and puts his other foot in Shane’s lap too. It’s nearly time for a nap, but he wants as much time with Shane as he can get, and feels annoyingly jealous over having to share any of their limited time with their own unconsciousness. Sometimes, if Ilya asks about stretching, Shane will get him to lay down on his belly and pull and prod his legs and arms into all sorts of nice stretches, leaning hard on his back from above to deepen them. He’s always hot and careful when he does it, and not sexual at all, which is such a novelty that it gets Ilya hard anyway.

Now, Shane keeps his eyes on the TV and just makes a distracted little noise, and then his phone beeps, so Ilya’s out of luck. Sighing, Ilya sits up, and puts his chin over Shane’s shoulder to watch him check his texts. Has to check Shane doesn’t have some secret mistress squirreled away somewhere or something. The idea is so absurd it’s deeply funny, except for the part where Ilya thinks he’d end up in prison if Shane ever tried to fuck someone else.

“Oh, it’s Mom,” Shane says, and tilts the screen to show Ilya. Yuna and David are on the bus with the other parents and family members who will be visiting to watch the first game. Yuna has sent Shane a selfie of the two of them bearing wide smiles and matching *Hollander* jerseys, cheeks painted in Raiders colours, waving little flags.

“Your parents are very cute,” Ilya says, trying not to feel some kind of way about it, and managing to feel all the ways instead – sad of himself, adoring of Shane, missing his mama, wanting to be invited back to the Hollanders’ cottage, all of it.

“They’re excited,” Shane says, as he taps something back in his texts. “Oh, they wanted me to ask if you’ll get dinner with us, too? To celebrate or whatever. I think my mom really just wants to coach you about your backchecking.”

Ilya’s stomach clenches. He both desperately wants to do that, and also sort of dreads it; he can’t stop thinking lately that he’s become so hopelessly obsessed with Shane that if his parents take one look at them together, Ilya will give it away. Still, he says, “If you think that is a good idea, then yes.”

“Yeah, it’d be nice,” Shane says. He’s too locked in on hockey to be thinking about the other stuff for a second, which is nice in its own way. Clearly a little distracted, he saves the picture of them on his phone and says, “I better send this to my publicist for socials. She’s really into building my ‘family brand’, whatever that means.”

The bed rocks as Ilya shuffles a little further forward, levering his legs on either side of Shane’s body and clinging to him from behind. Shane leans his weight back into Ilya easily, readily, the hard press of his body giving over.

“Mister publicity,” Ilya teases. “So famous you need help posting pictures, is a hard life.”

Shane squirms in the clutch of his arms and pinches Ilya’s wrist, which makes him laugh.

“You can’t make fun of me for having a publicist. You should definitely have one too – it’s crazy that you expect your manager to do everything. No wonder you don’t get big brand deals.”

“No, no, I like it this way,” Ilya says cheerfully, nosing at the space under Shane’s jaw. “Fun that my lover is more famous than me. Makes more money than me on his rookie deal because of how many billboards they put his beautiful face on. Maybe I will quit hockey and be a kept man.”

Shane lets out a little huff of breath, hanging onto Ilya’s arms where they’re wrapped around him. He’s still watching the game tape on the TV, but Ilya has at least half his attention, which feels like a startling victory this deep into playoffs. Shane says, “You better fucking not. I want to win at least five cups before either of us retires.”

Warmth flares in Ilya’s heart; he buries his face down in Shane’s neck, smelling his nice soap and feeling the heat of his skin, to hide how fluttery the idea makes him. That Shane wants to play together that long. That he thinks about *them* in terms of things they will do before

retiring in fifteen, maybe nearly twenty years. That he pictures Ilya being around all that time.

Draping himself harder along Shane's back, Ilya goes quiet, and watches the game review with Shane for a while. It's nice just being curled up against him like this, bracketing him, feeling Shane hang onto him. It's the way Ilya wants to hold him all the time – getting Shane into all of his senses, the smell and sound and feel of him. They're creeping up on the time Shane's alarm will ring to tell them it's definitively time to nap, but Ilya's already becoming sleepy, letting his eyes droop from his warm rest against Shane's back.

Then his own phone buzzes. Ilya grouchy retreats one arm from around Shane and squishes his cheek sideways into Shane's back so that he can check it. He sees the name on his screen, startles upright.

[From: Yuna Hollander]

Good luck tonight from me and David, Ilya! We'll be cheering for both you and Shane. Remember to pay attention to defence 👍

A weird feeling clenches inside Ilya's chest, and he swallows, the motion hurting his throat a little like something's stuck there. He wasn't – expecting that. It's not like he's kept in touch with Shane's parents since he visited them over the summer, even as nice as they'd been to him back then. He's seen them a couple times when they were visiting Shane or the rink since then, but he didn't think Yuna Hollander had any thoughts about him, beyond apparently wanting to lecture him on his backchecking.

“What is it?” Shane says, when Ilya pulls his other arm away to hold his phone in both hands. He glances back over his shoulder, then turns entirely away from the game when Ilya shows him his phone.

Ilya tries to sound like he's teasing and not flooded with dreadful misery as he says, “You have competition for Yuna's favourite Raiders player, I think. Watch out, I come for your title.”

Shane rolls his eyes, but he takes Ilya's phone off him and just looks at it for a moment, worrying his teeth between his lip. Suddenly they feel far apart on the bed, twisted out of the tight embrace they'd been so comfortable in only a moment ago. Shane's eyes flick over the words on the screen, over and over again, like he's decoding a hidden message.

Ilya rubs at his sternum, sighs. “What is wrong?” he asks, though he can guess.

Shane says, “Nothing. I mean, it's just – it's weird that you're the only player on the team who my parents know well enough to text, right? Mom asks about the other guys sometimes, or after Hayden's kids, but since last summer you're the only one they really *talk* about. It's just – do you think it's suspicious?”

“No,” Ilya says. “We are friends. They just think I am your friend. They like me because I spent all this time with them and charmed them, nothing more.”

"I know that. I'm just wondering if other people think it's weird."

"You worry so much about other people," Ilya says, rolling his eyes to the ceiling for a second, flopping back on his hands on the bed. This conversation makes him feel tired, not least because this is far from the first time they've had it. "All the time. It is fine, Shane. Nobody else knows anything else about what your parents think. And your mother could just tell I am a sad orphan with nobody else to cheer for me."

"Ilya. That's not true," Shane says. His voice is suddenly gentler. Hands reaching back out for Ilya, rubbing warmly at his hip. Ilya tries to play it off, but unfortunately, he knows at this point that Shane can always see through him.

"No, I am just joking," he lies. Maybe half-lies. He's sure Yuna Hollander is the sort of person, though, who would be keeping track of exactly who on her son's team is lacking the appropriate support system to adequately motivate them to get Shane's team to the cup winning game, and would take it into her own hands if necessary. It's probably nothing more than that.

"My parents really do like you," Shane tells him, with a weird, nervous energy. "That's not the problem with me, like, not wanting to tell them. You know that, right?"

"Yes, I know," Ilya says, as he idles his thumb on his phone keyboard. Eventually he just texts back a *thank you*)) and leaves it at that. Now's not the time to crack a joke or anything. He can feel Shane's anxiety walking on a thread above their heads; their public game of hockey and their private endeavour of whatever this is all hang on the balance of Shane's mental state, and Ilya worries about him. The pressure building. Worries less about himself, but that, too.

When he's sent the text, he tosses his phone off the bed and lays down with a huff of air, letting his fatigued muscles melt into the mattress. Shane lays down beside him, half-turned on a hip, and pushes Ilya's shirt up to his armpits. His warm fingers tickle over Ilya's stomach, then sternum, then scratch the hair on his chest. There's roughness from the tape holding Shane's probably-broken pinky to the finger beside it, but Shane isn't overly gently with himself, pushing all his fingertips into the give of Ilya's body.

"Sorry," Shane says, quietly.

For a second, there's a strange tension in the air. But Ilya lets it out in a big long breath and reaches up to wrap his arms around Shane, pulling him down; Shane goes the second he's led, collapsing into Ilya's chest and cramming his face between his pecs. He feels so right there, the hot heavy weight of him crushing out all Ilya's weird feelings and indecisions.

It's not that Ilya doesn't get it, logically. It would be fucking insane for them to come out to the world. He knows from the news back home that anti-gay sentiment in Russia is only growing, and doesn't want to think about what it could mean for him if anyone back there knew what he was getting up to with Shane. The world of hockey is so un-queer as for it to feel absurd to even think about other people in the locker room knowing two of their teammates are sucking each other's cocks on nights off; he knows they'd never be fully accepted again if people knew. And he's not like Shane – he doesn't have these close

relationships to people like his parents that could be jeopardised by telling them. So he gets why Shane's scared. If Ilya was smarter, he'd be as terrified as Shane is.

Unfortunately, he's not that smart, and the primal, childish part of him just wants to scream it from every rooftop: this man is mine! This most glorious prodigious specimen of hockey and dick riding belongs to me! Look at him and keep your hands off!

Not something for this lifetime, unfortunately. As he feels Shane melting into his body and letting out a shaky little sigh, Ilya pushes all of those thoughts away. Shane is something precious for him to look after. Far more precious than Ilya's own irrational thoughts of things they can't do.

"I can nap here?" Ilya checks, as they descend deeper into the warm, quiet embrace of each other's bodies; the blinds are already drawn, the room dim. Shane nods into his skin.

"Obviously," he says. "You sleep like shit without me, it would be bad for our game if you didn't."

"Yes, and who can blame me? You are perfect weighted blanket and I get to wake up with my cock in your mouth after a nap, who would ever sleep alone?"

Shane squeezes him, and Ilya laughs. "Asshole. I'm not blowing you right before a game, we need energy!"

"Okay, so after," Ilya decides, which Shane pulls a face at, but Ilya knows him well enough to know that means *yeah, probably*.

Leaning on him a little heavier, Shane says, "You have to be back in your own room before we get our call to leave for the game, though, don't forget. I'll set an alarm."

"Mm," Ilya agrees lowly, and closes his eyes while Shane fiddles with the television remote and his phone. His body doesn't crawl off Ilya's, so Ilya couldn't care less if he's calling the fucking moon up there.

It's the roughest, deepest part of the season. They've been pushing their bodies to the brink since the fall, and it's all catching up – they're nursing all kinds of injuries, not just Shane's busted fingers and the deep pain in Ilya's left shoulder that won't leave his tendons, but landscapes of bruises and cuts and strains and just a beat-down kind of fatigue. They've all lost too much weight, and Ilya can't wait already for summer, when he'll get to watch Shane's body bulk and plump and fill out his hands. Half the time at the moment, for as many jokes as he'll make about it, Ilya's too tired to even fuck when he gets Shane into bed with him. But this – napping together, letting the slow rhythm of Shane's breathing and warm smell of him lull him to sleep – has Ilya somehow, despite it all, feeling better rested than he has ever been in his entire life.

True to his word, Shane wakes them up on a cautionary alarm and kicks Ilya out from the nap-warm bed before their game call time. Ilya goes back to his own room and gets into his walk-in suit, slaps his own face a few times and balances on one foot at a time to check his body's obedience, locks in. Just before he has to leave, Svetlana texts him, *watch your edges*.

Ilya texts, *thank you for your eternal support*, and gets a middle finger emoji back, just before the travel team knocks on his door.

The bitter sting of frozen air on his face, snapping at his cheeks the way Ilya snaps at the ice with his skates, pounding down it; against the burnt-out hollowness in his lungs from exertion, against the screams behind him, following the glimmering call of Hollander's hulking form down the ice, and Ilya slams the puck out from Chicago's grip, and Hollander catches it, and a hard body collides with Ilya from the side, and Ilya shoves back even as the sharp groaning pain blooms in his hip, another bruise to watch bloom later, and he forces his quaking thighs off down the ice, and he's crushing their defenceman into the boards just as Hollander scores. Screams, celebrations, jumbotron video cutting to the Hollander parents in the crowd waving their little flags with Shane's face on them. Ilya smashes his chest into Shane's on the ice in celebration and feels a hot, excited puff of air out of Shane's mouth against the flushed skin of his face, which is nearly as good as a cup.

At the end of third period, he's panting and squirting water over his burning hot-cold face when the crowd erupts around them in a cacophonous siren. Boston have won the first game.

The bike spins under Ilya's feet, and he ducks his head down, sucking in a low, careful breath.

At this point in playoffs, working out hard doesn't make much sense – they need to save all the energy they can for the game, and they don't need to lose any more calories or exasperate the injuries every one of them seems to be sporting. But with limited ice time on their off-day between the first two games of the round, Ilya's not the only one who feels like he needs to keep his blood pumping. Ilya rounds up Marley and Connors to beg with him for something to do, and the trainers set them up on the bikes, where they can work into a light sheen of sweat broken up by a half-dozen protein shakes each without straining themselves too much.

“You've been in that apartment for fucking ever, man,” Marley says, over the whirring of machines and the low background noise of the music channel playing on the gym TV. “End of a fuckin' era.”

“Yeah, I’ll kind of miss it,” Connors huffs back, voice thick with exertion. “But you know how it is – Emmy thinks it’s a ‘depressing bachelor pad’ and won’t move in unless we get a bigger place, so it’s gotta go.”

The news of the week is that Connors will be moving out of the shared apartment building that Ilya and Shane both live in, as well as two of the younger rookies now. It’s the building that player services always sets up their new players in if they ask for help finding somewhere; it’s treated Ilya well over the last few years, but it was never meant to be a permanent home. Connors seemed a little more attached to it, though maybe just through convenience. The girlfriend whose name Ilya always forgets is apparently the only factor in his decision to move.

“Careful she doesn’t decorate the whole place in pink sparkles, dude, I’ve seen how she dresses,” Marley laughs, and Connors squirts his water bottle at Marley across the bikes.

“Oh, because your house is such beautiful interior design?” Ilya says, rolling his eyes as he fiddles with the front panel of his bike, lowering the resistance when his thighs start to burn. Half of what Marley owns is white leather. “Maybe you should get Conny’s girlfriend to help you out, make it more fun at least.”

“Roz, if you had your way, your whole place would be leopard print and fake gold, shut the fuck up.”

Ilya snorts. “Well, I am buying a house in the summer too, I will give these notes to my designer.”

“About time,” Marley says. Ilya grabs for his water bottle and doesn’t quite look Marley’s way. “Fuckin’ insane that you’ve been making eight mil and still living in a two-bedroom apartment, man. That’s gonna be one crazy ass mansion. We can throw some sick parties next year.”

“Eight point one,” Ilya says around his water, noncommittal. It’s less than he could have asked for on his contract if he’d cared, but he’d wanted to leave them more than enough room to get Shane’s extension in under their cap space, and thought it was funny to make it his number anyway. The signing bonus alone, of course, had been enough to outright buy a house for every day of the week if he’d wanted. He knows that the guys find it weird he stayed in the rookie apartments.

Ilya tries to picture it; his own place, extravagant and wild, ready to host the guys for all sorts of debauchery. It’s not that he wouldn’t still enjoy throwing an insane party, but when he visualises it now, there’s a certain coke-and-strippers energy that falls into a void in his mental television and is replaced by Shane’s frowning face. When he thinks on it a little more, even the idea of having the guys over to his house at all is loomingly threatening – for every minute someone else is in his house, it’s another picture of Shane he can’t have out, another one of Shane’s hoodies Shane will take home with him, another reason for a night Shane won’t sleep in his bed. The more Ilya tries to be close with anyone else, the more it will chip away pieces and pieces of their precious thing.

The thought of it makes an unpleasant metallic taste flood his mouth. Ilya swallows, looks down at his bike again. Now's not the time to think about any of this. He keeps telling himself that, though of course, it doesn't stop him thinking.

"Yeah, right," Conny says, thankfully saving Ilya a response. "You're not gonna be let out of the house for one of Roz's parties ever again, Marls. Aren't you back with Lola?"

This is news to Ilya, who doesn't exactly keep track of Marley's ever-rotating girlfriends, but does remember Lola being the one with the tongue piercing who made him want to drive off a bridge. He flicks a judgemental glance Marley's way, eyebrows raising. Ilya likes trouble, but even he's not *that* dumb.

"Dude, shut the hell up. Yeah, we're talking again, but she's being really chill this time around."

Ilya snorts while Conny says, "Riight, I'm sure that has nothing to do with that six-mil extension you just signed. Better check your condoms before you hit, I'm just saying."

"Conny, don't be an asshole," Ilya tells him. Then, thinking about it; "But Marley, yes, she is probably trying to baby trap, so watch out."

"Fuck you guys," Marley says. The music channel switches into commercials above their heads, an irritating slew of tinny American voices. "At least I can still get chicks. You've been striking out for months, dude."

For a second, the statement is so absurd that Ilya doesn't even realise it's directed at him. Then he flicks his eyes up and sees Marley's face and thinks: oh. Me? What the fuck?

It is maybe stupid, but Ilya has barely thought about how any of his teammates might think of his behaviour this season. Since he and Shane made up, he's hardly been going out to clubs – why would he, when he has the freakiest sex of his life on tap in his own apartment building and with a bedtime of ten PM? Sometimes he'll go for a drink, but he's obviously not hitting on girls while he's out there. He's barely got space in his head for anything other than Shane. And probably nobody would give a shit about his sex life, except for of course, in the first couple years he was here, Ilya was pretty much making a one-man compendium of North American puck bunnies. It's different.

"You are so dumb," Ilya tells him. His heartrate's up from the bike, shoulder aching where he leans into the handles; Ilya takes a few deep breaths, reminds himself he's not supposed to strain anything, slows down even when he wants to push and push until his muscles burn. "What, suddenly the only place I can find someone to suck my dick is gross club with you hanging off me? You have no idea how good I get it."

He shouldn't have said anything. He knows that. He's supposed to be laying low, not making anyone suspicious. But god, it's so fucking hard not to just scream it sometimes. Ilya has the best person in the world locked down – he won the literal lottery. He has a prodigy world-talent famous millionaire with big brown eyes who cries during sex from how good it feels. And he's supposed to pretend he's alone and uncaring. Ilya's not a humble man. He loves to brag. It's painful that he can't, about this.

“Where the hell else? Don’t tell me Roz the fucking dog is locked down, dude.”

“By fucking who? Oh, shit, is it your hot Russian girl?”

Sveta would probably hate and enjoy being described that way in equal measure. Ilya rolls his eyes.

“*Locked down*, I never said locked down. You are both too nosy. Shut up, none of your business.”

He slows his cycling to a crawl and sits up, jams his water bottle in his mouth, doesn’t look at either of them.

“You’re being real weird now, man.”

“You are weird all the time, Marley,” Ilya tells him. Cooling down, he clambers off the bike. “I am done, don’t want to fuck my shoulder before Friday. See you at dinner.”

They’re probably gonna gossip about him when he’s gone, but there’s not much Ilya can do about that. Ignoring the weird glut of tension in his stomach, Ilya stomps out of the gym, and tries to remind himself all the reasons once again that he has to keep his life a secret.

Shane had gone to the physio and a meeting with Coach after morning skate; by the time Ilya’s heading back to the hotel, there’s a text on his phone saying, *Back in my room. Where are you?* and then another one from fifteen minutes later that’s just a question mark. Needy. Ilya loves when he’s needy. He walks right past his own hotel room and knocks on Shane’s door.

Shane lets him in, locks the door behind him, kisses him once on the mouth and once on the jaw, and then turns around and goes back to sit on the couch at the end of his bland hotel bed. There’s game tape on the TV. Of course there is. Shane has the remote in his hand and scrubs it back a few seconds, making sure he didn’t miss anything in the time it took him to open the door.

“You only invite me here to make me watch video review?” Ilya accuses, overly betrayed. “I thought you wanted romantic ron-dee-voo.”

“Where did you learn that word?” Shane asks, laughing a bit. Ilya grins.

“I watch rom-coms on the plane now,” he tells Shane; which, really, he’d only done the once, but it’s worth saying it for how it makes Shane look at him in utter confusion for a moment, brow furrowed and lips parted. He looks way too good in his gym shorts and Nike t-shirt, casually jock-ish in a way that’s sexier to Ilya than if he were wearing lingerie. He wishes Shane would put on his backwards cap like he does in the locker room for press when his

hair's sweaty. Shane would look like one of Ilya's wet dreams in nothing but that and a jock strap.

Even just imagining it gets him warm, but the vision's a bit too ambitious for this deep into playoffs when even a half-hour of cycling is enough to wear him out. He'll get his cock in Shane's mouth later; he knows it helps Shane sleep, sucking it before bed. For now, Ilya descends beside him on the couch with a dramatic sigh, and flops onto his side. Feeling an intense and overwhelming urge, he pulls Shane's t-shirt away from his body so that he can stuff his face inside it, nosing against Shane's bare belly. Shane blinks down at him as Ilya lets the shirt drop back over his head, cocooning his head under the white cotton. The entire world disappears around him except for the gentle heave of Shane's stomach, the heat of his skin, the scratch of hair leading down from his belly button into the waistband of his shorts, where Ilya puts his mouth.

Ilya doesn't do anything, just lays there, breathing on him, letting the warmth of Shane's body envelop him.

"Comfy?" Shane asks wryly from up above him. Ilya lets out a happy little noise. The heavy weight of Shane's hands landing on his shoulders and the heat of Shane's body against his bruised face are perfect; he burrows his way further inside, stretching out the fabric of Shane's boring sponsored t-shirt.

"Yes," Ilya mumbles from his hiding place. His breath heats up the tented fabric. "I think I will stay here forever, actually."

"You can't stay there forever. We have a game tomorrow."

"Uuuugh," Ilya groans, and Shane laughs. Of course, Ilya wants to play the game; he wants to win, he wants the bloody sting of victory. But they're all fucking exhausted, beaten up, worn down from the physical drive as well as the mental intensity of wanting something so hard it could break you. Summer break will be glorious. They haven't talked about it, but in the secrecy of his mind Ilya imagines spending it with Shane and gets giddy.

"And team dinner tonight," Shane adds.

"That is ages away. So I stay here until dinner."

"Mm," Shane says, one of his hands digging a little deeper into Ilya's back muscles, and his body seems to melt a little under Ilya. "Okay, yes please."

The acquiescence floods him with pleasure. Whenever he manages to work Shane out of one of his tight little knots of denial and realises how badly Shane wants him here too, Ilya loses his mind for a second. He breathes deep through his nose, getting a whiff of Shane's skin, feeling the hotness of his own breath against Shane's body. There's the low noise of hockey commentary coming from the television, but he mostly ignores it, content for the while to try and absorb himself into Shane's body and ignore the rest of the world.

After a few minutes, Shane says, "Oh, I got the emails you forwarded me."

Ilya kisses the swell of strong stomach he's crushed against. "What do you think?"

Real estate listings, of course. It's not something he'll think hard about until playoffs end, but Ilya contacted a realtor last month about finally finding a new place, and she's been steadily filling up his inbox with suggestions. Ilya cuts out any that don't have a pool, a gym, or space to add a sauna. There are still several good options left.

"A couple of them look good. Better architecture outside of the city. Kind of far away from the rink, though."

"I think I can handle a bit longer drive," Ilya mumbles. "I have very fast car."

"In Boston traffic? You'll end up getting out and murdering someone within a month," Shane laughs, and Ilya digs his teeth into Shane's navel. "Ow!" Shane's fingers dig into his back hard, revengeful. Ilya loves when they hurt each other a little. The close connection of their bodies, the way they can do anything to each other.

"Problem for after playoffs, anyway," Ilya points out. It's getting humid and a little hard to breathe in his cocoon, but he doesn't want to leave.

"Yeah," Shane says, but in the tone of voice that means he's not dropping it. Sure enough, a few seconds later; "You liked the third one you sent, but you don't wanna go look around it, you said?"

Ilya blows a raspberry against him, which makes Shane squeeze him again. "Yes, well, a bit too big for me, and even further away. I will just add sauna to wherever I buy myself."

He'd looked at it. Looked at it plenty, when the realtor had sent the listing over; a sleek modern build with a pool, a gym, a sauna, a vanity garage, a basement where he could add some synthetic ice for home practice. But the size of the place had gaped at him, intimidatingly. He'd found himself trying to tally up how many people in his life Ilya could ever possibly need to fit in a house. He needs a spare bedroom for Sveta to visit – an extra wardrobe in case Shane decides it's safe to leave any of his stuff there sometimes. That's about it. He doesn't have parents or siblings he will ever need to host. No family will visit him, no extended friends; nobody beyond his teammates, who all live here anyway.

It's strange how such a communal life can sometimes make Ilya feel so achingly, notably alone. Ilya had emailed the realtor back and asked her to look for places with less bedrooms.

"Oh, that makes sense," Shane says. He doesn't say, *let's move in together! Fuck hockey, let's be loud and gay and public and have a big family home like Hayden Pike and adopt eight angry cats and invite everyone over for parties where we will need a table for fifty people!* He's sensible, unlike Ilya, who gets in the dangerous business of letting himself want things he can't have. "You still want me to help you look at places though, right?"

"Of course," Ilya tells his hip. "Who else will tell me if kitchen counters have weird texture or trees in the yard smell like 'yellow chemicals.' I have to make sure it is Shane-safe."

“Don’t make me sound crazy,” Shane complains, but he has to know by now that Ilya finds all his weird little oddities nothing but charming. Ilya snakes a hand up the back of Shane’s shirt to match his face shoved in the front, exploring more of the hot, bruised landscape of his body. “Anyway, I’m gonna find a new place in the summer too, now my extension’s gone through. No point staying at the apartments if you won’t be there. So you can help me look, too.”

Shane’s contract had been the subject of much excitement back at the start of the season. He signed his extension pretty early, though his rookie deal won’t be up until the end of playoffs this year, and to great success; making, as he keeps bringing up, 900k more than Ilya for the next five years. At the start of this summer, they’re gonna be handing him a 5-million signing bonus just to kick things off. He’ll be able to buy pretty much any place in Boston that he likes the look of.

“You can buy somewhere close to me,” Ilya decides, feeling a little better about the strange thought of both leaving the building where they’re never more than a couple feet of concrete apart. “Will be just like we are now, but nicer things.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Shane says. He rubs Ilya’s shoulder hard beneath his hands, working into the thick muscle; for a moment, it’s quiet but for the TV, muttering about the scoring race for the season, which both Shane and Ilya are at the top of. Strange, hearing their names coming from the screen while they’re in here, collapsed in their own private bubble. Over the sound of his own stats being recited, Shane says, “It’s gonna be weird, right? Being a bit further apart. I mean, we won’t be able to do this every night, anymore.”

Ilya feels grim at the thought. He pushes his face deeper into the thick, soft muscle of Shane’s stomach, like he might be able to crawl into his skin and stay there.

“You should still spend every night at my house,” he says, trying to put a spin on it. “Maybe even less suspicious than apartments, nobody will see you in the halls.”

There’s quiet; a weird, stressed little sigh. Shane says, “People will definitely notice if I’m coming and going from your place every night. Like, your new neighbours would see my car and wonder why it’s always there. The guys will notice if we go the same place after practice. What if someone dropped by unexpectedly? Marley’s always talking about partying at your place when you get somewhere bigger, and he’s got like, no boundaries. Plus drug testing has to know where I am in case they do a random check, shit, so I couldn’t be that far away from my own place all the time. And I couldn’t like, leave stuff there – it’s way harder to explain if we’re not in the same building.”

At Ilya’s apartment right now, Shane’s gym bag is already shoved in the back of the closet; his fancy spare toothbrush put away in the medicine cabinet between stays, just in case. Ilya swallows, his saliva over-warm.

“The team are all way too stupid to notice something like this,” he says. “It is not that bad. I don’t know. Maybe you buy the house next door.”

“That would be so fucking weird, Ilya.” He’s probably right, like they were twin sisters in a movie or something, but Ilya can’t fight the itch in his skin. He wants Shane close, closer

than close. “I guess I could find somewhere in a neighbourhood sort of nearby, but then we’d still be coming and going from each others places, and we won’t be as close as we are now. And we’ll have to be really careful about neighbours and people seeing. It’s not gonna be the same.”

Ilya stomach feels sloshy and sore. He puts his teeth on the skin of Shane’s belly, holding it for a second, while Shane’s fingers knot in his curls. “We shouldn’t think about this now,” he decides, even though they keep saying that, and the time keeps creeping closer and closer. “Problem for after playoffs, no?”

It should be the magic word. Shane can usually think of nothing but playoffs when they’re in them. His singular level of focus is the reason he’s such an incredible athlete, and also why he can be so oblivious to the rest of the world. But right now, Ilya is splitting his attention. He can feel how the deflection doesn’t work; the tension in Shane’s body where Ilya is crawling into it, the shake of his hands on Ilya’s neck.

Ilya crawls out from his safe, hot cocoon inside Shane’s shirt and sits up. Shane’s hands fall around him, holding his shoulders, gripping so tight it hurts; must hurt him too, Shane’s broken finger on Ilya’s strained shoulder, but they lean into it together, hurting themselves on each other.

“I don’t want to lose – this – you,” Shane says. His voice is thicker now, low, a kind of panic in his tone that Ilya can hear. He squeezes his eyes shut. Ilya holds his elbows, trying to bracket him against the feeling. “But I can’t figure out how it’s gonna work. And how *long* it’s gonna work. I mean, sure, maybe I move into a house down the street from you and we secretly spend the nights together, that might work for a couple years, but at some point, someone’s gonna find it weird that neither of us have girlfriends, or wives, or kids, or whatever. At some point the plausible deniability of being non-committal when you’re young or just a super focused athlete doesn’t work anymore. I want to play for twenty more years, Ilya. People are always gonna be looking at us. How the hell are we gonna keep this up?”

The scream of muscles in Ilya’s shoulder. His eyes hurt, his breath is sore. Ilya doesn’t have any good answers, but he knows Shane isn’t expecting any. He’s just spiralling. He will have thought about all this in his head, every possible avenue, and already concluded there’s no good way out.

His voice is rough and unconvincing when he tells Shane, “You are just thinking too much.”

A wet snort of a laugh. Shane’s still squeezing his eyes closed. “You always say that.”

“Yes, well, is usually true.” Ilya leans closer, bringing the hot planes of their sore bodies together. He kisses Shane’s forehead, gripping him tight, rubbing his fingers over Shane’s mouth to feel the rough texture of his stubbly playoff beard and the soft give of his wet pink lips. “I also don’t know how we make this work, but it will be okay.”

“You don’t know that,” Shane insists, mumbling into Ilya’s hands.

“Maybe not. But I want it.”

“I do, too.”

There’s quiet for a long, wallowed moment. Ilya pulls him closer on the couch; Shane’s thigh over his, Ilya’s arms over Shane’s, Shane’s hands kneading his shoulders, their bellies close enough to touch on an exhale. Shane smells like his own soap, which he travels with because he doesn’t like the scents in hotels. He’s trembling a bit when Ilya puts his face in Shane’s neck. They’re both so fucking tired.

It’s perhaps because he’s exhausted that Ilya says such a stupid, ill-advised thing next.

“Maybe it is a good thing if we tell some people,” Ilya says, into the comforting darkness of Shane’s hot skin. “Now we know Marley would be cool about it. Conny probably would too, he retweet the article about You Can Play. And your parents, Shane, I really think that they would be happy you are happy.”

He feels Shane go rigid under him. The stiffness of panic. The way he shuts down, hands letting go of Ilya’s shoulders, the feel of his throat swallowing under Ilya’s face.

“Ilya—”

“No, no, I know,” Ilya says quickly, hurried, turning his face the other way on Shane’s shoulder. “Forget I said that, I know.”

“Ilya, we *can*’t. It’s not that I—”

“I know, Shane, I know. I am just tired, being silly, you can ignore it.”

“You understand, right? Like, you do get why that’s impossible? It’s not, fuck, it’s *not* that I don’t want to.”

The problem is that yes, Ilya does understand. He just hates it. He just doesn’t want it to be true. All the things Shane has said – the way it could backfire on them, even if not officially – are true. The ways they could be hurt, ostracised, traded away from each other. Their lives aren’t under their own control. It’s part of the sport. Their environment is built without them, and it’s up to them to make sure they fit inside of it.

Ilya aches from fitting himself into this tiny, cramped box of expectation. It hurts worse than the worst injuries on the ice.

“Maybe things will get better,” Shane says, after a weird, tense minute. He swallows again, audible. His arms wrap around Ilya’s shoulders and cling on, tight, like he’s afraid to let Ilya go. It’s so exactly how Ilya wants to be held – desperately and painfully – that he melts into Shane’s grip even as his eyes sting. “In a few years, or, fuck, I don’t know. Ten years, or something. Maybe some other gay hockey players will come out and make it more normal. I guess if – you know, if that happened, or something like that, maybe we could tell a couple of people, right?”

It’s the closest to an acquiescence Shane has ever got before on the topic. Ilya realises, for maybe the first time, that Shane must hate the hiding as much as he does, but be so much

more terrified to think about why.

“Maybe,” Ilya agrees, but it doesn’t sound likely. How many gay hockey players can there be out there in the world? Probably even less who are fucking their own teammates, which is half the problem.

Fucking hell. All this, and they have a game tomorrow. He knows he shouldn’t be bringing any of this up – shouldn’t be stressing Shane or himself out, now of all times, when the whole team hangs on their backs in the most important playoffs round of their lives so far.

Ilya finally removes himself from Shane’s neck, and sits back on the couch. He pulls at Shane’s thick thigh, a mottled bruise crawling under the hem of his gym shorts, until Shane swings it over Ilya’s hips and sits in his lap. Shane’s looking down as he breathes, not meeting Ilya’s eyes. His hands come to Ilya’s chain, one of his warm thumbs sliding the cross up and down it with a satisfying little *whrr* noise as the metal moves.

“Forget all of that now, okay? It is hockey time. Talk to me about how we are going to fuck Chicago tomorrow,” Ilya tells him suddenly, lowly, as he spreads his hands over Shane’s parted thighs and squeezes, feeling the heat of him settled over Ilya’s legs. “Quick and rough, or, uh, do we take our time? Really make them feel it?”

Shane’s eyes flicker up to his; his pink tongue wets his plush lower lip for just a lightning-quick second.

“I don’t know,” Shane says, “You tell me.”

Something he would never say about hockey, but loves to say about sex. Ilya slides his hand higher, under the edge of Shane’s shorts, and squeezes the hot bulge of his cock and balls through his underwear. Shane’s eyes close; his throat bobs, and he leans into Ilya’s body like he can’t stay away from it. Maybe they have time for this before dinner, after all.

Rough and slow in the end, a frustrated chipped-away game with too many penalties called; Ilya spits and red-faced rants from the penalty box for a full five, chucks the snapped neck of his stick against the boards, while he watches the team give chase up and down the ice in front of him. Burning up everywhere his gear touches and ice-blustered cold on his exposed face when he’s sat there for long enough, he feels the needling desperation to be out there, pumping his muscles, *moving*. Ilya was a kid who hated sitting still, always squirming and fidgeting and distracting people and making a big fucking noise of attention just so he didn’t have to wallow in stillness. He still hates it now. He wants to cut into the ice and run, he wants the blood in his mouth; he cusses out the Chicago forward as he passes and the official in the box with him gives him a warning look. Ilya shoves his mouthguard into his jaw to chew on and stews. Counts the seconds til he’s let back out, where he can slam himself onto the ice and catch the puck the moment his skates are free of the sin bin, throw himself back into the game with full-body abandon.

Shane scores halfway through the third off Ilya's assist, and rocks his entire body into Ilya's in a hug as they celly, Marley's hard bulk on the other side of him, rough gloves slapping at his back and the bare side of his neck.

They get into place for a face-off. Chicago's left winger, Timofeev, gives Ilya a dirty look as he skates past him.

"Think you will touch puck this game, or are you saving that for marriage?" Ilya taunts him as he passes, because Timofeev is slow and atrocious, and because he's the reason Ilya spent a quarter of a period stewing in the bin. Timofeev goes nasty-faced and spits at him through the rough scrabble of his beard.

"Say some shit again, you cocksucking bitch, see what happens," he snaps in Russian, only the word *cocksucking* in English, presumably an insult he uses on every player he dislikes. Ilya blows a raspberry at him. Maybe would do more, if he hadn't already taken that penalty, and if the ref wasn't right fucking there. He wonders what Timofeev would do if Ilya said, *you should see me suck cock, it would impress you as much as my hockey*. If he said, *I take that as a compliment*. But he can't, obviously, say anything like that, and probably shouldn't even think it when he's surrounded by this many hockey players, fans, cameras.

Shane wins the face-off with a pass to Ilya. Ten minutes later, Boston win the game, 2-1. There's a serious air in the room afterwards, none of the usual wild celebration. They're halfway there, and Ilya knows that all any of them can think about is the feeling last year – getting this close, and having it slip away.

It's a relief to be back in Boston for the next two games. Back *home*, Ilya finds himself thinking – which is a strange way to think about Boston, a city so far away from anywhere he knew for the first eighteen years of his life, but increasingly how it feels. The rink feels almost as much like home as his apartment does. Shane's apartment, even, since that's where they go to sleep the first night they're back, Ilya not even bothering to dump his suitcase in his own place.

"I'll set an alarm early," Shane tells him, as he rolls over Ilya's body on the bed, dropping little kisses into Ilya's clavicle and then setting his chin in there. "I know you have shoulder physio first thing, and I want to talk to coach about scheduling extra tape review for everyone before the next game."

"Hollander, there is only so much tape dumb bunch of hockey players can watch before their eyes start going blurry," Ilya tells him, but lets Shane set the stupid alarm, and then lays there and lets Shane lave kisses onto his mouth with increasing desperation for the next few minutes, play with his curls, chew on his fingers, press gently on each of his moles and peer at his teeth. It's an addictive kind of scrutiny to be under from a very strange man; not even sexual, just obsessive in the neutral territory of the body. Sometimes it feels like Shane wants to catalogue every cell of him.

When Shane eventually lets Ilya's fingers out of his mouth and goes to shower, Ilya wedges the most Shane-smelling pillow under his head and scrolls through a furniture website on his phone. He orders a brand new king sized mattress and expensive solid-wood bedframe to his apartment, checking the extra boxes for it to be built for him, and his old one to be removed at the same time. He'll probably only be living there a couple more months, but it's not like he can't spare the money. And as much as he likes being in Shane's apartment – his neat, minimalist room, where everything smells like him – Ilya would also like to have a bed that his – Shane – is willing to get fucked in at his own place. As hot as it is when Shane's jealous, the bed thing has outworn its fun.

The Hollanders will be visiting until the end of playoffs, now, coming to every game to cheer on their son. Shane's set them up in a fancy hotel suite, claiming he needs to 'focus' at home, but they're bound to still be popping by Shane's place every free day. It's good to have options.

Practice the next day; Ilya lets himself be poked and prodded by the physio for a while, goes through the slow, wincing stretches for his rotator cuff and listens to the uncomfortable grating noises of it moving, fighting the itchy feeling of needing something to crack. He's pronounced good-enough with some painkillers and careful stretching, but needs to be checked every day. The physio doesn't say *no lifting up your 180-pound boyfriend to fuck against the wall on this arm*, because he doesn't know Ilya has one of those, but Ilya makes a disgruntled mental note to himself anyway. Not until after playoffs, at least.

In the locker room once everyone's in, the big news of the day is that Feller's there, back on his leg after knee surgery – not to practice, not for a while yet, but he can watch tape and yell shit at the guys.

"What is this, community outreach?" Ilya asks, slapping Feller's shoulder heartily as he strides back into the locker room. "They let old men hang out in here now?"

"Fuck you, Roz," Feller says, shoving him with one huge arm. Ilya staggers away a couple feet, dodging his sore shoulder, and flips him off.

"Fuck, trying to take the rest of us out to surgery now too, I see your plan," he complains playfully, as a couple of the other guys file in – Mullins, Loparrino, Dubek. Marley's already drenching himself in body spray across the room. No sign of Shane, who'd holed up with the Assistant Coach and his little clipboard as soon as they arrived, the serious furrowed brow of strategy on his face.

"Fuck, dude, how's the leg," Mullet asks Feller, and they chat for a bit while Ilya shucks off his shirt in his stall and sets about getting ready for practice. The physio told him to wear a no-contact jersey at practice today, which Ilya absolutely refuses to do, because he's not a pussy. It's not like the team are out to injure each other in the delicate stretch of their final week of playoffs. Practice is only really about nailing their footwork and passes, keeping it all fresh while they shake their nerves off for the next game. They've won two in a row – Ilya knows they're all desperate to keep the streak going. He tastes the win like blood in the water, making him snappish and hungry.

So he's not exactly paying attention to the milling players behind him, when he suddenly hears Loops' drawled Brooklyn accent saying, "— know about all that faggot shit going on?"

Ilya pauses, still facing the inside of his gear stall, eyes on the swaying name on his jersey where it's hanging in wait for him. Feller says, "No, what the fuck?"

"Will you two fuckin' cool it with that?" Marley's voice calls across the room.

"Oh chill out, man, it's not like we're offending anyone in here," Mullet snaps back. Ilya turns in time to see him rolling his eyes; he's leaning against the side of Feller's stall, one arm raised above his head to slouch into. Ilya throws his shirt to the floor. "Just catching Felon up on the news. You know they're making us do a fucking seminar about what words we're not s'posed to say anymore?"

"Ridiculous, man," Loops says. "If some fairy can't handle bein' called that on the ice, he definitely ain't tough enough to play fuckin' hockey."

"Now you're just being assholes," says Connors, who's working his socks on a few benches away; not exactly squaring up with them, but not impressed. The locker room's only half-full, most of them not paying attention, a few avoiding the topic. Ilya seeks Dubek checking his phone, like nothing interesting is happening at all. Probably to most of them it's not.

Ilya steps forward before he realises his feet are moving.

"How about," he says to them both, "You shut fuck up before I knock out rest of your ugly teeth, huh? Focus on the *fucking* game! If you are so worried some man who sucks cock will be better at hockey than you, maybe get better at fucking hockey. Did you forget, we have Stanley-fucking-cup playoffs right now? And you are worried who you can call a faggot? You cannot fucking call anyone anything, you cannot get the ice time to chirp because you are bottom rung fucking *assholes!*"

He only realises when the room goes quiet around him that he's shouting, red-faced, spitting by the end of his sentence; that his fists hurt in their clench at his sides, that his muscles are locked taut with the terse attention of a hockey game, ready to snap on a moment notice. Faces have turned to him. The air is hot and still. Ilya's chest cracks, clutches, aches.

"Jesus, who pissed in your Lucky Charms?" Mullet asks. And, then; "Aren't Russians supposed to hate queers, anyway?"

Ilya turns, still shirtless and red and furious and just so fucking done with it all, and storms out of the room. He doesn't know where he's walking, for a minute — just goes, pacing with the restless, built-up anger that leads him. He can't sit still. He wants to hit something. He finds himself in the empty, unlit gym and slams his fist bare-knuckled into one of the punching bags in the corner, then a second time, until he remembers he's not supposed to fuck up his shoulder, and stops, with a degree of self-control he's sure most people would think he lacked.

There are no lights on in the gym, just the dim glow coming from the corridor outside. Ilya turns, rests his forehead on the wall, and for a second just hangs there, breathing.

He hopes they don't say any of that shit around Shane. Shane, who already thinks there's no way they'll ever be able to tell any of their teammates they're together because of the reaction; who fears they'll be shut out in the locker room and hurt on the ice and lose their careers and their exceptionality over it. The worst part of all of it is that, of course, Shane's probably right. Most of the team seem pretty chill, but what does Ilya know? When it comes down to it, he has no idea who might actually stand in their corner.

Boston loses the third game of the round. 3-1 Chicago. It's nobody's fault in a vacuum; just one of those days where Chicago are good, and Boston aren't connecting. After, the locker room is terse, quiet, guys ripping their gear off and tossing it on the floor without making eye contact.

Shane leans into Ilya on his way past to the showers, mutters, "Good game, Rozanov." His fingers touch the back of Ilya's arm, just for the barest hint of a second.

"Not that good, we fucking lose," Ilya replies, voice scratchy with exertion. Shane lingers there for another moment, but can't seem to come up with anything else to say.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: three words (for real this time)

thanks so much for all your gorgeous comments and feedback as always <3 pls know i love and appreciate every single one even when i can't always reply !!

you can find me on [tumblr](#) between chapters/if you're wondering when the next update will be etc 

Chapter 27: after one long season of waiting. (part two)

Chapter Notes

emerges from the google doc covered in blood and presents you a 15k chapter. please tell me if there's any huge missing chunks of this or something bc i've lost the ability to read through it any more times without passing out

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

The team eat meals together most days during playoffs; all of them when they're on the road, about half the guys on off days when they're home. They're usually fed at the rink, but even on days with later practices they make a point of meeting up for a meal nearby before they all go in. A few of the dads stay home and eat pancakes with their kids or whatever, but it's good to keep the team together as much as possible when they're this focused. To live and breathe that connection. They have to play as one unit on the ice, closer than family, to stay in each other's heads. You can't play hockey on your own.

Ilya doesn't want to go to lunch, but he doesn't have much of a choice. He grits his teeth and gets in the shiny Raiders-gold sports car he bought with his first ever signing bonus and drives, separate from Shane, because who knows what somebody might think if they arrived in the same car. Apparently. Not that Ilya thinks a single person would notice – but he takes Shane's point that if they did, it could blow up their whole life, so they have to think about this shit, because the universe isn't fair.

They have a table for lunch in a private function room at the Italian restaurant that Dubek is obsessed with, partly for privacy and partly because it's hard to fit a whole team of giant hockey players around regular tables, but the privacy aspect becomes moot when someone recognises them as they're piling into the restaurant.

"Fuck!" the guy shouts, slapping his buddy on the shoulder as Ilya slouches past them. "Rozanov! Holy shit, I can't believe it's you. Go Raiders! This is insane, man, we were at the game on Monday, tough breaks."

"Yeah, but we're gonna fuck 'em up tomorrow," Marley says, appearing behind Ilya just at the right moment to stop Ilya from snapping and getting in trouble for being rude to fans. "We're bringing that motherfucking cup home for Boston, dudes, you heard it here."

The fans ask for a picture. Ilya stands there, trapped under Marley's heavy arm, feeling like his skin is itching off until they're done. It's nice, of course – always good to hear from the fans. To remember a whole city is hanging their hopes on Ilya and his idiotic teammates right now. The praise and adoration feel good. The rest of it is a little trickier.

He escapes after the selfie and lets Marley make any excuses for him as he flees into the private room. Most of the guys are there already, digging into a buffet's worth of food laid out ahead of time. Ilya's eyes scratch past their faces with irritation, until he finds the oasis he's looking for; crammed at the far left corner of the table, sipping idly at a glass of sparkling water, is Shane. He looks good even in the harsh, white lighting of the restaurant. A little tired and bruised on his cheek from last game, but that just makes him more handsome.

Ilya starts towards him, and Shane's eyebrows raise sharply for a second as he notices. He flicks his gaze insistently to a seat across the table, a tiny shake of his head. Ilya can almost see the panic crystallising in his eyes; can see him wondering if it's palpably gay to sit next to each other. If some sort of flashing rainbow beacon will light above his head if his elbow brushes Ilya's accidentally while they reach for the pasta. If Ilya's gonna lose control and start jerking him off under the table and everyone will see.

Ilya swallows, and takes a seat beside Connors. The room's over-warm, summer mugginess overworked by the heat of the restaurant and the cram of their bodies. Everything smells like tomato sauce. He's starving, because his body's desperate for fuel every second of the day, but he doesn't feel all that hungry.

While Ilya loads up his plate and glowers at the table, Marley finally catches up and slides into the seat next to him.

"Damn, dude," Marley says, while Ilya heaps parmesan onto his spaghetti and sticks a fork into the top of it. "What'd those noodles ever do to you?"

"Shut up, Marley," Ilya grumbles. "I am not in the mood."

"Jeez. Chill out, Roz, it was one loss. We're gonna get 'em next game, right?"

"Damn right," says Loops, across the table. "Roz, pull one of your insane miracle hattys on them, that'll shut them up."

He seems to have forgotten Ilya yelling at him until he was red and spitting in the locker room two days ago; another asshole with too many concussions to take seriously. Loops got his nickname because he trained figure skating a bit as a kid to help agility and can still do a proper spin in his hockey skates. Why he decided to be a raging homophobe is beyond Ilya's guess.

Their youngest rookie says, through a mouthful of bread so big it muffles his voice with the wet sounds of chewing, "Yeah, but last game was a shitshow. Why couldn't anyone score?"

Ilya scrapes his fork into his pasta, crushing the cheese into a melted mess.

"It just happens sometimes, dude," Connors says. "Nobody's fault. We know we're the better team, we'll clean them up tomorrow."

The rookie chatters away for a bit, annoying everyone, while Ilya drinks a coke and tries to make himself think about hockey rather than the gnawing misery in his stomach. He's not being particularly successful by the time he starts on his garlic bread, and it gets even worse

when Connors kicks him under the table and says, “Roz, is your girlfriend sitting with the WAGs this game? Emmy wants a headcount.”

Ilya just blinks at him for a second. “What is your idiot mouth saying, Conny?” he asks. “Girlfriend? I don’t have any girlfriend.”

Connors rolls his eyes as he rips into a slice of pizza with his teeth. He’s got sauce on his mouth when he says, “Come on, you know what I mean. Your hot Russian chick, right? With the curls?”

“Svetlana is my friend,” Ilya says. He can’t fight the urge to flick his eyes over to Shane, just for a second. Shane doesn’t look like he heard. Ilya swallows, looks back at Connors quickly. “Just my friend. Don’t be so stupid. And no, she is not coming tomorrow, she has work. She will be there for final game when we win.”

Clearly unconvinced, Connors laughs a bit and types something out on his phone. “Sure, dude,” he says. “And when we win and you propose to her on your cup day, we’ll all act real surprised.”

Fuck, Ilya knew he shouldn’t have talked to Marley and Connors about relationships last week. That little observation about Ilya not hooking up with girls in clubs anymore seems to have grown in Conny’s mind into a grand conspiracy.

At least Connors is easily distracted, and forgets about Ilya altogether when one of the other guys mentions a new girl he wants to bring to the game. At the other end of the table, Shane’s having an entirely different conversation. Ilya’s eyes drift to him; his serious face as he listens to something Dubek’s saying, something Ilya can’t hear over the throng of loud voices all talking over each other. He’s sure Shane’s talking about strategy. He won’t talk about anything else during playoffs, and he gets this specific, hyper-focused look on his face that Ilya could spot from a mile away; eyes dark, brows lowered, working his thumb over his pouty lower lip while he thinks.

Ilya has picked the absolute worst time in the world to have this crash out. He knows he should be focused on playoffs. He should be as focused as Shane is. And Ilya does want this; he wants the cup bad enough to bleed for it. He wants his flowers. He wants his legacy. He wants everybody to look at him and know how fucking good he is. He wants to bring it home for Boston and raise that champion banner in the rafters and leave it there forever, a permanent blot of himself on the universe, and he thinks he’s earned it.

Surrounded by their noisy sweaty teammates and the smell of Italian food and the over-warm clammy air, though, all Ilya really wants is Shane. And they can’t even sit next to each other in a damn restaurant.

Ilya’s spaghetti goes rubbery and lukewarm in his mouth. He wolfs down the plateful, because he needs it, because calories are as valuable as gold during playoffs season, but he chews more like he’s grinding his teeth together than enjoying a meal. The conversation washes over him, Ilya tuning it out. He bumps elbows with Marley a few times. Doesn’t look over at Shane, no matter how bad he wants to. Something tense and sick is building in his stomach, an amplified version of the way he feels when he has to rest an injury too long, or

when a fight breaks out on the ice that he can't join; pent-up, a whorl of snappish, angry energy chewing up his own guts because it has nowhere to go.

"Bry, you ugly cocksucker, would you just give me the fuckin' garlic bread?" someone says loudly, and Ilya stands up in a discordant scrape of chair legs against tiled floor before he's even realised he's going to move. A couple eyes glance at him.

"Cigarette," Ilya mutters, and stalks out of the room.

He doesn't actually have any cigarettes on him, because he barely smokes these days – one here or there, when he's drunk or sad, but he leaves the pack at home to resist temptation. Right now he is severely fucking tempted. The street's not overly busy outside the restaurant, but there are still plenty of people walking past, snapping into their cell phones or plugged into headphones or holding animated conversations with a friend beside them in the summer air. Ilya glances down the street, and spies a convenience store.

He's about to make a beeline for it when a hand claps down on his shoulder. Grip that brutish, Ilya would recognise anywhere. He huffs out, "What, I cannot have one fucking smoke now?" to Marley, and Marley just rolls his eyes.

"Day before the fourth game, you really wanna fuck with your lungs? If we lose tomorrow they tie it back up, dude. Besides, looked like Hollzy was trying to shoot you with a freakin' death laser when you left just now, so I'm just saving you the pain. If we don't get that kid his cup I think he might actually kill us all, like murder-suicide style."

Ilya's gut roils. He shakes Marley's hand off. "He is just ambitious," he says, because he doesn't want to get into it inside his own head – how much Shane hates when he smokes, half for Ilya's health and half for his hockey, the lecture Ilya would surely get later if he tastes of it when Shane kisses him.

"Yeah, no shit," Marley says, with a laugh. The sun is bright above their heads; Ilya's eyes hurt in a bruised-sore kind of way, down to the sockets. He closes them for a second, takes a breath. "Come on, brother, why don't we take a walk."

Marley's voice never sounds overly serious. He's a little sharp at times but mostly he always sounds the same; steady, chill, like he's a beat away from laughing. Right now Ilya's fried at the edges and sharp and spitty and he doesn't want to think about anything, so he gives in, and follows where Marley leads.

There's a park around the corner from the restaurant. Marley buys two shitty filter coffees from a food truck and then traps Ilya on a bench over by a sparse cluster of trees and a lightly-scuzzy pond where a single duck is making laps. Ilya slouches there, scuffing his sneakers through the dirt and sipping at his coffee, while Marley spreads his legs out beside him and takes up more space on a park bench than anyone else in the history of the planet has.

While they watch the duck dunk under the water and stick its ass up in the air, Marley says, "So you seem kinda stressed, man. Don't get me wrong, I get it – this shit can be hard. I've played a few more seasons than you and I get the playoff pressure, bro, it's nuts sometimes.

But I know it's hanging over you and Hollander more than the rest of us this time around. I'm just saying, if you need someone to talk to about shit, I'm here, alright?"

It's so far beyond what Ilya was expecting him to say that he doesn't even know what his face is doing for a second. When he glances sideways at Marley, he's as chill as ever; sunglasses propped on his forehead, tossing a random pebble over towards the pond. It lands with a satisfying *plonk* in the water, setting loose a wave of ripples in every direction. Birds cheep over the sound of Boston traffic in the background. They spend so much time in the rink, living on the frigid cold of the ice, that Ilya didn't notice summer arriving until it was already here.

"I am fine, but thank you," Ilya eventually says. He looks away again, tilts his head back towards the sky. "I am good with pressure. Makes me play harder. We will win this year."

"Right, dude," Marley says. The duck ruffles its feathers as it re-emerges from the water. "I'm not saying you're playing bad, don't get me wrong. You're killing it out there. I just wanna make sure you're good, bro. Like, that blowup in the locker room the other day? That's not like you, Roz."

"Well, they were being fucking assholes," Ilya snaps. "You said so, too."

"Yeah, for sure, but it wasn't like they were talking shit about *you*, man. I'm worried you're taking shit too personal, that's all. You're not responsible for every idiot on this team."

The June sun pelts down at them from above; Ilya feels the prickle of sweat at his temples, his armpits. The city traffic is audible around the park, but for a minute it still feels so peaceful. Nobody around. No billboards of Shane's airbrushed face visible from where they're sat. No hockey, no teammates, no fans. Just Ilya, sat with the guy who's been his best friend since he landed in Boston a surly eighteen-year-old who barely spoke English and was told one of his older teammates had a spare room for him to crash in for a couple weeks until he sorted out an apartment. Marley made him a homecooked meal his first ever night in Boston – it tasted like absolute shit.

Ilya says, "What if they were talking about me?"

This, for once, does get Marley on the back foot. He furrows his thick brows Ilya's way; Ilya crosses his arms over his chest like he's issuing a challenge. He grits his jaw the way he does on the ice. The tension in his gut is so tight it feels like an injury, sickly, a knot Ilya associates with fresh grief.

"Uh, what does that mean?" Marley asks.

"I like men," Ilya tells him. Like it's a drink preference or something. Like it's not the screaming white-hot crux of Ilya's panic and terror lately, like it's not his greatest joy and pleasure and the sexiest truth of his life and the miserable noose around his neck and career. Like it's just about him, nobody else, not the centre of his heart. "Men, women, I have always done both, does not really matter to me what is between any hot person's legs. So when those idiots park their second-rate ballsacks in *my* locker room and talk about how stupid faggots cannot play hockey, it is just hard to me not to beat them over the head with my Calder until

they bleed. That is why I am so angry, Marley. Not the fucking playoffs, which we are going to win.”

The duck lets out a loud quack. Ilya sips his coffee, too bitter and watery to enjoy.

Marley says, “Holy shit, dude.”

“Yes,” Ilya agrees, swirling his drink. “Holy fucking shit.”

When he looks over, Marley’s gaping at him open-mouthed. Ilya has to remind himself for a second that this is Marley; Marley who has been his friend since he was drafted, who has seen him high and drunk and heard him jerk off and coached him through miserable romantic woes and always has his back on the ice. Marley who gave the nice quote to the You Can Play people, Marley whose queer cousin does his taxes even after she got rid of her dick. He is the safest person in Ilya’s life to tell about this. Ilya has to believe that he’s safe.

“Well, that’s sure as shit not what I expected, Roz,” Marley says, and then he laughs; a sharp, rough-toothed laugh, and he claps Ilya’s shoulder, hard, with one meaty palm. “Leave it to you to always be up to some new shit, brother. Hey, good for you, man. I got your back, you hear me? Want me to knock down Mull and Loops on their bullshit, just say the place.”

Ilya only realises how tightly clenched his body was when he lets out a breath, and it all leaves. He swallows around an odd shaky feeling, digs his sneakers harder into the grass.

“Is probably okay,” he says, looking down. Now that the sharp clutch of tension has left his body, he just feels childlike and morose, wondering if he should be saying any of this at all. “Not a good idea to break more bones on this team before we win. We are already down Feller.”

Snorting, Marley nods. “Yeah, bruise their egos a bit, though, that never hurt.”

“I think they are too stupid for that,” Ilya says. “Loops has already forgot I was mad at him.”

“Shit, that kid should be on permanent concussion watch.”

“Mm. Especially since I may give him a new one in the off season,” Ilya says placidly, and Marley laughs again.

They’re quiet for a second, sipping their coffee. Ilya wonders if he expected this to be different. Should he feel some grand flood of relief and catharsis? It’s just Marley. And, crucially, Ilya can only say the half of it. He’s glad to tell Marley about himself; he wishes, more painfully, that he could tell Marley about Shane, which is the part of the issue that screams and burns at him. If Ilya was just blowing a few random men in public toilets in his spare time, it wouldn’t have any sense of urgency to it. It wouldn’t matter what people said in the locker room, or where he lived, or what the public saw from him. By talking about himself, he doesn’t actually solve fucking anything.

“Oh, have you talked to the You Can Play dudes and shit?” Marley asks him, suddenly. “Bet they’d be stoked. I can give you their info if you want. Could be confidential or whatever. I

just know they're real desperate for a gay dude in the league to come out."

A strange unpleasant lurch in Ilya's stomach makes him sigh and shuffle a bit further down the bench, slumping against the tension in his sore shoulder. He drains the last of his coffee, crumples the paper cup in his fist and immediately wishes he had something else to do with his hands.

"Eh, I don't know," he hedges. "Maybe I will talk to them eventually. Is not like I am going to come out and tell anyone else, so it does not matter too much."

"For sure, dude. But we'd have your back if you did – you know that, right?"

We is a generous term. He's sure Marley would. He thinks Connors would too, and probably at least half the team would be pretty chill and only slightly weird, not on purpose. Boston's an accepting city, all things considered. It's very outside the world of hockey, but you can't help but soak up that culture a little bit regardless of how insular the sport can be. There's a scant handful of players on the team Ilya thinks would be an actual problem, and he outplays all of them; it wouldn't be hard to bring them to heel by sheer pressure from the rest of the room. Ilya has a lot of sway on account of being the fucking best.

Or, nearly the best. Tied, maybe. Second best by a hair, if he dares admit that in the deepest recesses of his own mind.

"Yes, Marley, I know," Ilya says. "You are a good friend."

Maybe Ilya would like to talk to the people at You Can Play. Eventually. Someday. He still isn't really sure what they do, but he'd liked the sound of it; just the idea that someone out there was being bold and brave enough to stand up and plant the seed of the idea in the hockey world. A pre-emptive warning of gayness for the rest of the league. He doesn't really give a shit what ugly words people use in the locker room, but he cares about the sentiment. He cares about close-minded idiots thinking where Ilya sticks his dick says anything about how immensely talented he is in every area of his life – if he can encourage any less people to think that, he'll be pleased.

Ilya isn't trying to tempt fate. He doesn't really want to be out to the whole world; far more taboo in his home country than it is here, and not even great here. He's not stupid, and he's not trying to make his own life harder. But things like this – the people around him, in his immediate circle, knowing truths about him – are so tempting. It's the hiding Ilya hates. The way it chips away at the things he really wants.

The problem, still, is Shane. Ilya can't come out to anyone else without bringing Shane under suspicion, and he knows that. They've been too close for too long, now. All the things Shane is worried about from the court of public opinion – whether they spend too much time together, are seen at each other's houses, live close to each other, carpool from places they shouldn't be carpooling from – get magnified a thousandfold if Ilya puts out into the world the idea that he might sometimes fuck men. And while Shane is over-cautious to a degree that feels almost pathological, he's not actually wrong.

“I’m your bro for life, dude,” Marley says, and hits him on his sore shoulder again, going for jovial and ending up with Ilya shouting in pain and hitting him back harder. Marley recoils away from him. “Ow, fucking hell, Roz. You asshole.”

“Oh, now you are bullying me,” Ilya grumbles. “What, now I’m an asshole just for being a little gay? I see how it is, Marley.”

“Fuck off, man,” Marley laughs, but the fact that he’s laughing, and that Ilya got to say that at all, isn’t nothing.

They win the fourth game on home ice. Ilya puts his head down and plays hard and focuses on the puck and throws a few punches keeping those Chicago assholes away from his net. He shouts across the ice all game until his throat is hoarse, chirps and calls and plays and demands for the puck and arguments at the ref; a decent substitute for the urge he keeps feeling, lately, to scream at the top of his lungs and never stop.

So yeah, they win the game. Ilya scores once, Shane scores once, Dubek scores once. Chicago’s defence is decent but they’re just not putting enough shots on goal to catch up. Marley hugs him when they’re coming off the ice. Ilya does press afterwards with a scratchy throat and gives them the same boring answers everyone else always parrots; “Yes, we are very focused, we work hard, no distractions, we are happy with our lines, we have good chemistry right now, we focus on getting pucks to the net.”

He usually flirts and needles the reporters during press, but lately he’s just too fucking tired for it. Anyway, he’s supposed to be staying below the radar, so nobody starts asking questions about his life that he can’t answer.

The morning after game four, Ilya wakes up with Shane laying on his chest, and breathes hard. Slats of early sunshine are falling through the blinds and across their bodies, and his sore muscles are melted and relaxed on the plush new mattress, which was delivered a couple of days ago. It’s a treat to have Shane back in his own bed, his own apartment. It might not be like this much longer, so he knows he needs to make the most of it.

Deeply, Ilya inhales the scent of Shane’s hair, his nice shampoo; he runs his hands down the warm, broad expanse of Shane’s muscled back where it’s sprawled across his body.

They’ve got into the habit of sleeping very entangled. Usually it’s Ilya all over Shane – Ilya likes being held, and Shane likes being crushed under two-hundred pounds of muscled

pressure, apparently, so it works out for both of them. Ilya has no fucking idea how to sleep without Shane anymore. The heat of his powerful body is a sedative to Ilya's glum stress.

It's also weird for him to wake up before Shane. He drinks in the time now; listens to the little snuffle of breath Shane lets out onto Ilya's chest, feels the tiny wet spot where Shane's mouth is pressed a little open between his pecs, the rub of his saliva on Ilya's chest hair. Shane moves a little bit, and his thick, strong thigh rubs into Ilya's bare dick. Shane always puts on at least his underwear to sleep, but Ilya likes sleeping naked, which makes waking up with Shane especially nice. He's a little stiff already, and manages to bring one hand down between their bodies to play with himself, rubbing the sensitive tip against Shane's leg, feeling his stomach heat up. They haven't had much time to fuck recently. Even when there's been a free evening, Ilya's just been so tired.

"Mm, morning," Shane mumbles into his skin, waking up under the motion of Ilya's body. His mouth opens against Ilya's chest and rubs there, an affectionate little kiss. Ilya angles his stiff cock into the crease of Shane's thigh.

"Good morning, lyubimy," he says, kissing the top of Shane's head, his silky hair. "It is still early, before your alarm."

"Oh, so I should go back to sleep?" Shane mutters wryly. He lifts his head and looks up at Ilya, sleepy-eyed and handsome. The rough scratch of the facial hair he's still sporting for playoffs catches on Ilya's sternum.

"Yes, if you want." Ilya jerks himself off a little harder, gripping at Shane's hair with his other hand. "But I am going to fuck you either way, and I don't think you want to be asleep for it."

Shane's eyes go dark. "That actually sounds kind of hot."

"Jesus," Ilya mutters, "Every time I make a joke about sex I accidentally unlock new kinky things in your head, I think."

"You were so not joking," Shane laughs, rolling further on top of Ilya. His body presses down Ilya's hand, makes it impossible to keep rubbing at himself, so Ilya just lays there and lets himself be wetly kissed as the sun trickles through the blinds, and then Shane takes off his underwear, and the alarm ends up going off just when Ilya is pumping his cum into Shane's ass.

After, they lay there for a while, trading kisses. The low knot in Ilya's stomach isn't really gone, but it's so much easier to forget like this; being with Shane in private makes him so light, almost giddy. Shane's body is syrup on his. They talk better physically than ever with words, and the naked aftermath of sex is so wrought-open raw that Ilya sort of wants to cry with sweetness. He licks Shane's armpit to taste his new sweat. Shane lays with Ilya's soft cock in his hand for a while, just fiddling with it like a toy. They don't talk about hockey.

Eventually, the second alarm goes off, and they really do need to get up. They have a free morning today, but practice in the afternoon, and free doesn't really mean *free* during playoffs. It means recuperation and getting their heads sorted and planning everything else

they need to do to optimise their aching bodies. There's two more days until the next game, but they need every minute of it.

"I am starving to death," Ilya announces, while Shane stands next to the bed and stretches. When he touches his toes, Ilya can see the puffy red pucker of his fucked asshole, and gets a bit dizzy.

"There's protein shakes in the fridge," Shane says, straightening up and twisting his torso a few times each way. Ilya pulls a face at him. "And eggs and chicken breast. We can cook in a minute."

"No, I want donuts," Ilya says. The craving hits him strongly and abruptly; a need for sugar and carbs and something sticky to lick off his fingers. It almost replaces the craving he always has for a cigarette after sex, though not quite.

"Ilya. We're not having donuts for breakfast two days before we could play a cup-winning game. You need to actually fuel your body if you want to be at your maximum potential," Shane says reproachfully. He does a lunge, broad thigh muscles flexing and expanding. Then the other leg.

"Protein shake *and* donuts," Ilya offers from the bed; a compromise. "We can walk, you like walking." The nearest Dunkin' Donuts is only a few blocks away; they've gone there together before, a couple times. Their joint ad played on the television there constantly for a few months, which Ilya found pretty funny, going in and waiting to see if the cashier noticed. Usually they didn't. Most people don't actually recognise hockey players in public.

He watches Shane think about it for a minute, casting his eyes down at the floor while he stretches. Ilya can almost hear his worry from here. Less about the nutrition of it than he lets on – more, Ilya knows, that Shane has to think from twelve thousand different possible angles every time he and Ilya might go out in public together. Will they do something that could be taken the wrong way by a fan on the street, or caught in the back of a random photograph? Will it contradict some lie they have told to cover for themselves another time? Last night, half the team convinced themselves Ilya was going to his *girlfriend's* place when he begged off post-game drinks at Marley's house, and he instead brought their starting centre into his bed and fell asleep in his arms. That's the kind of thing someone might think about, if Shane and Ilya are caught getting breakfast together in the early morning.

It's too exhausting for Ilya to think about the strands of each possibility that way, like an endless game of chess. Ilya learnt chess from his father as a child and hated it; the endless sitting still and thinking with nothing to hit or push or do was like torture to him. But Shane always thinks about all of it.

The gentle pleasure of morning sex is slipping away faster than he would like it to. It's sunny outside, but he feels cold, sprawled naked on the bed. Ilya rolls off and grabs his underwear, preparing for a shower.

Shane says behind him, "Uh, yeah, okay, we can go to Dunkin'. In a little bit."

Which should make Ilya happy; would have a second ago. Ilya swallows, turns around, kisses him. “Okay,” he says. “I will shower first. You make horrible protein shakes.”

The walk is nice – sunny and warm, Shane in a t-shirt and his little running shorts so Ilya gets to look at his bare thighs from behind his sunglasses, which is a bonus. Shane walks a couple steps ahead of him, Ilya following behind. It’s not far, and his stomach’s still rumbling, barely mollified by the chalky beige smoothie Shane had forced down his throat before they left.

“Can we get to the rink by twelve?” Shane asks over his shoulder, tapping out something on his phone as he walks. “I want to stop by the treatment rooms before ice time.”

“Why? Finger?” Ilya asks, frowning down at Shane’s pinky, still taped up and bruised at the base. Shane scrunches his face a little, flexing his hand.

“Eh, knee,” he says. An old injury that still gives him grief sometimes – Ilya frowns at his back, worried that Shane’s mentioning it so casually now, two days before the next game. *You should have told me before I fucked you on all fours*, Ilya almost says, before remembering they’re in public and swallowing the words like a pill at the last second.

“Okay,” he says. “We can go whenever you want.” Maybe one of the therapists will be free to give him a massage, too. Ilya’s technically supposed to be under watch for his shoulder, although he’d rather die than tell anyone if it feels worse so the watch is kind of pointless. He’s not going to get benched now, of all times.

They walk into Dunkin’, the air conditioning hitting Ilya like the fresh chill of the rink on a game day, and somebody immediately squeals so loud it makes Ilya jolt.

“Ah!” In front of Shane appears a middle-aged Asian woman with two boys, maybe ten or eleven, bouncing around her. Her eyes are wide and starry and she looks at Shane with so much excitement that it’s like she’s seen the face of god. “Shane Hollander!” She says something rapid in another language that Ilya can’t catch; not that she seems to be expecting him to, focused entirely on Shane, who suddenly looks like he’s being held at gunpoint. Ilya subtly extracts himself from Shane’s back and edges towards the fridges, not in the mood for fans.

Shane pauses for a moment, eyes darting all over her face. “I’m so sorry,” he says, after a stilted second of silence. “My Japanese is really bad. Uh, it’s nice to meet you?”

“Oh, no problem, I understand.” She switches to English, still beaming at him. “I just want to say, we are big, big fans! My husband, you know, he loves hockey so much. I worried about whether it would be good for the boys, when they were little. But now we see your posters everywhere and they are so excited a Japanese man can play hockey, we’ve put them in hockey club because of you!”

“Oh, uh, thank you,” Shane says politely. “I’m always glad to hear more people are getting into the sport.”

“Can we take a selfie?” one of the kids asks Shane excitedly, and Shane nods, and Ilya wonders if it’s as obvious to them as it is to him that Shane would rather be hit by a bus in

this moment. Apparently it isn't, because the family crowd around Shane and take a selfie with him while one of the boys babbles about his school hockey team for three full minutes, and Ilya lurks around pretending to look at the donuts so they won't notice that the grouchy shadow over Shane's shoulder is also a famous hockey player.

It works, because nobody speaks to him. When Shane reappears by Ilya's side a few minutes later, he's got a rigid set to his jaw. "Can we get our food to go?" he asks Ilya, and Ilya, who doesn't have the energy to argue anymore, just shrugs.

Halfway through drinking his coffee back at the apartment, while Ilya licks frosting off a donut and the mutter of the radio sports channel in the background irritates his nerves, Shane suddenly says, "Now imagine if every gay hockey fan in the country had to stop us on the street and tell us they're joining a beer league because we showed them it was okay to play hockey and suck cock or something. We'd never get to leave the house."

It's such an abrupt transition that for a second, Ilya can't even figure out where it's coming from. Shane's staring out the window intently, his fingers tapping out a tight rapid beat on the kitchen counter, while Ilya turns his head and stares at him, finally remembering the family in Dunkin'.

"They were being nice," Ilya says, frowning. Shane lets out a testy, tight little sigh, sloshing his coffee in its cup.

"Yeah, super nice. They're always super fucking nice. That's why I have to think about them, every little Asian hockey kid in the country, before I do literally anything ever for myself, in case I'm accidentally a bad example. You know I've only even been to Japan two times? My grandparents lived in Quebec my whole life. I can say, like, five Japanese phrases, and I don't know the names of the festivals, and I can't read any fucking Kanji, because I quit Japanese school to focus on hockey when I was nine, and my mom encouraged it because she saw how big hockey could be for me. But even though I haven't actually done anything, somehow I'm the gold standard. Should those kids even be getting into hockey because of me? Just so they can get slurs hurled at them on the ice every day if they ever get remotely good at it? And then if we lose playoffs again this year I'm gonna be thrown around again as the proof that an Asian guy can't win a cup and all their dreams will be crushed. Shit, Ilya. It's all so fucking ridiculous."

He slams his coffee cup down on the counter, sloshing the lukewarm remnants over his hand and then cursing. Ilya furrows his brow, looking over at him, struck speechless for a second. He can see the tension roiling in Shane's body, pent up with nowhere to go. The spitting anxiety that seems to wind Shane's chest so tight Ilya can almost feel it in himself as well.

It's not something that Ilya has ever had to deal with, that sort of pressure. He's nobody's role model. He may be an immigrant in a foreign country, which comes with plenty of challenges, but he's far from the only Russian in the league; it's not unexpected to anyone that he's here. For Ilya, his difference has always been a point of pride.

Sometimes, Ilya tries to imagine the weight that bears down on Shane's shoulders every day – from being mixed race in an overwhelmingly white sport, from his reputation as a good little Canadian boy, from his squeaky clean brand deals and the money invested in him and

the morality clauses in all his contracts that he's petrified to break. Yeah, Ilya gets why Shane's like this. He doesn't think he could last a day in Shane's shoes. He understands why Shane doesn't want the entire weight of responsibility for gay hockey piled on top of the crushing pile that's already there; it would break his spine.

Then Ilya, because he knows how to pick the worst moment to do absolutely anything in the world, decides to say, "I told Marley I like men."

He has no idea why that's what comes out of his mouth, but it does. He supposes it could be worse, by degrees. It's good he did this while they were sitting down. In private, too. God forbid he said it while they were driving; he thinks Shane might have actually crashed the car. Instead, Shane just stares at him, eyes wide and terrified, and goes pale, like he might be sick.

"Ilya," Shane chokes. "You – *what?*"

"I did not tell him about you," Ilya says quickly. His donut suddenly seems disgusting, sticky with his saliva where he licked off the frosting and gluey and stale everywhere else. He tosses it back down onto its paper bag and leans back in his stool, grinding his teeth. "Just me. There was a thing in the locker room – nothing big, just, ah, a couple of the guys saying shit, and I got too mad. So Marley was worried and asked me. I didn't really think about it, I just told him."

Shane puts his coffee down, and then his head. "Shit," he says. "Fuck. Okay. Um. Okay, yeah, alright."

"You cannot panic," Ilya says. "Your fucking friend has known for months."

It's not a fair comparison, Ilya knows that. Pike finding out was only ever an accident, and it caused Shane to get most of the way to a breakdown. Pike's Shane's friend, but it still stresses Shane out that he knows. It's not like he *chose* to tell his best friend on the team and not Ilya's; Shane wishes nobody knew at all.

But Ilya doesn't wish that. He feels a black hole in his chest as Shane looks at him, tremblingly, mouth a little parted, pale with panic.

"Jesus, Ilya, you could have warned me before you did it, at least," Shane says.

"Why? You would just have told me not to."

"I wouldn't have – or not like *that*, but god, Ilya, I thought we were on the same page about this?"

"We agreed to not tell anybody we are together. I only told Marley I fuck men sometimes. So it had nothing to do with you."

Ilya knows he's being deliberately difficult, even as he says it. Truthfully, he feels a sticky rush of embarrassment running through him at admitting any of this; that he'd told Marley so impulsively, that he didn't think out the twelve-steps-ahead chess game the way Shane always does. Ilya doesn't want to be the weak piece in their secret, but he just can't manage

to knot it all up the way Shane does. Not that he thinks Shane is exactly thriving on it, either. He's so tense and nervous that he seems like he's going to war any time he leaves the apartment. They're both so completely fucked in different ways.

"You know that's not true," Shane says. It might feel better if he were angry – instead he just looks terrified. He puts his arms on the counter and bends down to lean his head between them, sucking in an audible breath, while Ilya's stomach clenches. "We spend so much fucking time together, Ilya. And the guys already talk about how I never bring girls around, ever, and if you're telling people you're fucking men and I'm the man you spend all your fucking time with, what the hell are they going to think –"

"Most people are not as smart as you think, Shane," Ilya says, trying to sound consoling, really half furious, half miserable, unsure where the hell to land between the three. "Nobody cares this much about your sex life except me. And it is only fucking Marley. He would be chill anyway. He was fine about it."

"Sorry," Shane says, face still hidden in his arms. Ilya swallows thickly, looks away from his trembling body, feeling like a monster. He wanted Shane to get mad back, yell at him – not apologise. Ilya's doing this all wrong. "Sorry, fuck, I know I'm being too much, about all of this, I know it's not fair. I just don't know how to stop thinking about it, Ilya. Everything that could happen. Every time someone else knows, I feel like I'm gonna die."

"Marley doesn't even know," Ilya says, his voice dipping quieter now that the anger has deflated. "Not really, not anything. He knows I have sucked a few cocks, big deal. He won't even think about you."

"Fuck." Shane raises a little off the counter, but buries his head in his hands instead. The radio's still stammering out sports stats above the sink. Ilya wants to smash it. Shane says, thickly, "Did it, uh, did it make you feel better? Telling him?"

God, how Ilya wishes the answer was yes. He wishes it had been a grand catharsis or moment of crowning victory; something that reaffirmed his identity and his friendship and made him feel better about the secrecy and hiding. Truthfully, he's not sure any of that fucking happened. He's glad he has Marley to smash some homophobes if it comes down to it. That's about it.

He debates lying to Shane, realises he doesn't know how, and looks away from Shane's stiff panicking form to stare out the window instead. "I don't know," he mutters. "Did not really change anything, so probably not. I am still not going to be able to get enough of you, ever."

They're both quiet for a second. The silence stretches out like a physical thing; the way it feels down to count down penalty minutes on the ice, knowing that as soon as it breaks you'll be back in the thick of the violence. Ilya, suddenly, finds himself anticipating a hurt.

Shane's voice is wet and muffled by his own bruised palms when he says, "I don't know what we're supposed to do, Ilya. I want you so much, but this is so fucking hard."

It's Shane's stress that hits him like a knife to the gut. Ilya's been sitting in the cool puddle of his own misery for a while, and he can take it – he tells himself, at least, that he's tough

enough for it, that he's weathered worse, that he can put up with the sting to get the honey. But on Shane, he can't stand it. He sees Shane shaking, holding himself together by a thread; he feels the knotted distress coming off Shane in waves, and all Ilya can think is that the last time Shane was this scared, he ended up on a bathroom floor with a bottle of pills.

It's the worst thought Ilya's ever had. Sickening, worse than a broken bone, the flush of frozen nausea through his whole body, the way his heartrate ratches and lurches. If being with Ilya is the thing that does that to Shane a second time – that even makes him think about it for a second – Ilya will never forgive himself. He will genuinely not survive.

Ilya grinds his teeth together. He clenches the fingers of one hand into a fist, biting the rough edges of his nails into his palm.

"Maybe we were stupid to make things more serious," he says around an awful scratch in his throat, snapping the still air of the room like brittle ice. "It was easier when it was just casual, maybe? Not all these big questions or problems about where we can live or how we might give it away. Maybe – I don't know, fuck – maybe better for you if you can see other people again, make it less suspicious, so you are not so scared."

Shane's head rips out of his hands. "What?" he says. "No." He reaches across the counter, grabbing at Ilya's forearms with his palms; he's wet from his own tears, smearing them over Ilya's skin as Ilya sniffs, trying to stay locked into his crossed-arms, resolute. "No, Ilya, I don't want to stop being together, that's not what I want at all."

"But then what are we supposed to do, Shane?" Ilya asks, and his jaw shakes as he looks down, watches Shane's grip on his wrists more than feels it, like his body's gone numb to spare him the heat of Shane's touch. "This is killing you. It is killing me. I want to wake up with you every morning, and I can't. You are so scared, and we don't have any good way to fix it. I don't know what else to do."

"We – fuck, Ilya, I don't know," Shane says, brokenly. "We'll figure something out, okay?"

But that's the problem. All the *figuring*, the thinking and analysing and dissecting their situation that Shane does, that Ilya tries to do, and none of it ever leads anywhere good. They'll never be able to come out to the world. They'll never be able to live in secret without looking over their shoulders every step in case they're found out. So where is this something that they're supposed to figure? How do they hide at the centre of this impossible diagram?

The sickly smell of his abandoned donut is making him feel sick. Ilya pulls out of Shane's hands and tosses the bag across the counter, then presses his balled hands into his eyes.

He wants life to be simple. That's all. Ilya only wants two things in the world – hockey, and Shane. How hard should it be, to get two whole things? But Ilya understands a fundamental truth of the universe, one he's known since he was a tiny child: no matter what he might deserve, Ilya is not the sort of person who gets to be happy.

At least if they're not together, he'll spare Shane the anxiety and panic attacks that have riddled him ever since they started trying to figure out how to keep this thing between them.

Take a little piece of the misery away from Shane, who doesn't deserve it, wasn't born into it, should have a chance to stand in the sunlight without Ilya's cursed shadow.

"Maybe we take a few days to think," Ilya suggests, not meeting Shane's eyes. He puts his hands back down and Shane grabs his wrists again, tight enough to hurt, but Ilya barely feels it. A gaping maw of despair swallows him, and Ilya feels nothing but the blackness descending, the chill of isolation and abandonment a familiar numbing agent to all his senses. "Just until end of playoffs. So we are not so distracted by this. Will be good for you, I promise."

"Ilya—" Shane says, but Ilya's already shaking Shane's hands off his skin again — so hot where Shane had been touching his wrists, so nothing everywhere else. He stands, the counter between them stretching to an expanse of miles.

"I will drive separate to practice today," Ilya tells him. "Just think, for a couple of days, okay? I'm not saying anything for sure, I just want you to think. It is okay if this is too hard for you. If you do not want me. I understand, I promise."

He leaves before Shane can come up with anything else to say.

They fly back to fucking Chicago, a city Ilya is growing to hate with a vengeance. Ilya ignores the guys trying to convince him to join their poker game on the plane, puts his headphones in and finds a seat right at the back, where he can stare out the window and watch the earth lurch beneath them, small and far away. All those tiny houses down here. They're flying over the heads of millions of people, most of whom probably don't give two shits about hockey. Have never heard Ilya's name. But some of them have, of course; some of them care a lot.

Shane sits with Hayden Pike; Ilya feels eyes on him the whole flight, but he doesn't turn around.

In Chicago, they skate their warm up perfunctorily. Stretch out on the ice, fire a few pucks. Shane comes up beside him, and Ilya rubs at his nose with his gloves, glancing away.

"Hollander, eyes on the fucking goal," Coach calls out from the side, gesturing with his iPad to where Shane just sent a puck flying wide by a full meter. Not like him. Ilya glances at Shane properly, for the first time in two days, and sees the rubbed-sore look of his eyes; bruised rings beneath them, tiny bloodshot capillaries. Guilt lurches in Ilya's gut.

When it's time for the game proper, after they skate out and listen boredly to the anthem and then begin to take their places for the main act, Ilya skates up to Shane's shoulder, and bumps him, ever so gently. He ducks his head close, catching the smell of Shane's hair and the old-sweat musk of his gear.

“Let’s kick their ass, Hollander,” he says, lowly. Shane glances sideways at him; focused, serious eyes. A freezing rush of ice comes up from Ilya’s belly to his chest, making him headrush-dizzy and sore.

“Uh, yeah,” Shane says, and then skates away to the face-off dot. Ilya scrubs hard at his nose for a second, trying not to lose his fucking mind and get on his knees and sob into Shane’s belly right there on the ice with twenty thousand fans looking down at them from the stands and at least a million behind the shiny television cameras looming above their heads. Everything is above them. Ilya feels tiny, like a bug being shaken in a jar.

Fucking hell, he needs to focus. He sucks in a deep breath of iced-cold air and hits himself hard in the chest to get his blood pumping and skates out to his place, looming behind Shane, waiting for the puck to drop.

It drops. Shane goes for it, and Chicago are quicker.

The game starts hard and it doesn’t stop. Ilya loses his breath and pushes his body and races his heartbeat against the pandemonium of shouts from the crowds and fights through the blooming pain of exertion, knocks a winger into the boards and his shoulder screams, gets tripped and slams into the ice on his side and knows it’ll bruise, aching and stiff by the time they get to the second period, chugging his water, stinging his eyes with smelling salts to wake himself up and rush the air back into his lungs. Chicago score. Boston don’t score. At the second break Shane comes off the ice steely-eyed and silently stewing; no slew of curse words and notes for the rest of the guys like usual. Pike tries to pull him aside in the locker room for a pep-talk or something and Shane smacks his hand away, furrowed brow worked down at nothing in particular on the floor, and Ilya wants to throw up.

They could win it all with this fucking game, and it’s falling to shit. Ilya’s muscles are cramping by the time they get back out there for the third period; his whole body’s working against him. He asks for one of Dubek’s gross mustard packets and sucks on it on the bench, working against the rebellious stab of tightness in his thighs with eye-watering mouthfuls of the tangy paste. It helps but it’s all still the same shit. Ilya gets back out there and scraps for the puck and spits and curses and uses his elbows and Chicago score a-fucking-gain.

Chicago’s Russian winger, Timofeev, steals the puck from him, and Ilya collides him so hard into the boards he feels bones crunch. A sickly second as they both catch their breaths from the impact, and they scrabble for the puck with their sticks beneath their feet, no idea where it is, and Timofeev curses at him, “Fuck you, you ugly fucking faggot,” and Ilya slams him again, and the refs call it because the puck’s halfway over the ice by now without them noticing.

He’s still stewing in the box when the game ends. Chicago have taken it. The discordant screams of the crowd around them barely reach Ilya’s ears; they’re on Chicago’s ice, everyone’s chanting for Boston’s loss.

Ilya wonders if he should be pissed, angry, throwing shit as they get off the ice and sulk back into the visiting locker room. Instead he just sort of feels sick. Guilt gnaws at him like a hunger pang, upsetting his tight stomach. He’s drenched from head to toe in sweat and feels ice cold, even in the hot water of the shower. Yes, he’s picked the worst time in the universe

to crash. Yes, if they lose the cup now, it will be all his fault for breaking Shane and breaking himself. No, Ilya can't think of a single other thing he could have done to make this better.

When he gets back out of the showers, one of the first guys ready on account of fast he ripped his gear off in a desperate attempt to get out of the room, the first thing he sees is Shane and Pike huddled in a corner together, Shane facing the wall.

"Sorry," Shane's saying to Pike; head hung awkwardly, rubbing at his ribs, brow set with the kind of ruthless focus he usually exhibits on the ice. "I was trying so hard, I just fucked it all up. Fuck. We almost had it. We could have fucking taken this—"

"Dude, it's not all on you," Pike says. "There's an entire team of us out there, will you chill out? Nobody's blaming you for a couple face-offs. We'll get them next game, for sure, don't sweat it."

But Shane looks like he's sweating it. From the doorway, someone calls out, "Rozanov, you're on media," and Ilya clenches his jaw so hard he feels one of his crowns ache. He doesn't want to speak to the fucking press. To have microphones shoved in his face and cameras flashed in his eyes and asked what happened with the loss, why they weren't on their game today. *Usual stuff, just I fought with my gay lover who is the other best hockey player in the world and now we are too sad to score goals for team that pays us millions of dollars to do nothing else. No big deal. Why did I not wait to have this fight until after we won? Oh, because if one more person saw us together at Dunkin' Donuts I think he was going to kill himself.* Ilya is going to lose his mind, and his boyfriend, and the cup all in one week.

At least they fly back to Boston that night; it's a late arrival but he'd rather that than spend another fucking night in a Chicago hotel. Sveta calls him just after the plane lands, and Ilya declines the call. She texts him a question mark, and then, a few minutes later, a middle finger. Ilya sends a thumbs up, turns his phone off on the drive home, and goes straight to bed.

When he wakes up the next morning, his whole body is stiff. The bloomed bruise on his side is throbbing; his legs are pulling down into the mattress with the heaviness of a strain; his throat is dry and tacky and his eyesockets hurt. The sunshine falling through the windows feels like a personal insult, grating on his glum nerves. He drags a pillow over his head and tries to ignore it. He needs painkillers and a piss, but he doesn't want to leave his bed for anything; briefly, Ilya even wonders about calling out of practice. It's an optional skate this morning but they still have tape and strategy and physio and all the myriad other parts of their job to do. They should absolutely not skip practice when there's only two possible games left of the playoffs, but the thought of dragging his wretched body out of his house today feels nearly impossible.

Then, his phone starts buzzing on the bedside table, an irritating staccato of vibrating metal against wood. Ilya groans, slaps at it with a hand to try and get it to shut up, only realising

when it doesn't stop that it's not his alarm clock, but a call. He swears in Russian and scrunches his face tighter inside his pillow for a second, and then grabs blindly for his phone, swiping it open and pressing it to his ear.

"What the fuck do you want?" he grumbles, voice gravelly with disuse, scrubbing hard at one of his eyes to get the crusted sleep out of it.

Marley's voice comes on the other end, "Just making sure you didn't jump off a roof last night, bro, you looked kind of like shit when you were leaving. Sleep well?"

Ilya swallows. He hadn't expected it to be Marley – he'd thought Sveta, probably annoyed at him ignoring her texts last night, or maybe even in the half-asleep residue of confusion he'd expected to hear his father's confused voice on the other end. It's still hard sometimes to remember he is really dead, especially from so far away, where the daily reminders of their once-shared life are already absent. But instead, it's his teammate, waiting expectantly for Ilya to say something.

"I have so many bruises I look like blueberry muffin, but yes, I slept fine. You need something?"

"Nah, not really. Tough loss last night, you know?"

Ilya knows it was a tough loss. He is the reason it was a tough loss. "Yes, I was there."

"Alright, smartass. Just saying, we're all feeling it. And you hit the ice pretty hard in that second period, your shoulder good? I can swing by and pick you up for practice later if you need, dude."

Ilya can't tell him that he's considering skipping that altogether, so he says, "No, it's fine, I can fucking drive."

"You are one tough cookie, you know that Roz?" Marley asks him. Ilya pulls a face at his bedroom ceiling. Tries not to think about how Shane's bed is directly below him right now; maybe if Ilya jumps hard enough on the floor he can go crashing right down into it and never leave.

"Yes, I am an asshole, everyone knows this."

"Yeah, right. You're not selling me on that one, kid. I know you've got that mushy oatmeal-raisin center underneath it all."

Ilya has never been described as *oatmeal raisin* before. For a second, he's so confused by the analogy that he forgets he's miserable, and finds himself just squinting at his phone screen to make sure it's really Marley calling and he's not having some bizarre sort of dream.

"Right, and you are the day old bread made by an angry babushka with crust tough enough to break someone's teeth," Ilya says. Marley laughs loud enough to make Ilya wince and pull the phone away from his ear.

“Fuck you. I’ll take it,” Marley says. It’s weird to talk on the phone to him for more than three sentences. Usually when he calls it’s just *get your ass to the club* or *did you leave without telling us?* or *settle a argument dude, would you fuck ScarJo or Gwyneth?* There’s a weird pause, while Ilya crushes his pillow under his head and rolls properly onto his back, kicking out a bare leg above the covers. Then, Marley says, “Anyway, just wanted to give you a heads up, I had a chat with Loops and Mullet on the plane last night. Told them if they didn’t knock off their dumb shit, I’d knock off the rest of their real teeth. Think they took the point in the end, so you know, it’s handled. Much as it can be, at least – I mean, I can’t actually make them not be fuckin’ morons, but I can make them be quiet morons.”

That, Ilya wasn’t expecting.

For a second he forgets how phonecalls work, and doesn’t know where to look. The bland input of his impersonal room doesn’t have anything to say about rampant homophobia in the National Hockey League, so it seems wildly inadequate to just be looking at the row of expensive colognes on top of his dresser as he says, “The fuck, Marley?”

“What d’you mean, the fuck? I fucking told you, man. I got your back.”

Ilya swallows a metallic taste in his mouth. His face feels oddly warm. “I told you I can handle them,” he says, unsure why he’s arguing, except that it feels like he’s supposed to. He rubs a closed fist against his sternum, trying to wake himself up.

“So what? I can handle them too, they’re dumbasses. And they’re probably still gonna be little bitches sometimes, but we all know you or Hollander are gonna be captain of this team next year, and I know neither of you would put up with that shit in the room, so it’s better to warn ‘em now anyway. They know they’re small fries, they don’t wanna be traded ‘cus they’re talking shit in your damn locker room.”

God. Nothing in Ilya’s life ever goes quite how he expects. The overwhelming flood of emotion that always feels so close to the surface in him these days runs through him, making him feel liquid and strange, happy and thankful and miserable and longing all at once.

“You are a good friend,” he tells Cliff, his voice breaking embarrassingly in a way he won’t ever admit to. Marley makes a noise on the other end, a little click of his tongue, like it’s nothing.

“Yeah, well, not just about you anyway, dude. I mean, you got me thinking, how the fuck do we know there isn’t some *other* secret gay dude in our locker room? Seems pretty unlikely, but you never know. If there is, we don’t want him hearing that shit either. Not everyone’s got a head as big as yours, they might actually take that shit to heart.”

A wild laugh works up in Ilya’s throat and he barely chokes it back in time, smothering a hand over his own mouth. Yes, seems pretty unlikely. His eyes sting. His nerves zap online all at once, a rush of wild adrenaline that pinpricks in all his aches and pains.

He’s still holding back a laugh as he says, “Yes, good point, Marley. You are so smart.”

“Yeah, yeah, fuck off,” Marley says. “Anyway, that’s it. See you at practice, brother.”

And he hangs up the phone.

About as sentimental a conversation as Ilya's ever had with another teammate, really. He tosses his phone onto the mattress and rubs at his face with both hands, trying to make sense of the universe. He's got a friend threatening homophobes on his behalf without telling him. In the NHL. Someone he's not fucking actually knows he's queer. In the NHL. And is cool with it. And they could still win this cup. But last night they lost, and Ilya can't just let go of the sting of that, or the anvil of uncertainty hanging over his head. He has no idea how he's supposed to feel. He may be feeling every single emotion in the world at once; they blur together like shades of light, forming nothing but a white void behind his eyes.

Ilya rolls out of bed. He wants vodka and a cigarette, but it's 8AM in the middle of playoffs. So he drinks his gross protein shake, does his physio exercises for his shoulder, takes a long shower and recites his Corsi under the spray to try and remind himself he's fucking incredible.

When he gets out of the shower, he looks at himself in the mirror for a minute. Forces himself to see his father's eyes.

Today, it's exactly one week until Ilya's birthday. By the time he turns twenty-two years old, he will either be a Stanley Cup champion or a miserable loser drowning the hopes of the city in the bottom of a vodka bottle. This will be his first birthday without his father – who never celebrated it, but was, at least, half the reason Ilya was even born. His first birthday with no parents at all. He hasn't made any plans; he'd sort of been counting on spending it with Shane. Maybe Marley will go to a club with him or something, if that's no longer the plan. Maybe he'll just stay in bed.

Well, that's a question for after the cup.

Hair still damp from the shower and wearing the first clothes he grabbed out of the laundry service bag, Ilya lays back on his couch with a second protein shake, and opens GrubHub on his phone to see if he can get three or four Egg McMuffins delivered for breakfast. He's adding an apple pie to his cart out of spite for his nutritionist when the piercing shriek of his doorbell goes off.

Fuck, it's always something. Ilya scrunches his eyes shut for a second, wishing the sound to go away. He waits a second. Another second, pressing his toes into the cool floor and bracing.

The doorbell stops, and is replaced with a knock. He doesn't know who it is, but Ilya's not in the mood. He abandons his gritty protein shake on the coffee table and wrenches himself to his feet, yanking the door open with a glare.

“What do you—”

He stops mid-sentence, breath caught in his throat.

“Uh, good morning.”

Ilya swallows. “Shane,” he says, shifting his weight; his bruises throb. Ilya sniffs, rubs at his nose, trying to look like he doesn’t care that Shane is on his doorstep at all, and surely failing miserably. “Is everything okay? We are not supposed to talk yet.”

He knows it’s a stupid idea to cling to, but Ilya can’t possibly imagine that hashing things out now will be any better than leaving it. They have to be able to get past this – to put themselves aside for the hockey, to play through whatever stupid bullshit personal drama they have going on, or they’re just proving the people who’d call their relationship a *distraction* right, and Ilya hates to prove an asshole right. They’re not going to feel better after a blowup fight. Ilya’s not going to feel better having another person leave him. They need to win the cup in this holding-swing of tension, or he worries they won’t be able to win it all.

But Shane is looking at him, with the serious, determined furrow of his brow that he gets before a playoff game; a ruthless kind of stare that makes Ilya’s skin goosepimple. Shane’s wearing wrinkled shorts and a Raiders t-shirt that look like what he slept in, although his eyes don’t give the idea that he slept much at all. He’s got something clutched to his chest. He shoulders past Ilya as hard as a check, forcing his way into the apartment, and Ilya lets out a ragged breath before closing the door behind him. He presses his forehead to the door for a second, leaning into the cool wood and trying to brace himself. He can do this. Ilya has been left before, and he can survive it again.

When he turns around, Shane is standing in his kitchen, barefoot, drinking a glass of water from Ilya’s tap. Ilya doesn’t know what to do with his legs. He approaches a few steps and then freezes, wavering on distance and how much of it he ought to keep.

“Hollander, I think we should wait until after the cup to have this conversation,” Ilya says, voice rough, not meeting Shane’s eyes. “I’m sorry I fucked up the last game with this, it won’t happen tomorrow. I will focus. We don’t need to make it worse now, the timing is so bad.”

Shane says, “I bought a house.”

Ilya blinks at him. Shane puts his water glass in the sink. A bird squawks outside of the window, and Ilya briefly wonders if he’s dreaming, because none of the noises around him seem to be making sense.

Then Shane says, “Well, actually, I bought two houses.”

“Hollander, it has been like four days since we talked, what the hell do you mean you bought two houses?”

“I guess it’s dumb to say I bought them,” Shane says, not quite meeting Ilya’s eyes, rushing through the words like he’s reading off some kind of script in his head. “There’s actually a ton of legal shit to do before it’s really official that can take a while, but my offers were accepted, so that’s pretty close, right? I went over the asking price and my realtor heard back within twenty four hours. She’s also your realtor, actually, I used the same one, since she already knew the house, I hope that’s okay.”

He finally unfolds his arms, and shoves a clear-fronted plastic file towards Ilya, who takes it numbly. Inside the file is a house listing, inky-splotched images on crisp white printer paper. Ilya, dry-mouthed, stares down at it.

It's the house he'd seen weeks ago and decided not to buy. Pool and gym and sauna and too many bedrooms for just Ilya, who felt grief-stricken and lonely thinking about living there by himself. He'd pushed away the idea of the place almost immediately, after a quick look with the realtor. It seemed like such a miserable pipe dream, even though he liked the place immediately, could see himself eating at those marbled kitchen counters and jerking off in the wall-to-wall shower room. It was just too much for Ilya alone.

Shane says, "It's really private. It's gated in and there are trees on either side for like, a couple miles, so we wouldn't have to worry too much about neighbours seeing who we are. It's pretty stupidly far away from the rink to get out of the city like that, but we can stay at our places in the city when we have early practice, I figured? Oh, uh, did I say that part yet? That's the plan, I mean, we buy separate places officially, but really, we live here together? We'll have to have a couple days a week at our own places, probably, and obviously if you wanted to, like, throw a party for the team, or have people to hang out, you'd do it at yours. But the rest of the time – I don't know. I just thought, uh, I don't want to be apart from you. And I don't think you want to be apart from me. So we should live together. And –" He lets out a rough, tremulous breath, and he finally looks at him properly, and meets Ilya's eyes. "And you should tell Marley about me. And I should tell my parents. And – I'm not saying anything more than that, Ilya. We still can't tell the whole fucking world. But we can get a few people in our corner, and we can make a place for ourselves, and we can – just play really, really good hockey for a while. We need make ourselves, like, indispensable. Which I know we can do, because me and you are the best in the whole fucking world."

"Shane," Ilya sniffs, and he doesn't even know how he moves, just that he has to, and all of a sudden their bodies are together, pressed warm to warm and Ilya's arms are crushing around Shane, squeezing him so tight it hurts his shoulder, never wanting to ever let him go. Ilya puts his face in Shane's neck and gasps, and the entirety of it falls into him all at once, as Shane's hand comes up and cradles the back of his head – his hopelessness, the insane love in his heart, the way nobody on the planet can ever have felt like this before because it is too fucking huge, nobody would have been able to stand it. He presses his mouth to Shane's neck and chokes on his breath and all he can manage to say, brokenly, is, "Fuck."

"Is it okay?" Shane asks, as he rubs his hands through Ilya's hair. "I stayed up all night before that fucking horrible game trying to find a way to fix this. This was the best thing I could think of, but I think it will help, right? If we can live together, even if it has to stay secret?"

"It is perfect," Ilya tells him. "You are perfect," and he reaches up and kisses Shane, so hard and wet that spit runs down his chin and he feels the imprint of Shane's teeth in his lip and Shane's hands cup the back of his head and oh, god, Ilya wants this forever. He wants this all the time. He says, "You really want to tell your parents?"

"Yes," Shane swallows. "I mean – fuck, I'm still scared shitless, Ilya. But I know I have to do something about it. I want to be brave for you. For this. And I know for this to work, I need to not be so fucking terrified of people finding out, so yes, I want to tell them." He's staring

with big, earnest eyes; the way being authentic seems to come so, so naturally to Shane always floors Ilya, works beneath his own veneers of charm and sarcasm and terminal insincerity like a targeted laser designed to crush at his soft soul. Shane mumbles, “I want them to know who you are to me.”

In a moment, Ilya realises he is experiencing the enormity of being on the other end of Shane Hollander’s legendary focus. For all he’s a ruthless machine, Shane isn’t really a *planner*; he’s laser-focused on what he’s doing in the moment, and he worries too much about the future, but it doesn’t come naturally to him to sit and work out plans and steps and contingencies without someone doing it for him. But he did it. For Ilya.

Ilya pulls back and looks in Shane’s eyes, the serious, worried tilt of them, and it comes out before he can even help it; a desperate, choked admission, “Fuck, I love you.”

For a second, Shane just looks at him, lips parted around the silent edge of surprise. Ilya’s gut clenches. His mind screams at him immediately – he’s done it again, he’s gone too fast, he’s being too much. He’s going to scare Shane away with the enormity of himself, and Shane won’t want to stay for him anymore. But, then –

“I love you too, Ilya,” Shane says, intently, the same deathly-serious tone of voice he uses when he talks about the Stanley Cup.

Ilya breaks.

He wrenches Shane into his arms. Shane says, “Fuck, I love you so much,” and Ilya presses wet kisses into his face and his neck and the clothed edge of his shoulder and Shane scrunches Ilya’s hair behind his head and kisses his forehead, his temple, and says it again.

“*Ya tebya lyublyu*,” Ilya tells him. The plastic folder with the house listing is crushed between their bodies, crinkling awkwardly with movement as Ilya shoves his hands under Shane’s ass and lifts Shane off the ground, desperate to have all of him on Ilya, in his arms, his heavy weight and strong limbs and who fucking cares if it hurts the screaming tendons in Ilya’s shoulder; “*Ya tebya lyublyu*, Shane.”

It’s so much scarier to say it in Russian. It feels so real, worked out from his bones, the deepest kind of truth he has. His arms shake from lifting Shane but he never wants to let him go; Shane’s thick thighs bracket his hips as Shane pants and holds onto him and kisses him again, forcing Ilya’s jaw where he wants it with one strong hand. The folder falls limply to the ground between them, skidding beneath Ilya’s foot as he fixes his grip under Shane’s ass, digging his fingers into the hard muscle.

“Does that mean I love you in Russian?” Shane asks, pantingly, into Ilya’s mouth. Ilya nods against him, and finally gives in to dropping Shane’s ass down onto the counter, where he can lean in and press himself further between the hot well of Shane’s thighs. “Will you teach me how to say it?”

Ilya’s chest cracks open and the hot beam of sunshine shining at them through the window falls into the cavity of his heart. He opens his mouth against Shane’s pulse point. “Ya,” he

says, scratching his lips against Shane's facial hair, "tebya," pressing the tip of his tongue to Shane's skin, "Lyublyu."

"Ya tee-bya yoo-blue," Shane says, and it's so cute and wrong and atrociously bad that Ilya breaks out laughing. He hears the awkward, half-offended huff of breath Shane lets out while Ilya giggles at him, and Ilya drops into the crook of his neck and laughs some more, pinching Shane's side while Shane squirms.

"We will work on pronunciation," he promises. "Not everyone can be bilingual master like me."

"I speak French, Ilya, I already am bilingual!"

"You are not bi anything," Ilya teases. "You are full gay for the English language."

"Fuck off. You're the only thing I'm gay for," says Shane, and he's trying to sound grumpy, but it's such a delightful sentence to Ilya that he feels like he's walking in the clouds. He smooths his hands down the sides of Shane's waist, and pulls back just a little to look in his eyes. Shane looks back at him. Together, they take a breath.

The tension, fraught and painful and ridiculous and romantic as it was, is gone. Instead, this gentle, giddy sweetness settles through them both, fresh as the summer air wafting through the cracked window.

"I'm glad you like the house," Shane says, quietly.

"It is perfect," Ilya tells him. "Telling your parents is perfect. You are perfect."

Shane lets out a little snort against Ilya's skin, wry. "I'm a fucking mess, Ilya, I'm not perfect."

"Well, I don't care," Ilya says, and it's true. "I like that you are a mess. I like that I am the only one who gets to see it."

The clinical hockey stats and airbrushed billboards and soft-lit television ads and screaming crowds looking at him down on the ice from a distance and the people who want him to be a good Canadian boy or a good Japanese-Canadian role model or whatever the hell else anyone wants from Shane, they don't get to know the sides of him Ilya knows. His worries and fears and the worst day of his life; his bitchiness and silly jokes and how violent he gets play-wrestling; the uninhibited feralness of him during sex, the way he delights carnally in any strange new sensation Ilya can think to lave upon his body. It all belongs to Ilya.

"Jesus," Shane says, looking over Ilya's shoulder. "I just realised we have to be at the rink in less than two hours."

"You, Shane Hollander, forgot the time for practice? During the final round of playoffs? Fuck," says Ilya grinning. "You really do love me."

"Yeah, asshole," Shane says, and kicks the back of Ilya's leg where his knees are still hooked over Ilya's hipbones. "I really fucking do."

Ilya kisses him, and doesn't stop.

“Listen up, fuckheads!” Ilya shouts. The locker room is jittery with nerves, but the babble of tense conversation falls silent when he stands on the bench in the centre of the room, spanning his arms wide in the bulk of his pads and looking at every single one of them; his team, his fucking brothers. He shouts, heart pounding in his chest, spit flying, “Here is your fucking pep talk. Forget about last game. That doesn’t fucking matter. This is our fucking night. I don’t care what those assholes in Chicago try tonight, we are going to fuck them so hard they cannot crawl back to their stupid city. I know you can do it, every fucking one of you, so you go and *do it*. This is our fucking night, this is our fucking cup, are you fucking *with me?*”

A crowd of voices holler back at him, a feral wolf-chorus of chanting, and they slap their sticks together and knock their heads and the energy is there – Ilya finally feels it, the sharp point of connection between every one of the guys in the room, their blood pumping as one thundering beast, as they charge out into the tunnel, ready for their game. Ilya rolls his shoulder and claps hands with Marley, and he feels like they could do anything tonight.

Shane’s lingering at the locker room door after everyone else has already gone through it. As Ilya passes him, Shane gives him a little grin, and bumps their shoulders together.

Ilya leans close, knocks his helmet the same way he did with everyone else, and mutters, “I win this one for you, okay?”

“Fuck off,” Shane hisses, but he’s grinning wider – the sweet, boyish smile that makes his eyes sparkle. “I’m the one who’s gonna win it. For *you*.”

“Hm, want to bet on it?” Ilya says, winking, before he turns and goes to take his place in the tunnel too.

The air in the place is full a static charge that makes Ilya buzz from head to toe. Home ice, which really is a kind of home to him – how many hours, in the last four years, has Ilya spent in this rink? How many times has he rounded these same edges, sat on this same bench? He recognises the skate-dents in the boards in front of where he sits, a couple of faces of diehard fans who always get seats against the glass. Glances up at the section where all their families are sat and sees Sveta's head of curls standing out in the crowd, sporting his jersey and waving her beer down at him. This is his city.

His blood roars. He can taste the ice, the sting of it in his mouth. They take their places, Shane shuffling in a crouch at the face-off dot. The puck drops, and Shane takes it.

They play, and the brutal aches and pains of Ilya’s body cease to matter. He wants it so bad that he’s not even playing from inside himself, but somewhere else entirely – it becomes rote to lean into his scorching muscles and push his thighs and sprint down the ice, to hook the

puck on his stick and slam with his hip and force out his heaving breath and look for his teammates in a split second – passing to Marley, scooping the puck between the legs of a Chicago winger, spinning on an edge and dodging a hit and pushing his skates into the ice and sprinting again, calling out for it, watching Marley slip the puck to Shane, Shane spinning with it beautifully, his fucking hands, Ilya there to catch it and pass it back to him behind the goal, and Shane sinks the first goal of the game, and everyone piles on top of him like they want to eat him alive, which Ilya understands.

In the first break, while they desperately rehydrate and refuel and after Coach is done shouting through their skulls about passing and the holes in Chicago's defence, Shane corners Ilya by the bin of sports drinks, picking up a blue one Ilya knows he'll never actually drink.

"What would the bet be?" Shane asks quietly, jostling the drink from hand to hand, flicking his gaze up at Ilya with a quick smile.

Ilya grins.

"I don't know," he shrugs. He glances around, being careful; nobody's near them, certainly not paying attention, and it's noisy as all hell. Ilya leans just a little closer as if he's speaking over the noise, and whispers to the side of Shane's head, "How about, if I score the winning goal this game, I get to do whatever I want to you."

"What if I get the last goal?" Shane asks.

"If you get it," Ilya says, "Then I also get to do whatever I want to you."

Shane laughs, rolls his eyes, and pushes away from Ilya, tossing the sports drink he didn't want back at Ilya's chest. "Asshole," he says, but he doesn't say *no*.

Ilya eats half a banana and finishes his drink and by the time intermission is over he's pumping with excitement again, ready to rip Chicago's neck out with his teeth. They pelt back onto the ice, and it hurts, the play brutal, but they keep going. Forcing Chicago's defence back, chipping away at them, stealing the puck and running with it and scoring his first of the night to a roaring crowd. Shane gets so close to him in the celly that Ilya feels his breath on his neck.

Play resumes. A brutal minute of scuffling and checking and the ache blooming deep in his shoulder rattles all the way down to his elbow, but he ignores it until the end of his shift, when he can skate off the ice and try and roll it out beneath his pads without giving away to the other team that he's stinging. Ilya thumps down on the bench, and squirts water into his panting mouth, the caterwauling crowds around them washing through him. His breath is tight from exertion, scrunching his sore ribcage with every heaving exhale. Not long left on the period now, and they're up; they just need to outlast.

Ilya's looking away when the hit happens. All he hears is the shouts from the crowd, and then he turns, and sees Dubek sprawled out over the ice, face-down, unmoving. A Chicago forward is hovering near him awkwardly, gesturing towards the ref.

"Shit – *fuck*."

Ilya stands up at the bench, leaning over the boards, trying to get a better look. “Stand the fuck up, Dubek,” he shouts over the ice, as Cadyn gets the Chicago player who knocked him down by the scruff of his jersey and lays a fist into his face. “You are okay? Get up!”

A brawl is breaking out. Ilya fights the urge to just fling himself over the boards and join in and take the fucking penalty; a fist makes impact with his thigh below the boards, and he turns to see Shane glaring at him.

“Don’t you fucking dare, Rozanov,” Shane says. Ilya blows out a frustrated puff of air, and looks back at the ice.

Dubek is sat up, giving them a thumbs up. His nose is smushed at a remarkably ugly angle, and gushing blood down his front, smearing the yellow stripes of his jersey in gore, but he’s sitting up. The medics reach him and fuss around him while the refs sort out the fight breaking out a few meters away, and Ilya glances back down at Shane, letting out a relieved puff of air. Shane’s hand bumps into his leg again, just for a second. Ilya knows they’re both thinking the same thing. Glad it wasn’t each other.

“Fucking hell, you scare us staying down like that, drama queen,” Ilya says to Dubek, leaning over the boards when he gingerly skates off the ice with the medic at his shoulder, clutching his blood-sodden jersey to his face.

“Thuck yoo, Rothanoth,” Dubek gurgles, which is pretty funny now that they know he’s well enough to skate off, so Ilya laughs. Shane elbows him, as Dubek is walked down the tunnel with the medics, to cheers from the crowd around them.

Fuck, and there’s still a period to go. They’re up two, which isn’t enough. Back out on the ice for the third and Chicago are getting desperate, scrappy, fighting for it. They claw a goal in the first few minutes of the third period, Ilya a second too slow to intercept it, and he shouts, “Fuck you, fucking assholes!” as he thumps into the boards.

With two minutes left and only needing one goal to tie it up, the Cyclones pull their goalie.

It’s a bold fucking move with Shane and Ilya both on the team; giving a free lane the league’s top scorers, when Chicago’s defence is already lacking, but they have nothing to lose. Their extra player takes the ice, and the advantage bears down on Boston. Ilya collides with a winger and stumbles on his skates, trying to lunge for the puck as it sails past them, but he can’t reach to clip it back up to the right goal. He turns and finds himself blocked, Chicago’s advantage bearing down on them with the extra player, no space for Ilya to fucking move.

Chicago score with thirty seconds to go. Ilya clenches his jaw, spitting angry, as he glides back to the Boston bench. The tension is simmering off all of them. They’re tight enough to snap, pushed to the brink, sweat-drenched and panting and bruised and sore and the crowds heave around them, the home ice a treacherous danger beneath their feet; if they lose it here, it will hurt so much worse.

The final seconds of the game tick down at 3-3, a dead tie. Ilya shouts, heaves his body across the ice, but there’s no point. The period is over before anyone can reach the puck.

“Well, it really looked like the Raiders had it for a while there, but now this game will officially be going into overtime.”

“There’s nothing like playoffs overtime, there really isn’t. Nail-biting stuff.”

“Isn’t it just, Clint. Now, if the Raiders win this game, they be your official Stanley Cup Champions of 2013, but if the Cyclones claw this one back, we’ll officially be going to game seven of the final round to decide this title.”

“I’m sure the Raiders are dreading a repeat of last year, where they lost the cup in the final round after a really promising series.”

“Will this be their year, or will Chicago, who hired a new coach at the end of last season and have seen remarkable improvement from it, take their second title of the last decade?”

“Now there’s Marleau with the puck, scrapping a little bit with Timofeev there – not the fastest player, but a real presence on the ice, I’m sure the Raiders are always nervous about meeting him.”

“And to Nelson, back to Timofeev, Boston lagging behind a little–”

“No, there it goes, Marleau gets it back, to Pike, tied up over by Chicago’s goal here–”

“Pike passes – OH, AND THAT’S SHANE HOLLANDER ON THE BREAKAWAY, A NIGHTMARE FOR ANY TEAM–”

“CHICAGO JUST CANNOT CATCH UP WITH HOLLANDER–”

“AND HE TAKES THE SHOT – AND SINKS IT!”

“AND THERE YOU HAVE IT, FOLKS, YOUR 2013 STANLEY CUP CHAMPIONS! THE BOSTON RAIDERS!”

Chapter End Notes

next time: the end 😭

it's truly mindblowing to me that we are here at this point of the story. writing this has been such an incredibly huge and fun undertaking for me and i'm so, so happy it's nearly a complete story ;-; thank you so much as always for your comments, i absolutely love

reading them so please do drop a line if you enjoyed this chapter ! i will see yall next week for, finally, the closing of this fic 🧡

as always you can find me [on tumblr](#) in between updates or for more glimpses of my writing :)

Chapter 28: and i believe to my soul.

Chapter Notes

fucking hell. i cannot believe we have come to the end of this fic

this has genuinely been one of the most insane undertakings of my life !! i've been writing fic for like, nearly twenty years, since i was a tiny tween, and this fic is by far the longest, fastest, and most special creation i've ever put out there. before this, my longest fic was half the length of this, and took me two years to write. i cannot fucking believe i wrote this in five months. please also admire the final wordcount. i don't know what possessed me. i don't know what drugs they put in this show but i never want to stop taking them.

thank you, hugely and truly, to every single person who has commented on this fic, or shared it with friends and recommended it to others. the amount of you here is mindboggling to me and means so much !!! i read and adore every single one of your comments and your support is the only reason this got finished, so thank you ;-;

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

The first thing Shane is aware of after the goal sinks home is a body crashing into his.

Not the screaming, though there's that. Not the lights and the noise and the sensory explosion from every direction; crowd, team, media, world outside of them. His own world stands still on a white-hot point, and Shane balances there, hanging outside of it all, until the hard impact of muscle hitting him from one side jolts him back into the bright flare of reality.

He doesn't need to turn his head to know it's Ilya. He can smell him, feel him, recognise him by the tone of his breath and the way his bare hands land either side of Shane's helmet, gloves abandoned on the ice, shaking him with the rough grip of someone who knows how much he can take.

"You fucking did it, Hollander," Ilya growls into his ear, sounding like he'd like to eat Shane alive.

Tingling kicks up in Shane's body, from the bottom of his bruised and aching feet all the way to his giddy head. The world swims in front of his eyes. He clutches the back of Ilya's jersey, and laughs.

"Fuck, Ilya, did we win?" Shane gasps. He can't even process the feeling. It's like the universe has bloomed in his chest. There's a gaping white void, but not in a scary way, like he felt when he was a teenager, the pressure consuming everything else; instead, it's like every atom of the world has opened up around him with possibility. They did it. They really did it.

He was good enough.

Ilya clutches him back. Guys are hugging all over the ice, losing their minds; nobody's looking at them weird for embracing, safe in the joy and celebration. Ilya shoves his face into the side of Shane's helmet, and says, just for him to hear, "That goal was so hot. Next time we win this cup, I am going to kiss you right in the middle of the fucking ice."

His lips are only an inch away from Shane's. Honestly, seeing the way Connors is gyrating on Marley in behind them, Shane's not even sure anyone would think it was weird if he and Ilya kissed right now. Maybe if they started using tongue. They're not going to, of course. They can't – they're too aware of everything they have to lose. Still, Shane presses his own helmet into Ilya's, and allows himself a second to imagine it.

"No," he says. "No way. Two cups is not enough of a legacy, Ilya."

Ilya laughs against him, and says, "Okay, so third cup, then?"

The shivering flood of adrenaline beats in Shane's whole body. He's giddier than he's ever been, he's exhausted and exhilarated and the explosive pulse of the entire arena around them is flooding in him and they're so, so public, yet this moment, this scant and deniable hug, is the most private thing he thinks he has ever felt. A moment just for him and Ilya. They fucking did it, and they did it together.

"Okay," Shane laughs, "Maybe the third one."

Ilya is grinning when he finally breaks away, clapping Shane bro-ishly on the shoulder a couple of times. Marley approaches behind them, swoops down on Shane's back and crunches his bones in a hug, and Shane laughs, and grins, and can't catch his breath. The lights are blinding. The crowd won't stop shouting; shouting for Boston, shouting his name.

When he lifts it, the Stanley Cup feels like molten gold under Shane's hands.

He barely knows what's happening, each moment blurring into the last among the cheers and shouts and the flashes of cameras, the hard impact of celebratory bodies against his. After they've taken their laps, families descend onto the ice; Shane spots his own parents decked head-to-toe in Raiders merch, his mom screaming her head off. Svetlana's at the edge of the boards, teetering in heels that shouldn't be trusted on an ice rink. While Ilya goes to her, Shane grabs his parents in a hug.

He can't hear anything they're saying beyond a couple of *oh my gods* and *so prouds*. The noise of the rink fills his ears. It's like he can feel every single fan pressed up around him; screaming, cheering. Someone shoves a camera in his face but he can barely pay attention. He's dimly aware of saying something, but it's like his mother's voice is speaking out of him, those years of interviews and media training taking the responsibility of forming intelligent thought off his hands. Which is good. He doesn't have any intelligent thought right now, because he just won the fucking cup.

Shane thinks, *this is the best moment of my life*. His lifelong dream, only three years into his career. And he got to do it with Ilya.

They really could get that second cup, that third, even more. They've got years ahead of them. When he dreamed of this as a child, it never felt this good; it never had the weight of partnership slung across it.

He didn't know he'd be standing at the top of the world with the love of his fucking life, the only other person on the planet who can understand just how good this feels, just how high they've flown.

Looking across the ice, Shane beams. Ilya's got Svetlana in his arms, charming the cameras with their matching cocky smiles. Everyone probably thinks she's his girlfriend; they'll be looking for his cup day posts on Instagram to see if he proposes to her or something.

When Ilya catches Shane's eye across the ice, he winks. Just for them.

"Hol-lan-der! Hol-lan-der! Hol-lan-der!" The whole team are chanting as the champagne cork pops and the bottle sprays directly into Shane's face.

None of them have come down from the game yet. The hard-won pain of it is still there; their injuries throb and sting at them, their exhaustion bites at their bones, but nothing is a match for the pure, unrivalled adrenaline of winning. They're stood on the peak of a mountain together, losing their minds. None of them ever want to leave this moment.

Shane, sticky with champagne, laughs. He wipes his face with his sleeve a bit and accepts a glass, necks it back, a drink he has fucking earned. He's not even sure he likes champagne, but everything tastes good right now. Sweet, nectary. Drink of the gods.

"You are a fucking legend, man," Connors tells him, drunk already. He slings himself over Shane's shoulder, and the guys around them holler a few ridiculous agreements. "Down in fucking history for that one! HISTORY!"

Shane feels himself pink-cheeked from the booze and the praise and the win and the pain and the exhaustion and the best day of his life.

"Hey, it wasn't just me," he says, and he means it. He's proud, sure, but of all of them, of this insane fucking run they've gone on, of their determination to bring it home. "You all killed it out there. We fucking earned this."

"Hell, yeah!" someone shouts, raising glasses to clink, and the music blares around them, and the champagne is sticky and uncomfortable where it's drying on his skin, and Shane couldn't care less.

He loses track of time in the celebration – booze and noise and warm bodies and chanting. It's not until a little while later that Ilya catches his attention. He's standing off to the side, away from the rest of the team, staring Shane's way. Shane warms under his attention.

When their eyes meet, Ilya downs the rest of his drink in one go, abandons his glass, and inclines his head. Shane glances around, making sure nobody else noticed. Nobody did. Everyone is drunk and screaming and downing champagne and wrapped up in their girlfriends or whoever happens to be draped over their lap; nobody gives a shit what Shane does.

Shane stands up from the table. Hands slap him idly; a few, “Hollzy, fucking Hollzy!”s follow him with an air of distracted congratulations.

A minute later, Ilya corners him in the dark of an abandoned corridor, presses him into the wall, and breathes on him – hot, hard breaths, like he’s holding himself back from a fight. From an inch apart, Ilya’s hands bracing Shane’s shoulders, they stare at each other.

“Ilya–” Shane says. He’s had more champagne than he’d ever normally drink and his head feels sweet and bubbly, body heavy enough to collapse. He’s sluggish, exhausted. He’s hot and turned on from the victory, the roaring, adrenaline pump of success.

“Fucking hell,” Ilya groans, and presses his face to Shane’s neck. “I want to fuck you so bad, Hollander.”

“Yes,” Shane says immediately – almost pants, really, wantonly desperate. “Yes, fuck, please.”

“You know how hot winning is?” Ilya asks. His hard thigh presses between Shane’s legs, rubbing at the swell of his cock through his pants. “Nothing fucking turns me on more than winning. This is the sexiest moment in my whole life.”

“Don’t tell me you got turned on by your Calder, too,” Shane laughs a bit, then cuts himself off on a choked breath as his cock presses against the hard seam of Ilya’s belt. He feels dizzy, so hot between his legs that it burns.

“Fuck, forget Calder, you should have seen me at the draft,” Ilya groans into Shane’s neck, wet tip of his tongue against the skin there for a second. “Soon as they called my name first, I got hard. I had to jerk off in the bathroom before they made me do media. Such a shame you were not there. I could have made you suck it as consolation prize.”

“If I’d been there, you wouldn’t have gone first, so problem solved,” Shane says, although the idea is kind of hot. Him coming second and being told he has to blow the first draft, whether he wants to or not, some kind of tradition; he puts the thought away for later. Ilya bites his jaw, tips his head back with one rough hand, and Shane turns to putty. Although, not so much he’s not still thinking about – “Wait, did you seriously jerk off at the *draft*? I went to the bathroom and had a panic attack.”

Ilya snorts a laugh into his skin. “Yes, we are very different people, we already knew this.”

One of his hands is working underneath the hem of Shane’s shirt. They’re still – fuck – half in public, in the dark and away from the guys, but no locked door to hide them. Shane swallows, his throat sticking, saliva flooding his mouth. He tries to care, but god, he really doesn’t.

“Can we find a fucking – closet or a bathroom or something, Ilya, fuck, anywhere,” Shane says. Ilya’s hand squeezes at his tit, pinching his nipple. Shane’s all the way stiff now, prodding at Ilya’s thigh, squirming on it, wanting something real around his cock.

“Mm.” Ilya, with the ruinous control of a drill sergeant, presses harder against him, and hangs onto Shane’s nipple, and rubs the sharp edges of his teeth over the lobe of Shane’s ear. Then, when Shane is panting and hard and his cock is making wet spots in his underwear and he’s ready to plead for it, Ilya says, “Not here. I will take you home, and fuck you in my bed. I think you can wait for me to take my time.”

Shane, so hard his cock hurts, his balls throb, the tight knot of heat in his stomach lurches like nausea, looks at Ilya with betrayal. “What?” he says. “Fuck you, *no*, I don’t want to wait, Ilya, now, I swear to fucking god–”

“You are going to wait like a good boy,” Ilya mutters at him. His hand slips down between their bodies and squeezes the stiff line of Shane’s cock through his pants, just once. Shane’s eyes press shut as he tries not to lose his mind. “I am going to go back into party and get your things, and you are going to go outside and call a driver, and you are going to sit well-behaved in their very nice car while they take us home, and then, when you are finally in my bed, I will do whatever you want. Do you understand?”

Shane’s head rushes, he sags on his feet. He might pass out from arousal and exhaustion. He might lose his mind and start sucking Ilya’s cock right here.

“Understand, Shane?” Ilya asks again – firmer, this time, which only makes Shane feel hotter, pin-pricked with fever.

“Fine,” Shane groans, putting his hands over his face. “But you better be fucking quick.”

Ilya grins at him, sharply pleased, and pats the side of his face. “Go call a car, Shane.”

It’s agony getting back to the apartments. Shane folds his jacket in his lap and takes even, measured breaths, the kind he’s supposed to take to stave off a panic attack, while Ilya sprawls in the seat of the expensive car beside him, not looking his way. It’s a nice car service, so the driver’s paid enough not to immediately chat to them about the game, but it’s clear he recognises them. He sneaks glances in the mirror, and Shane’s blood whirls. All he wants in the whole universe now is Ilya. He has his cup, he wants his man.

Ilya won’t touch him in the hallway, won’t touch him in the elevator, won’t touch him in the entry of his apartment while they toe their shoes off. Shane’s skin is buzzing, prickling all over. Ilya takes his shirt off as he walks to his bedroom, tossing it away with abandon, and Shane, dragging himself behind, watches the broad, shifting muscles of Ilya’s back move, so turned on he’s nearly sick with it.

He can’t believe he ever thought he could live without this.

When they’re finally in bed, Shane already feels like Ilya’s been touching him for hours. The raw-nerve feeling all over his body has him desperate, near tears, his bare skin sensitive to the hot summer air. He collapses back into the pillows, squeezing his hands in the sheets.

Ilya sits back on his heels, naked on the bed, his thick cock standing up from his lap. He circles a thumb and finger around it, presenting the swollen head for Shane to look at, and Shane's mouth floods with saliva.

"Well, Shane," Ilya says. "You scored winning goal, you win the bet. What do you want me to do?"

The whole world of possibility faces Shane until he's nearly sick with it. He wants Ilya to do pretty much everything to him; he's not sure how much of it he'd like, but he wants to feel it all, every possible permutation of how two bodies can act together. He wants Ilya to bite him hard enough to break skin, taste his blood, lick him all over, piss on him, spit on him, he's honestly not fucking sure where the line is.

He shoves his hands into Ilya's hair, pulling him down to kiss, open-mouthed and wet and panting at each other's tongues. He's still aware of the pain in his body – the hot throb of his sprained finger, his twisted knee – but it's all blending into the arousal, a strange catalogue of sensation on his body, like the good-press of a healing bruise.

"Will you just fuck me?" Shane begs into his mouth. "I don't care how, Ilya, just do it, please, I fucking need it."

It's rare that Shane gets to see a real moment Ilya loses control during sex, but he watches it, now; the way Ilya's cocky surety goes out of him at Shane's desperation. His pupils darken, his throat bobs. His hand shakes a little as he looms over Shane with the full expanse of his broad, bruised-purple body, naked except for the lurid-coloured KT tape holding his shoulder together, and presses him into the mattress.

"Fuck, Shane, you are perfect," Ilya groans, and then kisses him.

Shane bares down to all the points of sensation in his body; Ilya's knees pushing his thighs, hands pressing his shoulders, tongue in his mouth, on his nipple; hands pushing his thighs up roughly, then, and the wet intrusion of Ilya's tongue in his ass, while Shane squirms through it, and heat fills the apartment, making him sweat. It's so late it's early by now, but Shane's never felt farther from tiredness. He moans under Ilya's tongue, pushing his hips down into it. Ilya stretches him just a little, pushing lube into his soft asshole, before he finally pulls Shane's hips onto his own thighs and presses the fat head of his cock against the wet spread of Shane's hole.

Nothing feels better to Shane than getting fucked. When Ilya gives a hard shove and forces his dick inside, Shane throws his head back and moans so loud that he can feel it reverberate through his own body. His hands come up to the headboard, gripping it tight, as Ilya curses in Russian, shoves in a little further, his hands purpling new fingertip bruises on Shane's thighs.

"Do it hard, Ilya, I can take it," Shane pants, squeezing his eyes shut – his cock is already too hard, swollen and aching, and he worries he might come in a second if he looks at Ilya's red, panting face over him as he starts to thrust. Shane hitches a leg higher up Ilya's body, leaning into the painful stretch of it, the way he can feel Ilya's fat pec on the back of his thigh.

“You are the most fucking insane thing I ever see in my life, Hollander,” Ilya tells him, through broken grunts, as he starts to really thrust – like Shane wanted, hard enough it hurts, with the real feeling of intrusion that comes from this kind of sex, Ilya’s cock forcing Shane’s body to make space for it. He loves it so bad. His head tips into the pillows, jaw caught open, drool pooling in the corners of his mouth, as Ilya leans further over him and fucks him faster and says, “Holy shit, you will kill me, you are the sexiest thing that ever lived–” Something long in Russian that Shane can’t begin to parse, “–winner, best in the fucking world and you still need my cock, huh?”

No real idea what he’s agreeing to, Shane bites his fingernails into Ilya’s back, feeling the hot press of his sweaty muscles, and says, “Yeah, Ilya, baby, I need you.”

Ilya makes a strange, wet noise. Shane leans up to try and catch Ilya’s mouth – hard at this angle, his legs trapped between them, but Shane’s flexible and Ilya’s insistent and doesn’t care that much about hurting him, so manages to crush himself close enough to rub his mouth into Shane’s, his bowed lips wet and hot and their messy tongues coming out to lick at each other, trading saliva. It sparks his nerves everywhere they touch, makes his gut flood.

“Ilya,” Shane says, desperately. “I’m going to –”

“Quick, Shane, it is overtime already,” Ilya pants hotly into his ear, the wet of his breath touching Shane’s skin. “Are you going to win? You have to score in next three seconds –”

Shane comes so hard his vision goes white, his cock jerking in his own grip, the hot squirt of his cum flooding his stomach. His entire body goes lax the second he’s done – two months’ worth of fight and tension and work go out of him with a snap, like cracking a stiff joint. The orgasm fills every part of his body in a sedated tingle, and Shane stares at the ceiling, and falls out of reality.

He barely even notices Ilya still fucking him until eventually he goes stiff inside Shane’s body and moans. Shane promptly wraps his arms around Ilya so tight he can’t escape, and passes the fuck out.

The next morning, they wake slowly – hot mouth on him, kisses, an orgasm before his eyes are really open. Shower, get really clean – complain at Ilya for peeing in the shower, Ilya teasing him about his 2-in-1 shampoo – brush their teeth by side, knocking elbows, grinning in the mirror. Ilya makes coffee and Shane puts on the TV just to watch the sports channels recite their win again. They’re playing highlights; his goal, game-winning goal, iconed on the screen. The television says their names over and over again while they eat GrubHubbed pancakes, and Shane doesn’t count the carbs. Ilya’s bare foot rolls in his lap while they eat.

Shane finds his face hurts, separate from the aches in the rest of his body, and then realises it’s because he hasn’t stopped smiling since he woke up.

The real world is still there, of course. Their phones are both lighting up with constant texts, and Shane's parents are due for lunch, giving him time to sleep over the champagne hangover before they come for their own celebration.

It's only ten minutes until they arrive when he finally makes Ilya and himself both put on shirts.

They're in the kitchen of his place when his phone buzzes with the requisite warning that his parents are here; Shane glances down, sees his mom's message, asking if they should let themselves in, sends her a thumbs-up emoji. Ilya looks over his shoulder, reading the text, then blows a raspberry in Shane's neck.

"Do you want me to leave?" he asks, gently. It's sweet. Shane worries he's been so horrendous that he's made Ilya think he doesn't want him to ever meet his parents again, which is certainly not true.

"You don't have to leave," he says, shoving Ilya's shoulder. He opens the fridge, searches for something to do with his hands and comes up with a carton of orange juice. As he uncaps it he says, "My parents like you, and we're teammates. You can eat lunch with us, it's normal."

"Okay," Ilya says, still cautious. One of his warm hands touches Shane's waist through his t-shirt, then backs off again. "If you're sure. But you don't have to tell them anything today. Just enjoy the day, okay?"

"I know," Shane tells him, taking a sip of juice and not thinking of the sugar content. It tastes good.

The click of the spare key sounds in the front door.

"Hi, honey! We brought champagne," his mom calls through the apartment, sound of the door closing behind her. He hears her dropping her purse, taking off her heels, and the giddy-excited tone of her voice, how Shane still feels inside. "I know you probably had enough to make you sick of it last night, but we haven't celebrated, yet. Do you want to – oh!"

When she rounds the corner into the kitchen, Ilya is the first one she sees.

Shane, standing barefoot behind him drinking juice from the carton, steps out guiltily. Or, not guiltily; he shouldn't, he knows, feel guilty about anything he does in his own home, but he still always half feels like a misbehaving kid around his parents. His dad appears a second behind, champagne in hand, and gives a genial half-wave their way.

"Hi, Ilya," Mom says. "We didn't know you were here. Congratulations! Did you have fun celebrating last night?"

Ilya opens his mouth to say something polite and charming back to Shane's parents and Shane puts the juice down on the counter and says, "Mom, I'm gay and I'm dating Ilya and he's here because, um, we're together."

Ilya's jolts like someone just pointed a gun at him and Shane's dad doesn't move at all and Shane's mom drops her phone, just opens her fist and her phone topples right down onto the marbled floors, landing with a crash.

"Um," Shane says, after a moment where everyone is just silent and staring at him. "Sorry, I don't think I meant to say it like that. Maybe we could, uh, sit down?"

"Of course we're fine with it, honey, of course," his mom says, while they sit at the table like they're having a business meeting – Shane and Ilya on one side, Yuna and David on the other, nobody quite sure what to do with their hands. Ilya's nervous about being polite and his dad's nervous about being awkward and his mom's mind is clearly whirring at a million miles a minute and Shane, himself, feels all of it and none of it. His toes are numb, ears ringing. The biggest truth and fear in his life and he just said it, out of nowhere. Threw the words out like a puck to the ice without laying his stick down first to catch it. Missed the face-off. They're all just staring at it, nobody going for first touch.

"Ilya is a very nice young man," his dad says diplomatically, nodding to Ilya across the table. "We're glad you told us. Right, honey?"

"Of course!" his mom says, for a third time in as many minutes. "I just didn't expect it, that's all. I mean, Jesus, Shane, you never – you really never gave any hints."

"I'm twenty-two and I've never dated a girl," Shane feels the need to point out; like he hadn't been desperately trying to hide it, petrified and paranoid of all the signs that could have pointed any kind of suspicion at his sexuality. Now that he's thrown the words out there, he feels like it's ridiculous his parents didn't figure it out.

"Well, you're very focused on hockey, hon," Mom says. "And we didn't expect you were telling us *everything* about your life down here. There might have been some girls, we didn't know!"

She throws her hands up, glancing sideways to his dad like she's looking for some support. Dad doesn't really give her anything, just smiles at Shane, awkward-mouthed.

"It's good," his dad says. "That you have someone you care about. We're glad."

Mom cuts in quickly, "Of course we're glad. Baby, we are so happy for you, okay? We just – it's a bit of a surprise. How long has this been going on?"

Shane shoots a glance sideways at Ilya. The first proper look he's given him in minutes, and Ilya is sat there, stock-still like a statue; his hands are folded in his lap, his expression is frozen on his face. His posture is rigid. It's more nervous than Shane has ever seen him look. More nervous than before any playoff game, any interview or commercial shoot.

It makes him soften a bit. Beneath the table, he reaches out and circles one of Ilya's hands with his, feeling the strong grip of Ilya's fingers, brushing the hair on his bruised knuckles.

"Don't interrogate them, Yuna," Dad says, the aside of a man who's been witness more than once to his wife's more insensitive tendencies, the way she can get like a bulldozer when she

comes up against something she didn't predict. She glances sideways at him with a small amount of betrayal.

"It's not an interrogation, I'm *asking*," she says. "I mean, you can't tell me you're not fucking curious, David."

Shane clears his throat. "It's fine, Dad. Mom, uh, it's complicated, obviously. We started seeing each other sort of – casually. My first year in the league."

Ilya makes a little noise at the word *casually*, a half-scoff in his throat.

"Casual is the wrong word. It was very un-casual. Big deal to both of us."

"I just mean not exclusively, Ilya," Shane says despairingly, trying very hard not to say *we were fuckbuddies for years before we had a conversation about it* to the parents who still help him make dentist appointments. He's never been frustrated with their language barrier before now, but he deeply hopes Ilya grasps the nuance of what he's trying to avoid. "Obviously, yeah, emotionally, it was pretty intense."

"Intense," his mom repeats, glancing sideways at his dad, who looks back at her helplessly. "For three *years*, David, and we didn't know."

"I, uh," Shane says. "I know it sounds dumb, but even with – stuff going on with Ilya, I didn't really realise I was, like, totally gay until earlier this year. I didn't want to hide it from you guys, I just didn't – know how to talk about it, I guess."

"That must have been hard, kiddo," his dad says, which is perhaps the understatement of the century. "But you know we love you no matter what."

There's a long beat of silence. Ilya shuffles in his chair next to Shane, looking like he wants to fall through the floor but is trying to play the picture of polite model-son-in-law. Shane briefly thinks about the fact that he will never do this with Ilya's family; never be the awkward romantic prospect brought home for approval. Maybe he's taking it for granted that he even gets to be stressed about this. The other half of him just feels ill, watching the inscrutable expression in his mom's face, like she's upset and doesn't know how to say it.

"David, why don't we crack open that champagne," Mom suggests, suddenly standing up. She moves to Shane's kitchen and grabs a few glasses from the cupboard. "I think we could all use a drink. And we have a win to celebrate!"

Shane, who drank more champagne last night than he has in his whole life and isn't convinced he actually likes it, doesn't really want any, but he doesn't say that.

"I can help, mom." He starts to get up.

"No, no, honey, you stay," she says quickly, as she arranges the glasses on the table. Her hands are shaking a little. Shane's not sure he's ever seen her hands shake. After a second, she pulls back, and gestures off to the balcony door. "You know, I'm just going to get some air. I'll only be a minute, don't wait for me, open the bottle and get started, okay?"

Before he can even say anything, she's out the door. Ilya and Shane's dad both look at him, awkward. Shane's mouth tastes sour. His heart beats too fast.

"Uh, I'm just gonna," Shane says, and doesn't finish his sentence, gesturing lamely instead. Ilya gives him a lightly panicked look about being left alone with his dad, which Shane ignores because his dad is absolutely the least scary option out of his parents. Ilya can deal.

Shane takes a steeling breath, and follows his mom out onto the balcony.

In his three years of living here, Shane's hardly ever used the balcony at the apartment; it's tiny, just enough space to pace around in if you're starved for a drop of fresh air, but Shane jogs when he wants air. Ilya goes out there to smoke sometimes, which is irritating enough to Shane that he now avoids it as a matter of principle.

Tonight, he eases his way out through the sliding door and swallows. His mom is staring into the saucer that Ilya uses as an ashtray out here, a meagre pit of old cigarette butts that haven't been cleaned out in months because Shane never comes out here. Shane shakes out a breath, feeling briefly second-hand judged. He knows his parents have already met Ilya, but god, not like this – not evaluating him as a prospect for the rest of their son's life. The criteria are surely bound to have changed.

He says, "He's basically quitting. That's, uh, mostly old."

Mom turns around to him, and her eyes are wet. Shane has almost never seen his mom cry in his entire life. She gets wry and snappish and opens the red wine at 3PM when she's stressed, but never cries. When he was in the hospital after the draft – waking up then to see her messy-haired and red-eyed and frantic, it felt like staring at another person, some kind of strange doppelganger induced by the drugs.

"Good. It's a horrible habit. And you know it's just as dangerous for the people around smokers as it is for the smoker themselves? Cancer, Shane. Nobody can play hockey with lung cancer!"

"I know, Mom," Shane says, because he was a good kid who watched all the anti-smoking specials at school and internalised them, and already worries about Ilya's lungs more than she can imagine.

"Okay," his mom says, running her hands through her hair. She takes a shaky breath, looks out at the Boston skyline, and says, "I keep my pack in my work purse and always shower before I get back in bed so your dad doesn't smell it. He thinks I quit ten years ago. He thinks I drink hot cocoa in the kitchen when I can't sleep."

Shane just stares at her, for a second, gaping. He doesn't remember ever seeing his mom hold a cigarette. Not even in the old photos he's seen of his parents at college in the 80s, where she sometimes wore a leather jacket or heavy eyeliner, which Shane always found startling. His mom has always seemed like picture-perfect composure to him. Even in the messy moments you get when living together – her with soap in her eyes in the bath when he was small, her in her pyjamas with a headcold and no make-up – she has an air of neatness about her. It's something Shane has been trying to emulate his whole life, never quite achieving.

They stand there, and Shane tries to imagine his mom ashamed, sneaking secret cigarettes and then covering it up. Her not in complete control of herself, for once.

“I’m not perfect, Shane,” she says. She looks at him, and the hard-won control she always keeps her face under is cracking. Her eyes are big and pleading as she says, “Did I make you think you needed to be perfect? If I pushed too hard, I – I didn’t want to make you feel like that was something you had to live up to. I just always knew that you were so incredible you could do anything you wanted, and I wanted you to know that, too.”

Something hot and unpleasant runs through Shane’s face, his throat. He swallows tightly, looking down at the sad, abandoned cigarettes and not meeting his mom’s eyes.

“I’m really sorry, mom,” he tells her. And it’s true. The knife-edge of fear Shane has felt over this moment for months – years – is there, it’s real, and the world-cracking thought that his mom is disappointed in him lances him open like a knife. “I swear, I tried to be good, I really did.” His eyes are stinging, his nose is damp; Shane rubs at his face with the back of his hand, trying to hold in his trembling upset. “I just, uh, I can’t help it.”

“Fuck, baby, no, that’s not what I mean,” she says, aghast. Suddenly her hands are on Shane’s shoulders, holding him firm, squeezing him together like she always could; when he was a kid and he’d have nightmares and crawl into his parents’ bed so his mom could hold him so tight it nearly hurt, and it was the only way he’d fall back asleep. He looks down at her. After years, it’s still a surprise whenever he remembers he’s taller than her, now. She says, “You are perfect, Shane. You will always be perfect to me. It’s me – I’m the one who’s sorry. Fuck, I’m so, so sorry for everything I did that meant you didn’t want to tell me.”

She hugs him, and Shane leans down to put his face in her soft hair, and he cries.

“I know I’m a lot,” she says, while she holds him, rocking his body back and forth in her arms. “I know I’ve been worse, since your accident. Your dad tells me I’m too overbearing, but I just can’t help it, honey. I want to be able to fix everything for you so that these things don’t hurt you anymore. I didn’t know I was making it worse. Please, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay, mom,” he promises her. “I forgive you.” And he does. For all their arguments and irritations and the way they can sometimes talk past each other, Shane has never, never not loved his mom. “I just – I’m really glad I have you.”

She holds him until he stops shaking. When he finally pulls away and takes a deep, sobering breath, she looks at him, cups his face. Smiles, only half-sad.

“My baby,” she says. “My perfect talented genius Stanley Cup winning baby. Will you tell me about your boyfriend? I want to listen.”

When they get back inside, Ilya and Shane's dad are sat awkwardly across the table from each other, each holding a glass of celebratory champagne. Neither of them are really champagne drinkers, but Shane doesn't have other alcohol, so they must have been desperate. He can practically feel the placid awkwardness radiating off his dad, who is an incredibly nice and calm man, but has never exactly known what to do in a crisis. Not that this is a crisis. It just feels that way.

Among three poured glasses of champagne, there's a can of ginger ale waiting on the table. Shane's heart swells for one absurd second.

When Ilya turns to Shane with wide eyes, like he's trying to plead to him in a secret language, Shane lets out a helpless snort of laughter. He crosses to Ilya's side and wraps an arm around him, pulling Ilya's warm body into his side. He feels like he's mainlined five espressos, that jittery half-thrill, half-nausea of a stimulant.

"You are okay?" Ilya asks him lowly, though of course his parents can still hear; there's no privacy in the room as his mom follows in behind him, closing the balcony door with a thud and striding back towards the table, grabbing a glass of champagne and sipping it.

"Yeah, uh, I'm good," Shane tells him. He thinks about kissing Ilya's head, and then can't quite bring himself to do it in front of his parents, whose eyes he feels on him like a brand. Instead, he lets out a shuddering breath and rubs the blunt ends of his fingernails through the short hairs at the back of Ilya's neck, tugging a little on one errant curl.

"Okay," his mom says, sitting down, clearing her throat. Her voice is suddenly all-resolute; she takes her reading glasses out of her bag and slides them on, slams her planner down onto the table hard enough to make it shake. "What's the plan?"

Ilya gives a bewildered look Shane's way, and Shane just shakes his head, smiling. He slides into the chair beside Ilya, and Ilya rests a hand on Shane's thigh. The thrill zaps through him; the casualness of it, his parents sat across from him, looking their way, and the touch isn't hidden.

Turning to Ilya, Shane says, "If you thought my mom was intense before, you haven't seen her presented with an impossible problem yet. You might want to run while you still can."

"I will not apologise for that," his mom says, rolling her eyes as she scribbles something down on a fresh page of her planner. "My son has just told me something incredibly important about his life, am I supposed to sit back and *not* make sure everything goes perfectly for him and his boyfriend?"

"Mom," Shane says, but Ilya's just sat there looking with gentle bewilderment beside him, so he doesn't object further.

It's not really a word they've used between the two of them – *boyfriend*. It feels almost laughably inadequate, but at the same time, it's thrilling in its mundanity. The idea that after everything it's taken them to get here, all the heartache and drama and fighting and passion, they could wind up in something comparable in dynamics to the average couple on the street.

“No, I like it,” Ilya says. His voice is polite in a way Shane rarely hears it, carefully enunciating his consonants. He takes a sip of champagne and grips Shane’s thigh and says, “We never have a plan, we have gone three years without a plan. I think we need Yuna to tell us what to do.”

“We have a plan,” Shane says, frowning, slightly offended. He didn’t stay up sick and sleepless and panicked searching through Boston real estate websites and sending time-inappropriate emails to his accountant the day before a playoffs game to be called *planless*. He might not have his mom’s aptitude for contingencies, but he tried.

“Okay, so let’s hear it,” Mom says.

Shane glances sideways at Ilya, then back at his mom. He opens the can of ginger ale, fiddles with the cool metal tab.

“We’re, uh, living together next year,” Shane says. “I kind of bought us a house? It’s really nice and private and it’s out of town and you’ll like it, when you visit, I swear. But obviously, we can’t tell people we’re living together, so we’re both gonna get, like, cover houses, in the city. And, uh, well, Hayden kind of already knows about us. He found out by accident, but he’s – good, he’s cool with it. And Ilya’s gonna tell Marley – Marleau. He was supporting the You Can Play stuff so we know he’ll be cool too and he can help us keep things quiet, and, um, you know, be there and stuff.”

It sounds wan and inadequate when he says it all aloud. He hasn’t had the time to turn their plan into a Yuna Hollander-approved marketing strategy in his head yet; he’s lacking the buzzwords. But she just nods, scribbling in her little notebook, taking a sip of champagne one-handed. Her glasses slip down her nose and she pushes them back up with her glass.

“Okay, so Hayden, Marleau, and us. Does anyone else know?”

“No,” Shane says. “God, no.”

“I have fought for months just to get him to tell you both,” Ilya says, jokingly. “He was not letting anybody else slip through.”

“Oh,” Shane says, after elbowing him in the side. “I mean, there is Svetlana. Uh, she’s Ilya’s best friend.”

Ilya blinks as he scoots his chair a little closer, putting an arm on the back of Shane’s chair.

“Ah, yes. Well, she is basically a part of me, like a very beautiful leg. She does not really count.”

Shane sees his parents exchange a look, and quickly looks down at his ginger ale. He doesn’t want to get into the murky topic of Ilya’s *very beautiful friend* with them yet; he’s sure his mom would be nearly as irrationally jealous on his behalf as he already is.

“Okay,” his mom says, adding Svetlana’s name into her planner after a careful moment.

“Well, as long as they’re all people you trust, that’s fine. Now, next steps are telling your managers and publicists. Shane, obviously I manage your commercial career, but it would be

useful to tell Rahul as well, to make sure he flags any morality clauses or disclosure agreements in future contracts. Ilya, who are you signed with?"

Shane's sixty year-old Indian-Canadian hardass lawyer of an athletic manager is probably near last on his list of people he wants to tell about his gay sex life, but he nods to her point.

"Ah, my manager is Russian, quite old fashioned," Ilya says slowly, trading a glance Shane's way. He's almost sheepish as he admits to Yuna, "I do not have publicist, it is all just through my manager."

Shane's panic is at briefly interrupted by vindication when his mom pulls a face. He'd told Ilya he needed a publicist – told him recently and months ago and plenty of times, actually! Ilya's always teased, but facing down Yuna he seems mollified, like he's finally deferring to a proper adult. Shane would laugh if he weren't so panicked.

"Ilya," Shane's mom says, disappointed. "That's just ridiculous, for someone of your profile. And especially if you have any concerns about telling your manager, you need someone with professional experience on your side. What if something leaks? Those first few hours where you'd be scrambling to find someone to deal with it can be the make-or-break between a minor scuffle or a complete disaster. I'll put you in touch with Shane's publicist – if you don't want to use the same one, she can recommend someone else at her firm."

Ilya nods along like he's a schoolchild pretending he understands a math equation for a teacher he wants to impress.

"You think something might leak?" Shane asks, as his heartrate lurches.

"Well, obviously we hope it won't before you're ready, honey," she says, "But it's important to have a plan in place for if it does. You pay people who are professionals at this kind of thing for a reason. Just because your kind of leak might look a little different to other hockey scandals they'd expect, doesn't mean they're not trained to deal with it."

Shane can imagine the other kind of scandals they might be used to – guys cheating on wives, having secret kids, being embroiled in betting scandals or doping or saying offensive shit. He wonders if his publicist has ever had to cover up anyone else's gay romance. She's not a *hockey* publicist, but specialises in high-profile athletes. It's not out of the realm of possibility, he supposes, that this wouldn't be her first time. Maybe they could tell her – maybe it would even be smart if Ilya signs with her, too, to keep their circle of people in the know contained.

Shane's dad, who usually struggles to get a word in edgeways when Shane and Yuna are in planning mode, looks right at Ilya when he asks, "Now, I don't know where you kids are at with all this, but I don't think we've actually asked yet. Are you planning to, I don't know, tell people, at some point?"

"No," Shane says, quickly. Then, correcting with a guilty glance at Ilya; "I mean, not really. Not yet, at least."

“Shane does not want to be the first gay in the league,” Ilya explains. They haven’t discussed it in that many words before, but it is sort of what Shane thinks; that if some other guys in the league came out, maybe he’d figure it could be low-profile enough to tell a few more people, though how the *he and Ilya* of it all fits in is another story. Ilya, not so stressed about it all, grins and adds, “But I have made him agree that if we win three Stanley Cups I can kiss him in the middle of ice, so I will keep working to that.”

“Oh my god, don’t tell them that,” Shane mutters, but hooks his bare foot over Ilya’s ankle beneath the table. To his parents he adds, “He’s joking. Mostly.”

“But you would want to come out?” Mom asks Ilya, curiously, over her glasses.

Under her gaze, Ilya deflates a little. He shrugs, takes a sip from his glass. It’s the same dichotomy Shane has been aware of in him for a while – that Ilya has these big emotions he wishes he could live by, but is smart enough to know logically the practicals holding him back. He knows it wouldn’t be a good idea to come out, yet he desperately wants it, enough to make jokes but not quite enough to throw everything away. He wants to live by his heart and is forced to abide his head.

“Probably not really,” Ilya says. “I don’t know if you know much about Russia, but they are in some trouble for not being too nice to gay people already. Some news says it may get worse, maybe some worse laws will pass soon. It would probably be a bad idea for me to be public so loud while I still have a Russian passport.”

A sharp nod from Shane’s mom, more scribbling. “Right,” she says, underlining something so hard he can see the paper tear beneath her pen. “So, citizenship for Ilya. Obviously the first approach will be to go through your work visa in the US. You’ve been here nearly five years, right? I’ll contact some lawyers who specialise, but that’s bound to help. Of course, when you two retire, you’ll be moving to Canada and we’ll have to do this all over again, but it’s a start.”

Shane’s cheeks flush; Ilya, beside him, halfway through a sip of champagne, chokes and coughs embarrassingly. He’s glad they’re on the same page. The idea of his mom talking so casually about it – like it’s a given they’ll still be together in ten, fifteen years – is almost more insane than the way they’ve said things like that to each other.

Fuck, but Shane never expected it to be like this. The acceptance. The way even the jagged pieces of their imperfect puzzle are fitting together so easily.

“Mom,” Shane objects, half a groan, flushing. “I think we should at least move in together before we start talking about *retirement*.”

“No, no, I like this,” Ilya says, recovering from his cough in time to grin at Shane’s mom across the table. “Yuna is already planning to steal me away to Canada. I will be a full Hollander in no time.”

“You’ve barely even been to Canada,” Shane complains. “You’ve visited like, once outside of games!”

“Yes, good point,” Ilya says, grinning. His hand squeezes Shane’s shoulder where it’s draped over his chair, and Shane swallows around the hot feeling of it. “I will need to visit more, make sure I like it before we retire. You will have to take me on lots of trips.”

“Well, you’ll spend the summer up there, right?” Mom asks, like it’s obvious. “You boys are welcome to stay at the Cottage as long as you want, even if me and Dad are back in Ottawa for work. It might be the last year Shane’s at our cottage properly!”

Shane feels a little insane. The way he can sit here, like this, so casually – his parents across from him, Ilya by his side, talking about Ilya visiting again. As Shane’s *boyfriend*. They could share a room at the cottage. They could hold hands when he drags Ilya on a hike that he’ll hate. They could do fucking anything; the whole world feels wide open, terrifying and exhilarating in equal measure. Or if not the whole world, then at least the Canadian wilderness.

He puts his hand on Ilya’s leg, feeling the warm skin, the rough scratch of hair below the hem of his shorts.

“I’m going to have my own cottage built, nearby to where my parents’ one is,” he explains to Ilya; his parents already know this, helped him find a plot of land across the lake going word-of-mouth. He bought the land last summer with Rolex money, but the house itself is another thing. He’s supposed to meet with an architect in the summer, to work out designs. It may be a little on the back-burner after buying the Boston house, which he’s put most of his signing bonus down on now, but the plan is still there.

Ilya raises an eyebrow and says, “Ah, yes, a third house, just what you need. Mr Real Estate.”

“Shut up,” Shane laughs, and Ilya laughs too, and Shane can’t help tilting his head in and knocking against Ilya’s shoulder, just for a second. “One of those houses is half yours! I wouldn’t need three houses if it wasn’t for you.”

“Mm, I am honoured, helping you get your empire on the ground,” Ilya jokes.

When Shane stops laughing, he finds his parents staring at him from across the table. His mom’s face is tender in a way he rarely sees. His dad’s look is softly inscrutable.

“Well, I think it’s time for that lunch,” Dad says, when Shane meets his eyes. He rubs his hands together and stands up. “Carbs help soak up extra feelings. I’ll make some spaghetti.”

Shane manages to corner his dad after lunch, when his mom is sat on the couch with Ilya forcing him to email a publicist. Shane takes it upon himself to rinse the dishes, and his dad stands beside him, quietly, sorting out spoons, while Shane works up to what he wants to ask.

“You’re being pretty, um, calm about this,” Shane eventually mutters, as he passes over a rinsed plate. Dad puts it into the dishwasher and hums, not quite facing Shane’s way. They’re as bad at eye contact as each other; it drives his mom crazy, never being able to get a straight look out of them.

“Well, I have to confess, I sort of had an inkling already,” Dad says. Shane thinks he’d panic if he had any of that left in him – but when he waits for the white-cold rush of dread to come, like it always does when he imagines someone finding out about him, it doesn’t quite hit.

“Really?” he asks, abandoning the next plate in the sink. “How?”

A contemplative beat of silence. Shane imagines a million embarrassing things. *Last summer, I saw the way you looked at him and thought it seemed pretty gay*, or, far worse, *I was up for a glass of water in the middle of the night and heard you moaning Ilya’s name*.

Instead, his dad says, “Well, when we visited a couple weeks ago to watch you play Pittsburgh, there was that one day, where the restaurant cancelled our reservation and we came home early? You were in the shower, but you’d left your phone on the counter. Now, I wasn’t snooping, but we have the same phone case. I tapped to see if it was mine, and there were some texts on the screen. It gave some hints, that’s all.”

Mortification floods Shane. He has never hated his plain black phone case more in his life, or the fact that when he got a new phone he forgot to turn off message previews for two weeks. He doesn’t remember what kind of texts Ilya was sending him that afternoon, but it was a lunchtime hook-up and Ilya’s Ilya – he can guess.

“Oh my god, Dad,” Shane says, going to put his head in his hands and then stopping when he remembers they’re covered in dishsoap. He grabs a cloth and scrubs them off, staring at the wall. “You weren’t meant to see – whatever that was!”

“Well, yes, I figured that out on my own, bud,” Dad says. He sounds calmly amused in a way Shane has never managed to replicate in his life. At least it’s not the reproachful sting of judgement or disapproval; Shane knows, objectively, how lucky he is. But his heart is still pounding as he sucks in a deep breath and tries not to feel like the world is ending. His dad claps him a couple times on the shoulder and says, “I won’t say it wasn’t a surprise, but I’ve had some time to adjust. And don’t worry, I didn’t tell your mom when I saw it. Figured you’d want to do that under your own steam.”

Swallowing an unpleasant flood of saliva as he clings to that small comfort, Shane says, “Thanks, Dad,” and puts his head down on the counter to try and melt into the floor. What a fucking day.

“I guess I know why you want us away in a hotel now,” Shane’s mom laughs as they’re leaving that evening, waving her phone through the air before tucking it into her purse; it’s sporting a new crack in the screen protector from where she dropped it on the floor when Shane told her. He’ll remember to buy her a new one. She turns to look at the pair of them, and then says, “Oh my god, Shane, Ilya Rozanov. I should have known. I suddenly can’t picture you dating anyone without an Art Ross.”

She's had a few glasses of champagne. Shane flushes red, glancing at Ilya, who seems extremely amused now that he's recovered from the initial panic. One of Ilya's hands slides around his waist, and he feels both his parents look at it, that point where they're connected.

Ilya says, "I think that one goes to Shane this year. Our house will need a very big trophy room."

"Shut up," Shane mutters, although – yeah, realistically, he's probably getting a couple of different accolades at the NHL awards over the weekend. It's insane to remember that's coming up. The awards show feels like such an afterthought to the cup itself that he can barely bring himself to care. "Dad, make sure she lays off the wine, okay?"

"I can't make your mother do anything she doesn't want to," his dad says, with amusement, wrapping an arm around her while she swats at him.

"Oh, lay off. Ilya drank just as much champagne as I did," she says. "Maybe I have a new favourite in this family."

She leans in, and scoops Ilya into a quick, brisk hug, the same way she always says goodbye to Shane; squeeze, cheek kiss, pat on the arm as she pulls back. After she's done it to Ilya she reaches in and does it to Shane too, while Ilya stands there, lock-limbed at Shane's side, and Shane's heart grows big, and thumps, and he absurdly feels like he might pass out.

"I love you, honey," she says into his ear, and kisses him twice before she pulls away. Then she looks between him and Ilya, blinks, laughs. "Ilya fucking Rozanov. My grandchildren are going to be the best hockey players in the universe."

"I don't think that's how that works with two men," Dad says, at the same time as Shane says, "Oh my god, Mom, we're never having *kids*."

Ilya laughs. It's a weird, unburdened kind of laugh that Shane has rarely heard out of him; almost childlike in the way he scrunches his eyes up and grins.

"Yuna, I will talk him into some cats someday," Ilya announces. "Maybe a big dog. We can get them playing hockey, I promise you."

"Hm. We'll see. Okay, bye, honey. Ilya, look at that email I'm sending you with immigration lawyers tomorrow, okay? Enjoy your night!"

His dad has to tug her out of the door, rolling his eyes fondly behind her back. When the door swings shut behind them, Shane closes his eyes, and lets out a deep puff of air.

He's dizzy. Lightheaded. This whole afternoon was some kind of insane dream.

When he opens his eyes, Ilya is stood in front of him. His eyes are soft, concerned; his curls are extra fluffy, sticking up from his head in soft clouds. He shaved his playoff beard this morning and the smooth skin of his jaw is alluring to Shane's mouth, already some faint stubble that would be a satisfying scratch to kiss.

“You are okay?” Ilya asks, his hands sliding to Shane’s waist, rucking up his t-shirt a little as he grips. His hands are warm, his grip is strong at the sides of Shane’s muscle.

Shane sags like his strings have been cut. He leans forward, and puts his face in Ilya’s neck, huffing in a deep breath of the warm-skin scent of him.

“Yeah,” he mumbles, as his hands slide around Ilya’s back. He shoves Ilya’s t-shirt up to touch his hot skin, warmed by the summer sunshine glaring through the windows and the way Ilya always seems to be overheating, so full of life it radiates out of his skin. “I’m, uh, I’m good. I mean, I’m fucking terrified, but I’m glad I told them. I needed to tell them.”

“Yes,” Ilya agrees. His mouth presses to Shane’s cheek, soft and hot. “You were very brave today. It was fucking insane how you told them, but you were brave.”

Shane hits him; Ilya grins, hits him back. They tussle for a second, then wrap their arms around each other, and their breath deflates as one.

There’s nowhere else to go, today. Nobody else to see. They’re not quite at their stretch of post-playoff freedom yet – there’ll be press, events, the parade, the awards show. But they’re close, to that stretch of summer, where the only thing they have to figure out is themselves.

“Hey,” Shane says, suddenly. “It’s your birthday next week. What do you want to do for it?”

Ilya smiles, and kisses him. His mouth is hot, tugging at Shane’s lips, pushing his tongue behind Shane’s teeth lavishly; Shane melts into him a bit, scrunching his hands in the back of Ilya’s shirt.

“Stay in bed all day and fuck you one hundred times,” Ilya says, rubbing the words against Shane’s lips. Shane laughs.

“One hundred might be a bit ambitious.”

“Okay, okay, you’re right. Just twenty-two times. For my birthday,” Ilya says, like he’s being intensely reasonable.

“You want to end your birthday with your dick falling off?”

“Mm, it would be worth it, I think.” Ilya kisses him again; deeper, this time. His hands push beneath Shane’s shirt, spreading up the muscles of his torso, rubbing his rough callouses against Shane’s nipple as he squeezes a pec.

“How about we spread the twenty-two out over the week,” Shane offers, while Ilya starts pushing him backwards, stumbling until his knees hit the soft leather arm of the couch. Shane lets himself fall, landing on his back with an *oof*, grinning. His bruises and sprains and injuries from playoffs hardly seem real, anymore; well-rested and high on adrenaline and love and everything, all of this, his family, his *boyfriend*, the word boyfriend, his Stanley Cup, his *boyfriend’s* Stanley Cup, the whole world stretches out in his mind.

“Three times a day, every day of the week? Mm.” Ilya acts considering as he leans down over Shane, straddling his thick waist. Ilya rubs himself over his shorts, presenting the bulge of his

cock through the fabric. “Yes, I think I can manage this.”

Shane laughs, shoving hard at Ilya’s side. It sends Ilya tumbling off him onto the floor, where he makes a fake-aghast face, pointing up at Shane accusingly. “Asshole!” he says. “I am still injured, you are trying to take me out for the rest of the summer too?”

“I’m practically more injured than you,” Shane objects, climbing off the sofa to land hard on Ilya’s body. He digs his knees into Ilya’s waist and grabs his hands, forcing them down into the ground. Ilya lets him for only a second before he starts pushing back, bucking with his body, trying to shove Shane over to the floor.

Shane laughs and Ilya grins and they play like that for a minute, wrestling as hard as their bruised and battered bodies will let them. They’re red-faced and panting by the time Ilya finally says, “Okay, okay, fucking truce, Hollander!” and goes limp in his grip.

Grinning and breathless, Shane looks down at him for a second, just watching. Ilya’s happy face. It might be the most beautiful sight in the world. His smile creases his cheeks, stretches his moles, makes his eyes squint and sparkle. His chest is heaving the way it is after a game, or hard sex; the evidence of exertion that Shane so badly loves to bring out of him. He’s so strong and big and he’s laying there in the grip of Shane’s thighs, taking Shane’s heavy weight, like Shane’s never too much for him.

“Hey, Ilya?” Shane says. “I love you.”

“Oh, you love me, now?” Ilya asks. He’s still teasy. Happy. He stretches his limbs out under Shane’s body. “Get in line, Hollander, I have loved you first. I loved you for ages, you were so slow to catch up.”

“Not everything is a fucking competition, oh my god,” Shane laughs, but the words roll into him, nestle warm in his chest.

“Says the one who just pushed me on the ground while I have broken shoulder! I see how it is, only a good competition when *you* win, huh?”

“Your shoulder isn’t broken,” Shane says, but he still rubs an apologetic hand over it, feeling the scratchy KT tape beneath Ilya’s shirt. Ilya props himself on his elbows, raising up a little to stare into Shane’s eyes. “Sorry if I hurt you,” Shane says, after a long, quiet second.

The air feels still around them. Warm sun from the windows hitting them, the smell of champagne still in the air, on Ilya’s lips.

“I will accept your apology via blowjob,” Ilya says, seriously.

Shane would like to tease him some more, but he’s also really, really interested in having his mouth on Ilya’s dick. It’s maybe a solution that works out for both of them. He wants Ilya to fuck him, too. He wants to replay the cup-winning game on the big TV and fuck in front of it. He wants to drink champagne out of Ilya’s mouth. He wants to meet up with the rest of the team and celebrate more and live in the reality of their grandest achievement, his lifelong dream. He wants him and Ilya to get that dinner with Hayden, maybe even Marley, being

open about themselves, testing how *they*, together, work in a place like a hockey team. He wants to hang out with Svetlana again and try to be less jealous. Maybe leave one or two hickeys on Ilya's golden skin for her to see. He wants their summer in Canada, visiting his parents, healing and bulking and feeling their bodies get plump with muscle again and fucking in the sunlight and joining the same training group and doing this all next year, all over again.

They can start with the blowjob, for now. For once in Shane's life, he really feels something rare and precious to be true – that they've got time. Together, they've got time for all of it.

Chapter End Notes

the end.

if you want to find more about my writing, check out my [tumblr](#) (or if u really love me follow my [writing insta](#))

also, subscribe to the series to see when i post the sequel, which will deal with how coming out goes in this universe. before then i might post a oneshot or two (dinner with marley, anyone?) so stay tuned!

i love you all thank you goodbye

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