

Aftershock

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/75457596) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/75457596>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid , Heated Rivalry_(TV)
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander
Additional Tags:	Angst , Hurt/Comfort , Angst with a Happy Ending , Ilya Rozanov Needs A Hug , Injury , Guilt , Hurt Shane Hollander , Fluff and Angst , Hospitals , and another unexpected emergency situation , Whump
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2025-12-08 Completed: 2026-01-10 Words: 11,446 Chapters: 5/5

Aftershock

by [Maarlix](#)

Summary

They were only supposed to be hooking up. That's what it was supposed to be. They were never supposed to become anything real.

Falling in love with Shane Hollander had never been part of the plan.

So he ends it.

Months later, during a heated game, one explosive check from Ilya sends Shane crashing to the ice and fighting for his life. As Shane lies on the edge of survival, Ilya is swallowed by guilt, terror, and the crushing realization that he walked away from the one person he can't imagine losing, and that he might be too late to make it right.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

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Ilya ends things with Hollander the only way he knows how.

Badly.

He sits alone in the dark of his home, phone glowing blue against his palm, and tells himself, once again, that he has no choice.

They were going to get caught. Someone would notice. Someone *always* notices eventually. And when that happened, it wouldn't just be a scandal. It would be their careers ending, reputations torched, their entire futures collapsing in one spectacular, predictable implosion.

They were only supposed to be hooking up. That's what it was supposed to be. Just sex. Casual. Disposable.

They were never supposed to become anything real.

Ilya still isn't sure of when his heart betrayed him. But somewhere over the years, somewhere between stolen hotel rooms and whispered jabs that turned soft in the dark, something changed. Something grew.

Something he was never supposed to feel.

And loving Shane Hollander had never been part of the plan.

And so he ends it.

Not in person. He's not brave enough for that. If he looked into Hollander's face, he'd fold in seconds. He'd take it all back with a kiss.

He does it with a text. One sentence. With the practised coldness of the asshole the world expects him to be.

He tells himself he's doing the smart thing. The responsible thing. The necessary thing.

He tells himself a lot of lies.

He presses send before he can stop himself, and immediately hates himself in a way he didn't know he still could.

The first message from Hollander arrives three minutes later.

What?

Ilya, what's going on?

Ilya stares at it until the screen goes black. He puts the phone face-down, walks away, comes back.

Then the voicemails start. One, then two, then five. He doesn't listen to a single one.

Another text lights up the screen.

Ilya? Are you okay?

Then another.

Did I do something? Talk to me. Please. Just tell me what's happening.

That one hits hardest. All those years, and Shane thinks he did something wrong.

Of course he does. Shane Hollander always looks for the reason, the solution, the way to fix things. But Ilya can't explain that he is the reason everything has to end, not without betraying the one thing he can't ever admit out loud. That he's ending this because he loves him too much to ruin him.

So he sends one last lie. The worst one. The cruellest one.

Leave me alone, Hollander. We are nothing.

He throws his phone across the room the instant the message goes through, as if that could keep the words from reaching the man they'll hurt most.

He waits for the inevitable explosion. The *fuck you asshole*, the indignant voice message that he will force himself not to hear.

But nothing comes.

No reply. No anger. No venom.

Just silence.

And now, weeks later, the consequences show up everywhere he can't avoid, his game collapsing into something unrecognizable.

He once mocked Scott Hunter for his scoring drought. Now the universe collects its debt.

His first ever offensive slump. A humiliating stretch of nothingness that becomes its own kind of punishment. Every puck feels like it's dipped in lead. Every shot rattles off the post, or straight into the goalie's glove. His body feels heavy, his instincts dulled.

And Hollander?

Hollander plays better than ever.

Focused, ruthless, unstoppable. Like fury sharpened into perfect athletic efficiency, dominating like he was born to do it.

He racks up goals at a pace Ilya has never seen from him. Analysts can't shut up about him. Highlight reels might as well just be renamed the Shane Hollander Hour.

His name is at the top of every leaderboard, and the gap between him and the rest of the NHL grows more impossible every night. The season is almost over and the Hart trophy might as well already have his name carved into it, along with the Rocket Richard and the Art Ross. They'll build a shrine in Montreal if he keeps it up.

The last time their teams faced off, Ilya's team had been thoroughly dismantled. Hollander had torn through them with a hat trick and two assists, skating circles around everyone, like he was playing on easy mode.

The loss still stings the entire Boston roster, but the part that sits in Ilya's chest, heavy and bitter, is the hip check.

A perfect, clean, technically flawless hip check.

From *Shane fucking Hollander*, of all people.

Ilya hadn't seen it coming.

One moment he was skating away with the puck, then Hollander appeared out of nowhere, angled his body just right, and Ilya went airborne, spinning helplessly, limbs flailing, flipping over Hollander's back before slamming onto the ice with a thud that made the Montreal arena erupt into thunderous applause.

It was a legal but now rare move, completely unexpected from a player known for elegance and precision, not brute physicality. The old-fashioned and always spectacular check had been executed with the kind of textbook perfection only Hollander possessed. One commentator called it the "best hip check of the last decade," as if he should have won an award for sending Ilya flying.

Hollander hadn't even glanced back at him afterwards. He just skated away with the puck, focused, efficient, like Ilya was a hurdle he'd simply cleared on the way to his third goal of the evening.

Everyone knows that Canada's Captain Perfection isn't a dirty player, so Ilya hadn't been injured. Unlike his pride.

The internet, hungry and endlessly creative, had a field day with the footage. Dramatic slow-mo with opera music. Loops with slapstick music and a little squeaking toy sound when he lands. Memes with Ilya as a ragdoll shot into the sky.

Ilya tells himself he doesn't care.

He's lying again.

Tonight, Boston hopes to repay the humiliation.

The Bears lean into their reputation as a physical team, playing gritty, bruising hockey from the first shift, but it barely matters. Montreal still leads by two goals halfway through the third period.

Both goals belong to Hollander. Because of course they do.

Ilya hits the post again, the sound metallic and taunting. Like the universe is mocking him.

Meanwhile, Hollander is everywhere, gliding across the ice like he's made of something weightless and unstoppable. Cutting plays apart. Winning every puck battle. Fighting in corners, weaving through traffic. Reading plays before they happen.

He's not even looking at Ilya except with that razor-sharp intensity, as if Ilya is just another jersey number on the ice, nothing more than an obstacle in his way. As if the man who once kissed him breathless in the shadows now cannot see him at all unless he's holding the puck.

Ilya tries to catch his eye anyway, some masochistic instinct pulling him in. It's like looking into the eyes of a man forged out of pure competition. Not cold, not angry. Just absorbed in the game. Like years of history, gentle touches and stolen nights never happened.

And somehow, that is so much worse.

The rematch is almost over, and his team is choking. Still down by two with six minutes left. Montreal's killing the clock, halting every attempt at offence, and Boston's at real risk of being shut out.

Hollander gathers the puck along the boards in Boston's zone, turning his body to line up a pass.

Ilya sees him move and instinct takes over. He launches forward, accelerating into the kind of hit he's good at. Heavy, borderline, but still clean enough.

His shoulder slams into Hollander with punishing force, driving him hard into the boards. The impact reverberates up Ilya's arm and Hollander lets out a short, choked grunt.

Satisfaction flickers through Ilya like a spark.

The puck skitters free and Ilya sweeps it away to a teammate, already turning for the next play.

And then, from the corner of his eye, he sees it.

Hollander is on one knee, stumbling upright, but something is wrong. His balance lags a half-second behind his body. His skates scrape awkwardly. Instead of regaining momentum, he wavers, like a puppet with its strings suddenly cut.

Then he collapses.

The sound his helmet makes hitting the ice is sharp and final and wrong.

The entire arena inhales.

Ilya's world shatters in one instant.

There's a low horrified buzz rising from the crowd.

A referee reaches him first. A Montreal player drops to his knees beside him, rolling him gently onto his back. Shane's eyes are open but unseeing. Empty in a way that shakes Ilya to his core.

Then people are running. Trainers, both teams' medical staff, more players, flooding the ice faster than Ilya can process. Ilya's own teammates block his path when he tries to skate closer. He barely hears them calling his name.

Someone shouts for room. Another calls for equipment. They cut Shane's jersey and pads with swift efficiency. Voices bark orders. Hands press into Hollander's sternum, starting chest compressions. His body jolts under the force, the movement frighteningly mechanical.

Another medic preps the AED. Electrodes are placed on Hollander's bare chest. A warning shout. Then Shane's body jerks violently as the shock tears through him, forcing his heart to remember how to beat.

Ilya's vision blurs. Black spots spark at the edges.

A mask sealed over Hollander's face, rescuers forcing air into lungs that will not rise on their own.

Another round of compressions.

Another shock.

A cervical collar fitted around his neck.

Hollander lifted onto a spinal board. Straps tightened.

Then onto a gurney.

The man he tried so hard not to love being taken away, disappearing down the tunnel.

Ilya's knees nearly buckle.

He can't get air in.

Because if Shane dies.

If Shane dies because of *him*.

Ilya doesn't know what he will do.

He doesn't know how he will survive it.

Chapter End Notes

If you don't follow hockey and/or don't know what a hip check is, I suggest you go watch some on YouTube. They are still legal in the NHL but very rare nowadays, in part because they are difficult to execute properly and not taught at minor levels anymore. Not a move you would imagine Shane Hollander knowing and using.

Chapter 2

Later, the team psychologist talks to him. Or at least tries to.

She takes him to one of the auxiliary rooms beside the rink, somewhere quiet, where she thinks he might be able to breathe. Or talk. But Ilya sits stiffly, hands clasped so tightly his knuckles blanch, gaze pinned to a spot on the floor.

She speaks gently, carefully choosing her words, but Ilya barely hears her. The world around him feels muffled, like he's underwater. He answers her questions with stiff nods, or a vague shake of his head, or, more often, nothing at all. She tells him his body is reacting to trauma, suggests meeting the team doctor, that what he's experiencing might be nervous shock.

He doesn't bother responding. The silence is refusal enough.

She assures him the team will keep him updated on Hollander's condition. Then she warns him, firmly this time, not to rewatch the incident and to stay away from the internet, to protect himself from the wave of speculation and sensationalism already forming online.

Ilya gives another mute shake of the head, but this time it's just to get her to stop talking.

The moment he gets home, he opens his laptop. He types Hollander's name. Before he even finishes, the search bar fills it in for him

It's everywhere.

Every feed, every headline, every platform has already dissected the moment his shoulder collided with Hollander's chest.

Clips, slowed down, magnified, analyzed from every possible angle. Technical analyses. Amateur breakdowns. He scrolls, nauseated by the sheer number of people in the arena who held up their cellphones while Shane's life stopped in front of them, as if it were some kind of spectacle to be shared.

He sees the faces of Hollander's teammates. Hayden Pike with tears streaming down his cheeks, another player shaking as he presses his hand to his mouth. Players from both teams taking a knee on the ice, helmets off and heads bowed. Some praying. Some crying openly. All of them forming a ring of stunned, helpless solidarity while paramedics worked.

And then there's him.

Standing upright, helmet still on, staring like an idiot, eyes wide and mouth slightly open. Frozen. Motionless. Useless.

He sees Marlow and St-Simon grab his arms and guide him off the ice. He doesn't remember that happening. He doesn't remember leaving at all.

Maybe that psychologist was onto something. Maybe something in him cracked.

But even with all this coverage, for all the obsessive cycling of footage, he finds almost no real news about Hollander's current state. Just speculation. Repetition. The same three sentences regurgitated by every outlet. They know he's in critical condition. They know his parents were photographed entering the hospital through a side door, looking shattered.

Beyond that? Nothing.

Medical analysts fill the uncertainty with their own theories. Most of them land on the same explanation.

Commotio cordis.

A perfect storm of timing and force. A shoulder hitting a chest at the precise microsecond capable of disturbing a heart's rhythm. Sometimes, they say, the heart restarts on its own. But Hollander's didn't. Only the medical team's immediate response saved Hollander from dying on the ice.

Nobody seems to blame Ilya for the hit. Not the commentators. Not the league. Not the physicians being interviewed on late-night panels. They call it a rare, unforeseeable incident. A one-in-a-million event. A tragic accident.

But the faceless swarm online disagrees, and for the first time in his life, he agrees with them.

He watches more clips. He watches himself collide with Hollander. Watches the exact moment Shane's body goes limp, eyes unfocused, light gone. It feels like torture he deserves. A punishment he should endure.

The league suspends him pending investigation. Management assures him it's procedural, that the hit was legal and clean. But because his and Hollander's rivalry has been splashed across every sports broadcast for years, and because of Hollander's humiliating hip check on him during their last game, the league wants to eliminate any suspicion of retaliation.

It doesn't matter. None of it matters.

He wouldn't have been able to play anyway. He barely sleeps. When he does, he wakes up choking on the image of Hollander falling. He can't eat more than a few bites of anything.

The team releases a statement. Carefully chosen words about unity, support, thoughts and prayers, gratitude to the medical staff. Empty words meant to comfort the public, meant to reassure sponsors, meant to manage optics.

But the truth lives only in the hollow pit of Ilya's chest.

Shane might still be clinging to life, but Ilya ended it. He ended it with his own hands, his own body, with the irreversible choice made in a split second.

And no amount of experts or statements or reassurances will ever change that.

It has been four days, and Ilya cannot stand the waiting anymore.

The hospital looks the same as every other hospital Ilya has ever walked into, with its bland walls, fluorescent lights, and sterile smell. Ilya pulls his hood lower, adjusts the cap's brim until it shadows half his face, and tugs the surgical mask higher over his nose.

It shouldn't be this simple to slip inside unnoticed, but no one looks closely. This is an overworked medical centre, where exhausted staff barely glance up at the people drifting through the halls.

Still, he knows it's a stupid idea. He might still get recognized. Might get thrown out like he deserves. He doesn't belong here, at least not as someone that should be allowed to stand anywhere near Shane Hollander's bed.

Montreal had flown to their next game without their captain. They had played a beautiful, inspired game. Ilya read the recap twice, imagining the way Hollander would've smiled at that, proud of them even from far away.

He times his arrival carefully, aiming for the end of visiting hours. He catches sight of Hollander's parents as they leave his room, raincoats pulled on, heading for the elevators. They don't notice him at all.

Hollander's mother's hand is wrapped around her husband's arm, steadying him even though she looks like she might collapse herself. Hollander's father wipes at his cheek with the back of his hand.

Ilya watches them walk away and wonders if he's too late. If something has changed. The fact that Hollander hasn't been transferred back to Canada yet speaks volumes about how fragile, how unstable, his condition must be.

Dread coils in his stomach as he reaches the door. He pauses, palm hovering over the door handle, unsure of what he'll see. Unsure of whether he can bear it.

He forces himself to enter.

The room is dim, the overhead lights turned low. Machines populate the corners. A heart monitor flickers nearby. The beeps are steady, evidence that Hollander's heart is still doing its job.

And there he is.

Shane Hollander, the unstoppable force on the ice, the player who moves like gravity doesn't apply to him, lies pale on the hospital bed. Bruising shadows curl beneath his eyes, a faint scrape on his cheekbone from the fall. Electrodes cling to his chest. Tubes and wires snake

across the bed, disappearing beneath the blanket pulled up to his chest. A nasal cannula rests beneath his nose, delivering oxygen into lungs that should be drawing in air effortlessly.

At least he's breathing on his own now.

But everything else about him is frighteningly motionless.

The sturdy shoulders that once drove through players much larger now look diminished. His arms, usually so sure and controlled, lie limp at his sides, fingers curled in on themselves.

He closes the door behind him with a soft click, shutting out the hallway, shutting out the world. It's just them now. Like so many moments before. Except this one is suffocating, and entirely wrong.

Ilya stays near the foot of the bed, staring at the man he hurt. He doesn't trust himself to go any closer.

He doesn't know if Hollander will wake up. He doesn't know if the person inside him survived the seconds his heart stopped.

Ilya was the one who ended things, but Shane is the one leaving. In the worst, cruellest way.

"Hey, Hollander." His own voice sounds strange to his ears. "It's me."

No reaction, of course. Not even a twitch.

"You probably don't want me here."

A hollow laugh escapes him, humourless. "Well, I don't want *you* here either."

"I didn't want to h—"

He cuts himself off. He can't say *hurt*. Because somewhere deep in his chest, he knows he did want Hollander to hurt. Not like this. Never like this. But just a little. Just enough to feel even a fraction of the pain Ilya was drowning in.

"I didn't want to injure you," he says instead.

He studies Hollander's face. It's too still.

He should be full of life. Intense, determined, annoyingly perfect. He should be skating like the ice was made for him alone, not lying here like some fragile thing that could break if Ilya breathes too hard.

The sight of this force of nature lying quiet and still in a hospital bed feels like a crime against nature, like the universe got something horribly wrong.

The thought comes unbidden. What would have happened if he had told Hollander how he really felt? If he had chosen honesty over fear?

He might have walked away, ending things anyway, leaving Ilya heartbroken and humiliated. But he'd be alive on his feet. Ilya is sure of that.

He reaches for Hollander's chart, desperate for more than scraps of information. The writing is messy, half-coded medical jargon he barely understands. The only thing he catches is confirmation of what the medical experts in the media guessed.

Commotio cordis. Wrong place, wrong time, wrong millisecond. Confirmation that the impossible happened because of him.

He sets the chart back and pulls a chair forward. The metal legs scrape softly against the floor. He sinks into it, leaning forward, staring at Hollander like he can will him back. Like if he watches long enough, he will shift, wake up, and glare at him for being annoying.

"Wake up, Hollander."

Silence.

"You are being even more boring than usual."

His vision blurs. He wipes at his eye with the heel of his hand, quickly, as if trying to erase the evidence before it forms.

He wants to brush the hair from Shane's forehead. Wants to touch him, even just for a second, to prove he's warm and alive beneath all these wires. But he doesn't move. He forfeited that right the moment he hit send on that text. The moment he made Shane believe he did not care.

If Hollander was awake, he'd probably be furious at him. For the way he ended things. For the hit that stopped his heart. Maybe even for Ilya showing up now.

Ilya wants to see that anger. Almost as much as he wants to see him smile at him again, that sharp spark in his eyes. Almost as much as he wants to see the expression Shane made when he was overwhelmed with pleasure, wiping all his inhibitions and leaving him undone.

"You are Shane fucking Hollander. You are too strong for this." He wants to yell, but he only chokes on the words. "You do not get to die."

The room stays quiet, only the regular beeping of the heart monitor breaking the silence.

He missed Shane. More than he meant to. More than he can admit to himself.

He missed the sound of his voice, his smile. The way he frowned when Ilya chirped him during face-offs. The way he whispered his name. The way he smelled afterwards.

He missed him long before any of this happened.

And now Shane might never open his eyes again.

Ilya folds forward in the chair, elbows braced on his knees, hands pressing hard against his temples. He stares at the scuffed linoleum floor. If he lifts his eyes again, if he looks back at Shane, something in him might finally give way.

He stays like that, spine bowed, shoulders locked tight. There is a pressure building behind his ribs and in his throat, a wave of feeling he refuses to let out. He locks it down, clamps it tight, the way he always has. He cannot unravel. Not now. Not ever.

Then the quiet breaks.

At first it's just a swell of sound beyond the door. Voices raised, hurried footsteps, too many. Someone shouts something he can't make out through the door. Ilya's head snaps up, pulse spiking.

His first instinct is to leave. To slip out unnoticed while he still can. He has overstayed whatever welcome he had here. If someone opens that door and sees him here, hunched at Hollander's bedside, it won't end quietly. He imagines security coming in, dragging him away, Shane's parents' faces, stricken and furious.

He shifts his feet under the chair, ready to stand.

The fire alarm explodes overhead.

A shrill, piercing blare fills the room, so loud his ears ring.

Ilya jerks fully upright, heart hammering.

Fire? Evacuation? Or just a false alarm?

He doesn't know. He doesn't know what he's supposed to do. He looks at the equipment around Shane, the wires, the monitor still beeping steadily.

What is the protocol? Are they going to move him? Can they even move him? Should *he* be doing something?

The alarm keeps screaming.

Hollander doesn't move.

Ilya steps closer to the bed and reaches out, his hand hovering just above Shane's shoulder before he lets himself make contact. His touch is hesitant, afraid of doing even more damage.

"Hollander," he says, loud enough to be heard above the alarm. "Now would be very good time to wake up."

Nothing.

The noise outside intensifies. He hears panicked screams. Feet pound down the corridor. Someone yells something he can't quite make out over the racket.

He moves to the door and cracks it open just enough to look out.

The corridor is chaos.

People are running. Visitors clutching coats and bags, faces tight with fear, one man dragging an IV pole. A nurse rushes past, eyes wide in fear as she pushes a wheelchair forward. Someone stumbles. Someone else shouts for them to keep moving. Red emergency lights strobe over everything, turning the scene nightmarish.

This is not a drill.

Ilya closes the door quickly, heart in his throat, and turns back to Shane.

Shane, who hasn't moved. Who lies there, silent and vulnerable, tethered to machines that may or may not keep him alive if everything goes wrong.

Fuck.

Chapter 3

Ilya moves before he can think himself out of it.

Instinct decides for him, the same way it does on the ice when hesitation means defeat. He reaches for the flannel blanket and pulls it back from Shane's body, exposing the tangle of wires and tubing that now look like obstacles instead of safeguards.

His hands shake as he works, but they work fast. He unhooks the heart monitor leads first, silencing the steady beeping that had been his only comfort instants before. He removes the nasal cannula next, easing it from beneath Shane's nose with careful hands and laying it aside.

The IV stops him.

He stares at the IV catheter in Shane's hand, frustration spiking. He does not know how to remove it properly and he cannot afford to learn right now. After a heartbeat of indecision, he disconnects the tubing instead, fingers fumbling, praying the worst this causes is inconvenience and not something catastrophic. *Just this once*, he begs silently. *Let me not make it worse.*

He slides one arm under Shane's shoulders, the other beneath his knees, and lifts.

Shane weighs more than he expects. Not because he actually does, but because there is no resistance in him. Dead weight, his mind supplies cruelly. Ilya tightens his grip and adjusts, pulling Shane closer to his chest, shifting until he can brace him properly. He settles Shane's head against his own shoulder, careful with his neck, careful with everything.

For a scary second, Shane's head lolls, and Ilya freezes. Then he adjusts again, slowly, gently, until Shane is supported. He presses his cheek briefly to Shane's hair, grounding himself in the familiar sensation.

"Okay," he says, quietly. "I got you."

The hallway outside is eerily empty now. The evacuation has already swept most people away, leaving a vacuum of empty corridors and fluorescent lights. The alarm still wails, but it feels distant.

Ilya walks fast, but not fast enough to jostle Shane. Every step he takes is deliberate. He keeps his back straight and his arms locked, adjusting his hold whenever he feels Shane's weight shifting.

He spots an exit sign ahead, directing towards the stairs. He knows he shouldn't use the elevators during an alarm. But the thought of taking stairs with Shane unconscious in his arms makes his stomach clench. One misstep. One stumble.

Before he can decide, voices rise from around the corner just ahead.

Loud. Violent. Wrong.

“Stay the fuck down! If you do as we say, nothing bad will happen.”

Ilya stops cold. He silently presses himself flat against the wall and leans around the corner, just enough to look.

The ICU’s central hub opens in front of him. The nurse’s station sits in the center, overturned chairs scattered around it. People lie face down on the floor, hands laced behind their heads. Men with guns stand over them, weapons held casually but deliberately, eyes constantly moving. One of them kicks a chair aside with his boot.

Ilya pulls back instantly.

It is not a fire.

It is a hostage situation.

Understanding crashes over him all at once. The alarm was never meant to evacuate everyone. It was meant to thin the crowd. To make this easier.

He backs away silently, every step measured, then turns and moves faster, scanning desperately for another exit. He spots the glow of another exit sign just as heavy footsteps sound ahead.

Too close.

He ducks through the nearest door and pulls it shut behind him, easing it closed inch by inch until it clicks softly into place. He stands frozen for a heartbeat, holding Shane and listening.

Voices pass outside. Boots thud. Then they move on.

His heart is pounding so hard he is sure it will give them away.

The space is small and windowless. A storage room, little more than a closet. Shelving units line the walls, stacked with sanitizer, gloves, bedpans, boxes of supplies. The air smells faintly of bleach and dust.

Ilya crosses the room and lowers Shane carefully into the far corner, shielded from the door by a shelving unit. He carefully leans Shane back against the wall, adjusting him until he is stable, until his head is supported and his body will not tip sideways.

“Stay with me,” he uselessly whispers, as if Shane could hear him. “I will be right back.”

He moves back to the door and locks it properly. He then drags a metal cart in front of it, followed by a stack of heavy boxes, wincing at every scrape of sound. He works slowly, cautiously, until the door is barricaded as well as he can manage.

Only then does he pull out his phone.

He presses the button.

Nothing.

Again. Harder.

The screen stays black.

“No, no... Fuck!” he breathes, pressing it again. And again. Dead. He must have drained it earlier. He doesn’t know when.

He grips the phone tight, the urge to throw it is strong, but he forces himself to stop. Noise would be worse. Noise would get them found.

Instead, he sinks down onto the floor opposite Shane, his back against a shelving unit. His legs fold in on themselves, knees drawn up. He stares at Shane’s slack face, at the slow rise and fall of his chest, and forces himself to breathe in time with it.

In the silence, with danger just outside, the absurdity of it hits him. Of all the ways this could have gone.

He huffs out a breath that almost becomes a laugh. “You know, Hollander,” he murmurs, glancing around the cramped storage space, “this is probably the most in-the-closet we have ever been.”

With Hollander unable to tell him to fuck off like he usually would, the joke falls flat.

Ilya keeps his eyes on him and waits.

Time stretches. Minutes feel like hours. His legs cramp, his back is stiff against the shelving, but he does not move. His phone is still dead in his pocket, a useless weight, and he curses himself for not charging it during those long nights of pacing his apartment, scrolling through updates he already knew by heart, waiting for news that never came.

Outside the storage room, the fire alarm cuts off abruptly.

The sudden silence is almost worse. He does not know if it means the danger has passed or if something has gone terribly wrong. He holds still, listening, but there is nothing. No shouting. No footsteps. Just the hum of the building and the sound of Shane’s breathing.

“You have slept long enough, Hollander,” he murmurs.

Shane’s eyes stay closed. Ilya did not expect otherwise.

He notices Shane’s lips then. Too pale. Almost bloodless.

A spike of panic runs through him. His mind leaps immediately to the missing nasal cannula, to the extra supply of oxygen he removed with own two hands.

He scrambles across the floor and settles beside Shane. He reaches for his wrist and presses his fingers lightly against the skin until he finds the pulse. It is still there. Strong. Consistent. He counts the beats, grounding himself in the steady rhythm.

But Shane's skin is cold. Colder than it should be. The hospital's air conditioning is strong, and the paper thin hospital gown he wears does nothing to protect him. Ilya curses himself for not noticing earlier.

He peels off his hoodie and drapes it over Shane cautiously, lifting him just enough to slide the fabric beneath his shoulders, making sure his head stays supported. It is a zip-up, thankfully. He gently guides Shane's arms through the sleeves, mindful of the catheter on his hand, and pulls the zipper up slowly.

"I do not like putting *more* clothes on you, Hollander," he mutters. "It sucks."

The hoodie hangs loose on Shane, sleeves bunching at his wrists. Ilya pulls the hood up, tucking it over Shane's head, framing his messy black hair.

His gaze drops lower.

Shane's feet are bare. That will not do at all.

He removes his own socks and slides them onto Shane's cold feet. The socks are still warm. They should help.

With the hood up and his body bundled like this, Shane almost looks normal. Cozy. Comfortable. Like he could be sleeping after a long day. Like he might open his eyes any second and smile at Ilya.

Ilya lets himself believe it for one small, selfish minute.

He wishes he could press his mouth to Shane's and kiss him awake like in some stupid fairy tale. But he does not. It would not be right. Not when Shane cannot kiss back. Or call him an asshole and shove him away.

Ilya listens for sounds beyond the door. There is still nothing.

After a while, he reaches for Shane's fingers, limp in his grasp. They are still too cold. Ilya's own skin is warm, even stripped down to his tank top.

"You are Canadian, man," he whispers. "You should not get so cold."

He shifts closer, closing the distance completely.

"Come. I will warm you up."

He gathers Shane into his arms carefully, drawing him up and into his lap. Shane's body yields without resistance, boneless and pliant in a way that makes Ilya's chest ache. His head comes to rest low against Ilya's shoulder, his arms folded uselessly into his own lap.

“You better not pee on me, Hollander,” Ilya warns softly, the teasing jab instinctive, the way it always surfaced whenever he feels too exposed.

He can almost hear the response. Hollander calling him an asshole, irritated and alive.

Shane feels so much smaller like this. Diminished. Nothing like the powerful athlete who usually takes up so much space on the ice and in Ilya’s heart. He doesn’t even smell like himself right now. Just antiseptic and medicine and something sterile and wrong.

Ilya has wanted this for months. To have Shane in his arms again. To hold him close.

But not like this.

The door rattles suddenly, snapping him to attention. The door’s handle is rattling.

Ilya’s entire body tenses. He tightens his hold instinctively, curling around Shane, his body angling to shield him. Whoever is on the other side tests the handle once, then even harder a second time.

Then footsteps retreat.

Ilya stays frozen for a long moment before his breathing starts again. His heart still slams violently against his ribs. He forces himself to breathe. In through his nose. Out through his mouth.

He lifts one hand and cups Shane’s cheek, thumb brushing softly against the smooth skin.

“We are okay,” he whispers. “We are fine.”

Shane’s cheek is still soft beneath his palm, still warm compared to the rest of him. Ilya’s own jaw is covered with unshaven stubble, roughened by days of neglect.

He stays like that, thumb tracing slow, absent circles along Shane’s cheek. He commits every detail to memory. The curve of his cheekbone. The scatter of freckles across his nose. The familiar shape of his mouth, slack with sleep. His gaze drifts upward to Shane’s lashes, long and dark, resting against his skin. Covering eyes he aches to see open again.

It is not enough.

It is never enough.

Ilya leans forward until his forehead rests against the top of Shane’s head, his breath stuttering as it leaves him.

“I love you,” he whispers. The words spill out, unstoppable. “I love you so fucking much.”

The words crack something open inside him. He should have said them before. He should have said them a hundred times, in a hundred careless moments. He had so many chances. But he chose silence. He chose distance. He chose to protect himself instead of risking everything. And now the cost of that choice feels unbearable.

Now he has lost the only person he cannot live without.

More than lost. He killed him. He stopped Shane's heart with his own body, with a hit that will replay in his head forever. The knowledge gnaws at him from the inside. It's killing Ilya too.

He pulls Shane closer, pressing him against his own heart as if he could anchor him here, holding him like he might slip away if he loosens his grip. His lungs refuse to draw in air properly. His every breath comes in shallow.

No matter what happens next, whether Shane ever wakes up or his eyes stay forever closed, this is the last time. The last time he gets to hold him like this, warm and close, even when it feels like a violation to cling to him when Shane cannot choose it.

Pressure builds in Ilya's chest, rising fast until it becomes unbearable. He tries to swallow it down, to stay quiet, to stay composed, but the sound breaks free anyway. A sob tears out of him, ugly and broken. Then another. His body curls around Shane instinctively as the choking sobs violently shake him, and Shane's limp form moves with him, unresisting.

Tears spill down Ilya's face unchecked. He cries until the edges of his vision blur, until his head spins, until he forgets how to breathe at all, dragging in air in ragged gulps.

Then he feels it.

Soft pressure around his waist.

Fingers tightening weakly in the fabric of his tank top.

A face nuzzling into his chest, clumsy and uncoordinated.

It cannot be.

Ilya stills completely, his breath hitching. He leans back just enough to look, but Shane's head follows the movement and remains pressed against him, hidden by the hood.

With trembling hands, Ilya carefully shifts him, the hood still shadowing most of his face. He reaches up and peels it back.

Shane's eyes are open.

Chapter 4

Shane's eyes are heavy-lidded and unfocused, cloudy with exhaustion and medication and Ilya doesn't know what else. But they are open.

"Shane?" Ilya breathes.

Shane blinks slowly. His gaze drifts upward, unfixed. It slides past Ilya's face as if he is not seeing him, as if he's not really there, as if Ilya is only another shape in the room. Panic flares in his chest.

Ilya cups Shane's cheek and chin, grounding him, while his other arm tightens instinctively around Shane's back to keep him steady.

"Hey," he says softly. "Look at me."

Shane's eyes shift again, sluggishly searching. This time, they find Ilya. They settle on him, dark and glassy.

"Say something, Hollander," Ilya pleads quietly. "Speak."

Shane's mouth moves. The effort is visible. When the sound finally comes, it is barely audible, rough and thin.

"...bossy."

The small word feels like a miracle.

Relief crashes through Ilya, so intense it almost knocks the breath from his lungs. He pulls Shane closer, burying his face in his hair, pressing kisses there, over and over, without thinking, without restraint.

Shane lifts a hand, clumsy and slow. His fingers brush Ilya's cheek, wiping away the tears he did not realize had formed there. The movement is awkward, limited by weakness and the IV catheter still taped to the back of his hand.

"Don't cry," Shane says. It's little more than a rasp.

Another sob escapes Ilya, but this one does not cut as deep. It feels lighter, threaded with relief instead of despair.

"What's wrong?" Shane asks quietly.

Ilya knows he is not asking about himself here.

"It is okay," Ilya murmurs, trying to steady his voice, smoothing a hand over Shane's hair. "Is better now."

Shane's eyes drift around the room, taking in the dim space without comment. He does not ask why they are here. He does not react to the cold tile floor or the metal shelves or the borrowed clothes wrapped around him. He does not question why he is cradled in Ilya's lap like this.

"You want to know where we are, yes?" Ilya offers anyway, brushing his thumb gently along Shane's freckles.

Shane hums softly. His eyes close again, his head settling more comfortably against Ilya's chest, as if his body understands safety even if his mind lags behind.

"No," he says after a moment. His voice is drowsy and oddly content. Like he is exactly where he wants to be.

Relief and fear knot together inside Ilya. He tips Shane's chin up just enough to see his face.

"Eyes open, Hollander."

Shane's lashes flutter, then his eyes blink open again. Ilya wishes he could drown in the brown of them. Anchor himself there and forget everything else.

"How do you feel?" Ilya asks.

"Okay," Shane answers after a beat.

Ilya tightens his hold just a little, his voice gentle but insistent. "Hollander..."

Shane's brow furrows as he searches for the right words. "Confused, I guess?"

Of course he is.

"I meant," Ilya clarifies, choosing his words carefully, "are you in any pain?"

Shane considers it, brow creasing. "No... I don't... No."

"Okay." Ilya nods, more to himself than to Shane. It's probably the best answer he is going to get right now.

They sit in silence for a moment. Shane's body doesn't feel cold against his anymore.

"Ilya?" Shane says after a while.

"Yes." Ilya answers instantly.

"What happened?"

Ilya closes his eyes for a brief second, then opens them again.

"You remember the game?"

"Yeah..."

“I hit you,” he admits quietly. “Wrong place. Wrong time. “

Ilya breathes deeply, steeling himself.

“Your heart stopped,” he continues, forcing the words out.

Shane’s eyes widen just a little. “What? Fuck...”

“You heard of something called commotio cordis?”

Shane blinks slowly. “Ummm... yeah... read about that...”

He does not ask more. He does not spiral. He does not freak out. The absence of panic says more than any reaction could. Shane is not fully there yet, still floating somewhere between waking and unconsciousness.

“You should be furious,” Ilya says, the ever present guilt clawing back up his throat.

“I am,” Shane answers calmly, and then snuggles closer, pressing his cheek against Ilya’s chest like that settles the matter.

The contradiction hurts and soothes all at once.

“You think you can ever forgive me?” Ilya asks. The question feels wrong just leaving his mouth.

“Maybe,” Shane says after a moment.

It is more grace than Ilya deserves.

“...if you kiss me.”

Ilya feels himself melt on the spot, heart aching, hands tightening reflexively around Shane’s back. He wants it more than he has ever wanted anything. He wants to kiss him until the world makes sense again. Wants to feel Shane’s lips on his, to know he is real and awake and here.

But he can't.

Not like this.

Not when Shane is soft and dazed and vulnerable in his arms.

He lifts his thumb and traces it carefully along Shane’s lower lip instead, the touch light and careful.

“When you are better,” Ilya says softly. “If you still want, I promise I will kiss you then.”

Shane’s mouth forms a small, displeased pout.

“But I will hold you,” Ilya continues. “I will keep you warm. Keep you safe.”

“Safe?” Shane repeats.

This time, his gaze sharpens a little. He looks around properly, taking in the metal shelves, the boxes of supplies, the cramped space.

“Ilya,” he says slowly. “What’s going on?”

“There was an... incident. Men with guns.” Ilya answers simply. “I tried to get you out. But you are safe here.”

He hopes.

“Guns?” Shane blinks. “But... we're in a hospital, right?”

“Yes.”

“...Fuck.”

“Yes,” Ilya wholeheartedly agrees.

A quiet moment passes.

“I miss Canada,” Shane says quietly, his voice too small, like a young boy who misses the safety of his own home.

Ilya closes his eyes for a second, pressing his cheek to the mass of black hair. He wishes he could take him there. He wishes he could go to boring Canada with boring Shane Hollander. He wishes he could stay there with him.

Shane does not say anything else. What little strength he had left is already spent, his breathing evens out as sleep claims him again. His head grows heavier against Ilya’s chest, his body slackening completely, trusting without even realizing it.

Ilya does not move. He does not dare. He adjusts his grip just enough to keep Shane comfortable, even as his legs begin to ache and his back protests against the hard floor, sending dull sparks of pain up his spine. He barely even notices it.

He could stay here forever like this, cramped and sore, holding his heart safely in his arms.

The hospital intercom crackles to life. A calm, authoritative voice fills the corridor beyond the door.

“This is Captain Reynolds of the Boston Police Department. The situation has been resolved. The facility is now secure. Please remain where you are and await further instructions.”

The words take a moment to register.

When they do, relief hits Ilya in a wave. His chest loosens, a shuddering breath tearing free as the tension finally drains away. He presses his forehead to Shane’s head.

“We are okay,” he whispers, more to himself than to the sleeping man in his arms.

He tightens his arms just a little and holds on.

If this is all he ever gets again, it will have to be enough.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya was unsurprised when the Montreal organization released a statement the following day. It was brief and carefully worded, announcing that Shane Hollander was awake, stable and recovering.

He tells himself, over and over, that Shane will be fine now. That the worst has passed. Shane does not need him. He needs doctors and nurses and care. He needs his parents sitting by his bedside. Not the man who ended things with a text and followed it up by nearly killing him on the ice.

Even if Ilya wanted to go back, hospital security must be airtight after what happened. He should be grateful he got to see Shane at all. Grateful he got to hold him, to hear his voice, to watch his eyes open again.

When he got home that night, he finally heard the full story on the news. It still sounds unreal. A high ranking convict, leader of a criminal clan, rushed to the ICU after an emergency intervention. An extraction attempt gone wrong. A hospital thrown into lockdown. Guns. Panic. Tactical teams flooding the building. It's the kind of story that belongs in some TV medical drama, not in the place where Shane is supposed to be healing.

In the news reports, Hollander's name never comes up. Not once. On hockey forums online, fans speculate anyway, some theorizing, some panicking and asking if the Montreal captain was involved, or safe. But there is nothing concrete.

And nowhere, thankfully, is there any mention of Ilya being present.

Ilya sits on his couch staring at nothing, his thoughts looping uselessly, when his phone buzzes.

Jane: B-418

He stares at the message. Reads it again, just to be sure. Why would Hollander want to see him? Why would he want him anywhere near after what Ilya had done?

Another message comes in.

Jane: You promised me a kiss, Rozanov.

Ilya reads that one twice too. He is out the front door before he even thinks of replying, keys already in his hand.

He drives too fast. He knows it, but he does not slow down. His mind spins, replaying the last forty-eight hours on a loop. He had been certain Shane would hate him as soon as he was

lucid enough to understand what happened. That the affection Shane showed in the storage room would evaporate the moment clarity returned.

When he reaches the hospital, Ilya checks the room number again. It is not the same. Not even the same wing.

Meaning Shane is out of the ICU.

A nurse stops him at the desk. He braces himself, ready to be turned away, to be told he does not belong here. Instead, she checks her computer, nods once, and tells him he is on Hollander's visitors list. She gives him directions and a small smile.

Ilya thanks her and keeps going.

He pauses in the doorway when he reaches the room, hand hovering near the doorframe. Inside, the heart monitor and IV are back, but the monitor's sound is muted, its screen quietly pulsing instead of beeping. Shane's skin is still pale, his dark hair a familiar mess against the pillow.

But he is alive.

Awake.

Beautiful in a way that makes Ilya's heart flutter inside his chest.

Ilya stands there, frozen, like he is waiting for permission to come in.

And he is.

"Hey," Shane says. "I wasn't sure you would come."

His voice is cautious but strong. Steady. Nothing like the frail sound from two days earlier.

Ilya steps inside and closes the door behind him. He stays where he is. He does not dare to come any closer.

"How are you?" he asks.

Shane hesitates, like he genuinely does not know how to answer. Ilya's stomach knots. He is terrified of the answer. Terrified he might learn the extent of the damage he caused.

Then Shane sighs.

"Fucking bored," he finally says.

Ilya blinks. "What?"

"Very bored," Shane repeats patiently, as if Ilya simply misunderstood his meaning.

Ilya lets out a shaky breath. "But you are better, yes?"

“Yes,” Shane answers. “No confusion. No mind-altering meds. One hundred percent capable of making informed decisions.”

Ilya frowns, trying to follow. He is not sure where this is going.

Shane looks at him, open and calm.

“I’m still waiting for that kiss, Rozanov.”

Oh.

Ilya freezes.

“I mean...,” Shane hesitates, now uncertain. “I mean, unless you don’t... want to.”

Ilya is struck by the impossibility of Shane’s words. That Shane wants him that close. That Shane thinks Ilya might not want to when he is all he wants.

But he can’t do that to Shane. Not when everything he has done has hurt him. He glances back at the door, grasping for any excuse.

“Someone could come in.”

Shane scoffs. “I don’t give a fuck about that right now,” he says. “I fucking died.”

Shane *died*.

He knows it all too well. He sees it every time he closes his eyes. Shane collapsing on the ice, his eyes empty. Shane’s body jerking under the chest compressions.

Something must have shown in his face because Shane’s voice softens all at once.

“Hey,” Shane says gently. “Ilya.”

Ilya barely hears him over the ringing in his ears. Shane extends a hand.

“Come here.”

Ilya does not move.

Shane sits up fully, hand still extended, unyielding. “Ilya.”

Ilya’s feet betray him. He crosses the room and takes Shane’s hand. Before he can process the contact, Shane pulls him forward with unexpected strength, wrapping him into a tight hug.

Shane feels solid against him. Robust. Just like he has always been.

He rubs Ilya’s back in slow, grounding strokes, like Ilya is the one who needs comforting. Ilya clings to him. He wants to disappear into the embrace.

“I am so sorry,” Ilya says, the words tearing out of him.

“It wasn't your fault.”

Ilya pulls back, staring back at him in disbelief. “It was.”

“Of course not,” Shane says, unwavering.

“I fucking *killed* you, Hollander.”

“You didn’t. I’m *fine*.”

“You are not. You were not. I hit you and you *died*.”

He hit Shane and his entire world fell apart.

“It was a freak accident,” Shane insists. “Nobody could have seen that coming. My doctors told me the same thing.”

“What else did doctors tell you?” Ilya urges. “Will you be okay?”

“Yeah,” Shane says. “Didn’t you hear?”

“No,” Ilya snaps, the powerlessness of the last days leaking through. “I know nothing.”

“They want to run more tests. My heart will need to be monitored for a while. But they expect a full recovery.”

The tension drains out of Ilya all at once, so fast he almost feels dizzy. Full recovery. The words echo in his mind, delicate and precious.

“I might even make it back in time for the later playoff rounds,” Shane adds.

Ilya nods. He does not trust himself to speak. Montreal is a good team, with depth and discipline, but they are not the same without their captain. Without Shane’s leadership and skills, they will struggle to make it past the first round of the playoffs. He keeps that to himself. He will not be the one to take hope from Shane, not now.

He looks at him instead, really looks, and the guilt surges again. He sees the hospital bed, the wires attached to Shane’s chest, the IV, the pale skin. And all he can see layered over it is that night, months ago, where he caused it all.

One message. One sentence. Cold, final, and inconceivably damaging. A lie born out of fear and love and cowardice. Because ending things felt safer than admitting the truth. Because loving Shane terrified him more than losing him.

“Hollander,” Ilya says hoarsely. “I am so sorry.”

“I told you,” Shane answers. “It was an accident.”

“No,” Ilya says, shaking his head. “I mean... for before.”

Shane looks at him, genuinely confused.

“I told you we were nothing,” Ilya says. “That was a lie.”

The worst lie of his life.

Understanding hits Shane slowly. He looks away, his face going carefully blank, the way he does when he tries to hide how he feels. The heart monitor beside the bed tells on him anyway, the numbers creeping upward, faster than before.

“It was?” Shane asks, flat and quiet.

The realization nearly floors Ilya.

Shane had believed him.

He had taken Ilya at his word. He had believed he meant nothing to Ilya, when he was *everything*. When Ilya’s own heart had stopped beating in that rink, the same moment Shane’s did.

“Yes,” Ilya whispers. “Horrible lie.”

Shane’s eyes shine with unshed tears but he refuses to let them fall. Ilya reaches out instinctively, wanting to wipe them away, but Shane turns his head further, denying him even that.

“Hollander. Please.”

Shane wraps his arms around himself, shoulders curling inward.

“Shane,” Ilya tries again.

He shakes his head and presses his lips together. He does not answer.

Ilya silently curses himself. He is hurting Shane yet again.

He should have waited. He should have thought for more than a heartbeat before unloading his guilt on someone who is still healing, whose heart literally needs time to recover. Instead, he has dropped the weight of his conscience on Shane and now he does not know how to pull it back.

He does not know how to reach him now. He does not know if he should even try or if the kindest thing he can do is step back and give Shane the peace he deserves.

“Do you want me to leave?” Ilya asks softly, terrified of the answer he will get.

Shane shrugs, fragile and uncertain. “If that's what you want.”

“That is not what I asked.”

Shane does not respond. He fidgets with the tape holding his IV in place, fingers picking at the edges.

“But... I want to stay,” Ilya adds softly. “For as long as you will let me.”

A pause.

Shane’s voice is small when he answers. “Then stay.”

“Okay.”

He does not know what to do with himself, just uselessly standing there. He picks up the water bottle from the bedside table and offers it to Shane. Shane takes it, fingers brushing his, and drinks in slow, careful sips.

Ilya watches his throat move with each swallow, stupidly wishing that he had thought to bring ginger ale, or that he could offer something better than water and apologies.

Shane leans back against his pillows, looking completely spent. At least the heart monitor has settled again. Low. Strong. The quiet proof of an elite athlete’s body still doing what it knows how to do even after everything it has been through.

Ilya gaze stays fixed on the numbers anyway. Not out of fear anymore, but fascination. If the machine is right, and it definitely is, then Hollander’s resting heart rate is insanely good. Almost unfairly so.

Shane shifts a little, turning his head toward him. “What are you staring at?”

Ilya jerks his gaze away too quickly to be convincing. “Nothing.”

Shane follows his line of sight anyway. He glances at the screen, then back at Ilya. His mouth twitches.

“Is my resting bpm better than yours?” he asks, something almost playful creeping into his expression.

Ilya rubs at the tip of his nose. “No.”

Shane’s smile spreads slowly, smug and satisfied. “Yes it is.”

It is. But Ilya will never admit it out loud. Still, the familiar spark of competition brings colour back into Shane’s face, and the small smile now on his face feels like a blessing.

Ilya takes the empty water bottle from Shane’s hand and sets it back on the bedside table. “Do you need anything?”

“No. I’m fine, thanks.”

Fine. Ilya almost laughs.

Ilya gestures at the IV, the heart monitor, the wires tethering Shane to his bed. “This does not look fine. You are not *fine*.”

Shane studies him for a second, then says calmly, “Still better than you.”

Ilya blinks. *What?*

“You look like shit, Rozanov.”

For a second, Ilya just stares at him, stunned. Did Shane Hollander really just insult him from a hospital bed?

“When was the last time you slept?” Shane continues. “Or ate anything?”

The concern in his voice twists something in Ilya’s chest. He can’t believe this. Shane is the one who died on the ice. Shane is the one recuperating from a fucking cardiac arrest.

And he is worried about Ilya.

“Well?” Shane presses.

Ilya searches his memory and comes up empty. “This morning.”

“Coffee doesn’t count,” Shane replies. He pauses, then adds, “Vodka either.”

Ilya exhales a soft laugh despite himself. He looks at the determined line of Shane’s mouth, the stubborn set of his jaw.

God, he missed him.

He lifts a hand and gently strokes Shane’s cheek, thumb tracing the warm skin there as if to reassure himself it is real.

“You are beautiful,” Ilya says, unable to stop himself.

Shane exhales, his voice losing its edge even as he tries to hold his ground. “Don’t change the subject.”

“Whyyy?” Ilya purrs. “Is my favourite subject.”

Shane very clearly tries to pretend it does nothing to him. Colour creeps up his cheeks anyway, a slow, unmistakable bloom that gives him away. His mouth presses into a line, and then it softens despite him, curling into the softest smile, unguarded and real. Ilya feels a quiet satisfaction settle inside him.

Good. He can still make Shane Hollander blush.

From the corner of his eye, he notices the curtain track above the bed. He reaches out and slowly pulls the privacy curtain closed around Shane’s bed, sealing them into a small pocket of quiet.

“You still want that kiss?” he asks.

Shane's smile lingers, thoughtful. He looks at Ilya like he is considering his question very carefully, then lets the moment stretch just enough to make Ilya doubt himself.

"What do you think?" Shane says.

Ilya leans in and kisses him softly. So careful it's almost chaste. He starts to pull back, reining himself in, already telling himself not to push. Then Shane's hand comes up and grips the front of his shirt with surprising strength, keeping him solidly in place.

"I think I deserve more than that," Shane says, playful but sure.

Ilya is glad to oblige.

He kisses him again, slow at first, then deeper, like he is testing how much Shane wants before stepping forward. Shane answers immediately, mouth opening under his without hesitation, unmistakably wanting more. The kiss does not break so much as blur into the next, and a small breathless sound slips out of Shane, rough and needy. Ilya feels it against his lips like a spark. It sends a shiver straight down his spine.

Shane's hands slide into Ilya's curls, fingers tangling there, drawing him closer. When Ilya pulls back even a fraction, Shane follows without thinking, chasing him, refusing the distance.

Ilya answers by kissing him harder, the careful restraint he just promised himself slipping through his fingers. Their breathing turns uneven, short gasps breaking between kisses, mouths never quite leaving each other. Ilya kisses Shane like he is trying to make up for every moment he denied them.

The heart monitor suddenly breaks the spell with a loud, insistent beep.

Ilya pulls back instantly, adrenaline crashing through his system. His heart slams against his ribs as panic flares, his eyes snapping to Shane's face.

Shane is flushed and breathless, glaring at the monitor like it has personally offended him.

"Come on," he complains. "That's unfair."

Ilya barely hears him. He presses one hand flat over Shane's chest, the other slipping behind his neck, eyes darting to the screen. The numbers start to slowly tick back down again and Ilya watches them like the fate of the world depends on it.

"Hey," Shane says gently. "This is nothing."

Ilya folds in on himself, bending until his forehead rests against Shane's chest. His eyes squeeze shut, lashes damp against his skin.

"Fuck," he exhales, the word breaking on the way out.

"Ilya, it's all right," Shane murmurs, his voice low and steady. "Don't worry."

Logically, Ilya knows his own heart is probably racing far faster than Shane's right now. He can feel it pounding wildly against his ribs, too loud, too fast, like it is trying to break free. He presses his face more firmly against Shane, grounding himself in the regular rise and fall of his chest.

Shane's hand slides through his hair, slow and deliberate. Fingers comb gently through curls, then linger, warm and reassuring at the back of his head. Ilya focuses on that touch, on the warmth of Shane beneath him, until the panic loosens its grip.

When he straightens, lifting his head just enough to look at him, Shane's eyes meet his immediately. They are warm. Soft. So kind and full of care it almost hurts. Even now, even after all the pain Ilya caused him, Shane looks at him like this.

Ilya leans in and presses a series of gentle kisses across Shane's face. One on his cheek. One just beneath his jaw. One at the corner of his mouth. Each one is careful, adoring.

He pulls back and meets Shane's gaze again.

"I am so sorry, Hollander," Ilya says again, his voice rough. He could say it forever and it still would not feel like enough.

"You don't have to—" Shane starts, but Ilya doesn't let him finish..

Ilya *has* to. Because he can't live with himself anymore.

"Yes. I do," Ilya insists gently, firmly.

This time, Shane lets him speak.

He exhales slowly, forcing himself to keep speaking even as his throat tightens. "I hurt you. I did not want to. But I did. And I am so very sorry."

Shane watches him for a moment, then answers as if it is the simplest thing in the world. "Then I forgive you."

Ilya's breath catches. He shakes his head, turning away, his voice breaking. "You can't."

Shane reaches up and cups his face, firm but gentle, turning him back until their eyes lock.

"I just did," Shane says, steady and unmistakably certain.

The simplicity of it nearly breaks him. Ilya can't understand how Shane can offer forgiveness so easily when he does not know if he will ever forgive himself.

"How can you be so fucking calm about this?" Ilya asks, disbelief bleeding into his voice. This is Shane Hollander. He should be angry. Or spiralling. Or demanding answers. Not forgiving. Not looking at Ilya like he wants him here, like he deserves a place at Shane's side.

Shane shrugs lightly. "I could be dead," he answers simply. "But I'm not. Kinda changes your perspective."

He pulls Ilya down against him, solid arms wrapping around him. Ilya melts into the embrace like he has been waiting his whole life for it. He presses his face into Shane's shoulder, arms wrapping tight around his torso, just breathing him in.

He did not think he would ever get this again. This closeness. This warmth.

"I thought you were gone," Ilya whispers, his voice cracking.

"I'm here, Ilya," Shane replies quietly. "I'm still here."

Shane just holds him there, presses soft kisses into his hair, his temple, the side of his head. His fingers play idly with Ilya's curls, soothing, unhurried. Ilya lets himself sink into it completely.

He wants to stay like this. Curled close, Shane warm and solid against him. He wants to be with Shane Hollander for as long as he can. Forever, if the world would allow it.

But the inevitable reality creeps back in anyway.

"When do you get transferred back to Canada?" Ilya asks quietly.

"Already trying to get rid of me, Rozanov?" Shane teases.

"Never," Ilya answers at once, too fast, too honest.

"They scheduled it for today."

"Oh," Ilya says, trying to hide the drop in his chest.

"Yeah," Shane continues. "They wanted to do it early this morning. But I ended up asking to stay here until I get discharged."

Ilya sits back, staring at him. "You decide to stay in crazy hospital with guns and police?"

Shane makes a vague gesture. "Well..."

"You are sure your head is fine?"

Shane lets out a small laugh. "My parents asked the same thing. They weren't thrilled. But..."

"But what?" Ilya presses.

Shane's fingers curl around Ilya's hand. "I wanted to see you."

"You did," Ilya says. "The other day."

"That doesn't count," Shane replies immediately. "I was so out of it. It all feels like some weird fever dream."

Relief washes through Ilya. He is grateful Shane does not remember the terror of that night the way he does. The panic, the chaos, the powerlessness.

But worst of all for Ilya had been the fear that Shane's eyes would never open again. That he might be lost forever.

Something must show on Ilya's features, because Shane's eyes widen, studying him more closely, suddenly alert. "What's wrong?" he asks. "Did I do something back there? Or say something?"

Before Shane can spiral any further, Ilya lifts Shane's hand and presses a kiss into his palm, letting his lips linger against Shane's skin.

"You were very cuddly," he says with fond amusement.

Shane groans and tips his head back against the pillows. "Oh my god."

"Perfect," Ilya adds, unable to help himself. "Like little kitten."

Shane's ears turn unmistakably pink. "Shut up."

Ilya laughs softly, the sound surprising even himself. It feels easy. It feels right. Sitting here, the warmth of Shane's hand in his own, close enough to hear the steady rhythm of his breathing, the world finally makes sense again.

He does not want to think about what comes next. He does not think about all the ways this could become complicated again. He will figure it out later.

They will.

He will not make the mistake of deciding for both of them ever again.

Ilya watches Shane shift against the pillows, alive and determined and impossibly beautiful. He wishes he could stay and help Shane recover, even if he keeps insisting he is fine. He knows it will probably be next season before they meet on the ice again, but the thought of it already makes his blood hum.

There is nothing like playing against Shane Hollander. The speed, the instincts, the brilliance. The best player in the league this season. And, not that Ilya will ever say it, probably all the time too.

The thought nudges at something else, something that has been nagging at him for weeks.

"Hollander?" Ilya says.

Shane turns his head toward him. "Yeah?"

"I have one question."

Shane raises an eyebrow. "Go on."

Ilya waits a second, just long enough to be dramatic.

“When did you learn how to do hip check? You never do one before.”

A slow, mischievous grin spreads across Shane’s face, but he does not answer.

Ilya narrows his eyes. “Is dirty move.”

“It’s perfectly legal,” Shane says, smug and entirely unrepentant.

Ilya leans in closer, lowering his voice. “Still kinda dirty,” he says, rolling the R with deliberate intent.

Shane’s grin turns downright sinful. “Maybe.”

“You will teach me, yes?” Ilya asks.

Shane snorts. “You wish, Rozanov.”

Ilya squeezes Shane’s hand, a crooked smile on his face.

He’s already plotting exactly how to make him change his mind and make that lesson happen.

Chapter End Notes

That's it my friends! Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed it!
Comments are always greatly appreciated ❤️❤️❤️

(PS: I didn't want to go further with love declarations for a few reasons, but mostly because I still NEED the cottage to happen!)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!