

The Hollander Inn

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/75617991) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/75617991>.

Rating:	Mature
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 , Cliff Marlow
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Alternate Universe - Bed & Breakfast , Career Ending Injury , POV Ilya Rozanov , Hurt/Comfort , Fluff and Angst , Book 2: Heated Rivalry (Game Changers) , Grief/Mourning , Homophobia , Implied/Referenced Suicide , Implied/Referenced Racism , Depression , Past Character Death , Outing
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Hollanov AUs , Part 1 of The Hollander Inn
Stats:	Published: 2025-12-12 Completed: 2026-01-15 Words: 29,327 Chapters: 3/3

The Hollander Inn

by [FreeformHardcore](#)

Summary

Now that he could finally recognize who the man in front of him was, everything flooded back into the forefront of his mind. The nights he spent in Moscow poring over hockey content on YouTube, how watching the teen that was poised to be his rival stirred up newfound ambition to become the greatest instead. He remembered that career-ending hit as well, the way Shane's body crumpled on the ice, tiny and unconscious, body contorted unnaturally as his teammates crowded around him. He remembered the disappointment he felt at not having anyone else to best, to directly compare himself against. Time had passed, and so too did that disappointment in favor of achieving the greatness that Hollander promised. And with that time, Shane Hollander was just another name of the past. But now he was right in front of him, freckles all in the same spots and gear replaced with ugly knit sweaters.

Or

In which Shane Hollander never became the hockey legend he was supposed to. Ilya Rozanov did. Somehow, in the midst of a blizzard, their stories intertwined once more.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

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

“Well boys, looks like we aren’t getting back to Boston tonight. Next flight is at six PM tomorrow if the snow stops.”

A groan arose from the Bears, tired from the crippling loss they suffered at the hands of the Ottawa Centaurs. The Centaurs weren’t even a good team, Ilya knew this. But something was off with the Bears’ chemistry last night, easy shots they should have made slipping through their fingers. Morale was low in the group, all stung by that same disappointment at losing a game they thought was surely won.

“Another night at the Hilton, eh Rozanov?”

Marlow nudged him good-naturedly. As much as he liked Marlow, now was not a good time.

“Shitty hotel in shitty city. What is new?”

He wanted to go back to Boston, his own apartment, his own bed. He wanted to just curl up and go to sleep.

“Don’t you have a girl in every city? Call one of them up, maybe they’ll take a charity case in for the night.”

“More like I am doing charity for them. I do not have Ottawa girl. Yet.”

“You could always stay somewhere else if you can get through the snow. Not like we’re going anywhere else for a while, if the weather report is right. Once-in-a-lifetime blizzard my ass, remember a couple years ago?”

Another nightmare of a time in Ottawa, three straight days of snow that grounded all motion. Leaving everyone behind wasn’t a bad idea. Anywhere would be better than among his moping team mates mourning their first loss of the season. LeClaire probably wouldn’t care too much either, the C on his uniform doing a lot of the heavy lifting. His coach said as much when Ilya did approach him, waving him off and telling him to keep his ringer on and phone charged.

Walking along the snow-lined streets of Ottawa, with the harsh air blowing across his face with chunks of snow, he was reminded of home, back in Russia. He was reminded of his mama.

As much as he wanted to deny it, Ilya knew exactly what went wrong during the game. It was his mother’s death anniversary. Her gold cross chain weighed especially heavy on his chest that night, a constant reminder that she was gone. Everything went awry before he even hit the ice, the days leading up to it being marked with increasing emptiness, like the emptiness

that had consumed his mother before she ultimately took her own life. Alexei nor his father even bothered to give him a call or a word of comfort, a mother and wife simply cast aside in their memories without a second glance. He couldn't even blame his father for forgetting, not really. But dwelling on his father's condition would feel like mourning a second time over. This time, for someone who didn't really deserve that kind of remembrance at all.

The cigarette in Ilya's mouth was bitter, the usual comfort of it stale, each drag causing the icy air to bite at his fingertips. Twinkling through the ongoing blizzard was the sparse light of streetlamps, like stars obscured behind an overcast sky. The streets were quiet, lined with empty restaurants and galleries that had closed their doors much earlier in the day in anticipation for the weather ahead. Tossing the cigarette bum aside, Ilya resolved to find somewhere warm. Somewhere quiet. Somewhere lonely.

The first place he found was a small motel with no vacancy. However, all it took was a quick wink and flirt with the hotel receptionist to yield a second location that would hopefully be emptier. A bed and breakfast called the Hollander Inn.

When Ilya stepped through the threshold, he was welcomed by a comforting interior clad with red and brown, all wood planks rather than the impersonal hotel rooms he practically grew up in. If he pretended for just a second, he could imagine it was how his mama would continue to decorate their house, if only she had the choice, and if only she was alive.

"Welcome to the Hollander Inn!"

Ilya's eyes snapped to the enthusiastic receptionist. He was short, jet black hair with a constellation of freckles over his cheeks and nose hiding behind a pair of black glasses. *Pretty*, his mind supplied unhelpfully. That wasn't what he was here for. There was a flash of recognition in his eyes as Ilya got closer, one that was quickly schooled behind a warm mask of professionalism. That was barely surprising. What was more surprising was the sense of faint recognition in Ilya's own mind. Something about him seemed familiar, but Ilya could not place the face to any memory for the life of him, nor did he care enough to put in any more effort. Walking to the desk, he noted the employee's nametag: Shane, Proprietor.

"Do you have any rooms?"

"Yes we do, sir. How many nights are you expecting to stay?" His voice slightly quavered on the *sir*. He definitely knew who Ilya was.

"However long this storm will last."

"Let's put you down for one night, then. You could always extend your stay. Could I get a card for the room and an ID?"

"Sure."

The way that Shane was shaking as Ilya placed his requested cards on the front desk was almost worrying. Like a kitten thrown out into the raging winter storm that whistled beyond the doors of the inn. His shaking did not cease as he went about recording Ilya's information.

Ilya had to say something before the man exploded right before his eyes; he was not prepared for the mess if he did.

“You know me, yes?”

Shane looked up, mouth agape and flushed a light pink under his freckles. The shock at being called out for his covert hero worship allowed the mask of professionalism to dissipate at once.

“Of course I do, Mr. Rozanov. Number one draft pick, rookie of the year, center and captain for the Boston Bears, how could I not know you.” The blush on his face deepened before he looked down and returned to Ilya’s info. His tremors had stopped to a point of pure stillness, as if Shane was too embarrassed to even make another move.

“I am flattered.” The space turned awkward between them, only the scuffle of papers and clatter of his metal credit card filling the silence.

“Well, with the way we beat you earlier, I thought you needed the ego boost.” Shane’s words came out shy, eyes downcast as he returned Ilya’s things. Testing the waters, so to speak. Ilya was no stranger to a good chirp, and it was much better than the stuff he had heard on the ice during the game. Boodram had called him a Hungarian sausage ready for roasting. The hell was that even supposed to mean?

“Very kind. Was bad night, I admit. Should have won against your half-man half-horse joke of team, but they were lucky.” Shane scoffed and looked back up at Ilya, dark eyes poking straight into him like some kind of intimidation tactic. It would have been more effective if Ilya was not taller than him by a few centimeters. He just looked like a petulant dog. A cute one, at that.

“Was that what you were thinking when Da Costa deke’d you?”

“Along those lines.”

“Well, I hope that we get lucky during the playoffs as well then.”

“Will not be so easy during playoffs. The Bears will do it with our eyes closed.”

“We’ll see about that, Mr. Rozanov.” The smirk Shane leveled him with was full of confidence, bright and playful with a hint of teasing. Shane’s eyes crinkled in amusement at the entire situation, seemingly comfortable with the rapport they had established, the tension in his muscles now gone.

“You’re all set up for the night. I’ll take you and your luggage to your room. Breakfast is complimentary, starting at 8:00 AM. You’re the only one here, so don’t worry about other Cens fans giving you a hard time.”

“Only one?”

“Most of the bookings left before the blizzard set in. And no one else is dumb enough to wade around outside right now.” Shane jumped in shock in realization of what he had said.

“Sorry! Not that you’re dumb, Mr. Rozanov.”

“No, multiple concussions will do that. Make you stupid enough to freeze your toes off for a place to stay.”

Shane let out a huff of laughter at that, one that made Ilya’s own lips draw up into a lopsided grin. As Shane outstretched his hands to return Ilya’s things and his room key, Ilya made the effort to brush their hands together, his fingertips rubbing over Shane’s knuckles as he pulled away. The tips of the shorter man’s ears burned dark red as his adam’s apple bobbed up and down, the air being shifting from warmth to something more electric as the two stared at each other, unblinking. Picking up girls, perhaps the occasional guy if they seemed reliably discreet, was easy. Straightforward advances to the waves of pretty girls that approached him in pounding clubs gave way to unbridled lust for a night, sometimes an exchange of numbers if it was a really great night, noting their presence for the next time he was in the city. But never had he done anything like this. The initial shyness mixed with the easy conversation that they flowed into was somehow more interesting than the past ten partners he’d had his way with, combined. All of them were starstruck at the opportunity to sleep with him, but that sex-focused admiration was the end-all-be-all of his relations. Interacting with a potential fuck buddy on the shared basis of hockey alone was new. Shane shook his head like he was clearing that tension between them. Ilya would have many more opportunities to take that tension further if he wanted to. Now he was really trying to figure out where he knew Shane from. If they’d slept together before, then he definitely would have remembered him. Even given him his phone number.

“I know how it feels. The concussions, I mean. Had a really bad one in high school that ended any chance for a career in hockey.”

“You played hockey?”

“Yeah, center. It was my whole life for... for my whole life, I guess. But now I’m here.”

It was at that moment that vague memories from his rookie years came back into focus, obscured behind years of his brain bashing against the sides of his skull. Shane Hollander was supposed to be in his rookie class. Shane Hollander was supposed to be the future of hockey.

Now that he could finally recognize who the man in front of him was, everything flooded back into the forefront of his mind. The nights he spent in Moscow poring over hockey content on YouTube, how watching the teen that was poised to be his rival stirred up newfound ambition to become the greatest instead. He remembered that career-ending hit as well, the way Shane’s body crumpled on the ice, tiny and unconscious, body contorted unnaturally as his teammates crowded around him. He remembered the disappointment he felt at not having anyone else to best, to directly compare himself against. Time had passed, and so too did that disappointment in favor of achieving the greatness that Hollander promised. And with that time, Shane Hollander was just another name of the past. But now

he was right in front of him, freckles all in the same spots and gear replaced with ugly knit sweaters.

“Shane Hollander.”

“You know me, yes?” There was a twinkle in Shane’s eyes as he parroted Ilya’s earlier words back at him, a mockery of his accent coloring his question. A disbelieving laugh escaped Ilya.

“Wow. We were supposed to be in same rookie class, correct?”

“Yes. Would’ve been first pick too.”

“Do not get ahead of yourself, Hollander.”

“I definitely would’ve, though. Your left-side was very weak back then, could’ve broke through easily. Still could.”

“Eh, you were tiny back then. Every face-off would go to me.”

“You wish, Mr. Rozanov.”

“Ilya.” He blurted out, nerves creeping in at the edges of his thoughts. He didn’t know being confronted with someone as unimportant to his story as the seventeen year old phenom he was poised to duke it out with would throw him this off-kilter.

“Ilya.” Shane repeated back, a soft smile tugging at the corners of his full lips. *Kissable lips*, his mind said. *Shut up*, he thought back, *now is not the time*. But it was true, the man in front of him softer and more relaxed compared to the harsh angles and reserved awkwardness of his teenage years. The time as proprietor for the inn had served Shane well, it seemed. For the first time in the past few days, some of the emptiness that infected each centimeter of his body and soul started to lift at the idea that Shane had turned out okay.

However, those thoughts did nothing to combat against the emptiness in his stomach, the lukewarm Dunkin’ Donuts bagel and hash browns from the airport cleared out. It let out a ridiculously loud grumble that cut through the warm, nostalgic atmosphere that developed between them. Both Shane and Ilya let out a stifled laugh, before Ilya broke first and they devolved into child-like giggles, the absurdity of the entire situation striking both of them. Shane regained composure first, that slight smile still toying at the edges of his mouth.

“Let me take you and your stuff to your room. I can whip something up for you.”

The room Shane led him to was quaint, the color scheme matching the rest of the inn. A bookshelf sat to the side, filled with books of various topics, hockey the most prominent. Little knick-knacks littered the rest of the space, glass figurines and rich mahogany carvings, stuff that his mama would spruce the house up with and buy with abandon whenever she took Ilya out shopping. With her passing, his father had swept them into the trash, the shatter of frail crystalline peacocks and cats happening the morning after she was laid to rest, as quick to kill them as how quick he was to find another woman to bring to bed.

“Do you like the room?”

Shane’s words brought him out of his reverie. It was tinged with nerves, searching for approval from Ilya, who had fallen unusually silent. Were those nerves always there when he brought guests to their rooms? Or was it only with him, the shared history that never was weighing heavy on him, likely more so than Ilya?

“Is perfect.”

“Good. I’ll let you get settled in. Do you have any food allergies?”

“None. Thank you, Shane.”

“My pleasure. I’ll knock when its ready.” He slipped out of the room, closing it behind him. All that was left was the whine of snow battering against the windows and the hum of a generator spreading heat throughout the inn.

Ilya flopped onto the king bed in the center of the room, rainbow granny-square quilt laid on the foot and at least eight pillows at the head. He checked his phone for new messages, messages he knew would not come from people that he needed to hear from. Of course he could reach out to Alexei or his father first, but what was there to talk about? They had already denied his mama the dignity of acknowledging the true meaning of how she died, much less the why behind it. Bastards would probably beg for a drop of cash before even saying anything about her. The empty feeling crawled back into him at that thought.

Marlow had reached out with a short *u good?* To which he replied a similarly short *yes*. Marlow sniped back with *Have fun with your ottawa girl tonight*. Everyone else on the team probably thought he was out searching for an Ottawa girl to complete his collection. Every part of him, his past and his identity, any lick of sensitivity and rawness, was hidden by that confident persona of pure masculinity. Absolutely no one would think that he was searching for an Ottawa boy. That realization, one he had come to numerous times before, still stung to think about.

Ilya opened YouTube and typed in ‘Shane Hollander.’ All of the clips were years-old highlight reels, titles a clinical description of the location and date of each game. Only three stood out.

One was thumbnailed with shots of both Ilya and Shane from their respective media days, young and restless for the long careers ahead of them as foretold by critics and casters. Rozanov vs. Hollander: The Next Biggest Rivalry in Hockey? He faintly remembered watching it one night, interest being piqued in this Canadian boy that would soon be his greatest competition. He then proceeded to watch all of Shane’s clips, studying the little inconsistencies in his form and potential opportunities to gain the upper hand. After that night, Ilya strived to work harder, be the best in the world, prove to himself that he was worth a damn. It was almost exciting seeing someone that he could go head-to-head with. Shane was definitely a force to be reckoned with, years of hard work demonstrated in the way he commandeered the rink.

The next was an interview with Shane from a couple years back, a ‘where are they now?’ styled video that aimed to inquire into the whereabouts of potential lost. Shane’s demeanor was not dissimilar to how he acted that night, smiles coming easy to his face. He talked about his love for his parents, who in turn fostered both his love for hockey as well as his love of taking care of others, naming him the sole proprietor of the Ottawa location of the Hollander Inn as they searched for other cities to expand to. But there was a hint of dissatisfaction in his eyes, the reminder of what he lost being poked and prodded at for only a couple thousand views. Evidently, the rest of the world moved on from Shane as well.

The final video was of Shane’s injury, the thumbnail a still of the impact with the opposing right wing. Ilya hesitated to open it, as if it would open up a mess of feelings he wouldn’t know how to untangle. In the end, curiosity won out. But he had to stop halfway through, seconds after Shane’s body fell onto the ice, motionless and chest barely rising. It felt too personal to continue on with. The moment that Shane’s life changed forever and Ilya’s had simply moved on as it was supposed to.

A knock at the door interrupted his internet stalking. Opening the door to Shane yielded the hard pitter-patter of claws against wood, a dachshund wandering into his room through the small crack, already crawling under the bed.

“Shit, Rosie! Come back here right now! Sorry Ilya, she can be a little wild.”

“Is okay. She’s cute. Like her owner.”

Shane, who was on all fours and attempting to drag the dog back out, suddenly looked back up at him with a deep crimson blush that looked too perfect on his face. It was the kind of color that Ilya wanted to keep bringing out in the man, who had in less than an hour came back into sharp focus in Ilya’s life. Shane was definitely floundering, mouth opening slightly before shutting back closed, intensely staring back down under the bed and the light yips of the dachshund still underneath. Those yips turned into full barks as Shane finally got a hold on her, gathering the dog in his arms and cradling her like a baby.

“Foods ready.” He mumbled out, avoiding eye contact. “You can follow me to the dining room. I’ll bring it out to you.”

The walk was awkwardly quiet, Ilya trailing a few steps behind. And if Ilya took a few glances at Shane’s ass, then the man in question was none the wiser. Even though he had filled out slightly, his glutes seemed to still hold onto the conditioning from hockey. Well-shaped.

After sitting down at the head of one of the various tables in the dining room, Shane disappeared into the kitchen sans Rosie, who was now sitting next to Ilya, posture perfect as the two stared at each other. She licked his hand when he reached down to pet her, comfortable with his presence already.

Shane returned carrying a platter filled with various dishes and a can of coke.

“I hope you like Japanese curry. Quickest thing I could make for you with what I had on hand.”

“I will try anything once.” Ilya replied with a wink, that same beautiful blush returning to Shane’s face as he looked off to the side. No response to his flirtations once again. Laying it on thick wasn’t going to work.

“I’ll let you eat up. Let me know if you need anything, I’ll be in the kitchen.”

“Doing what?”

“Eating. I, uh, thought you might want some space.”

“You do not have to do that, Shane. Plus, I must talk to man who was supposed to be my greatest rival.”

That same dissatisfaction in the interview flashed in Shane’s eyes again, before it was replaced with a furrow of his brows, seeming to be battling whether he would give in.

“Fine.” Shane replied as he disappeared into the kitchen and brought out his own portion to the table, sitting to his left, Ilya’s off-side. Only the scrapes of spoons against ceramic sounded between them, a tense stillness settling otherwise. The curry was fantastic, flavor soaking into the vegetables and beef perfectly. It was homey, seasonings practiced and perfected over years to bring maximal comfort to the consumer. If all of his meals were like this, then Shane was probably very popular with his guests.

“So. How did you end up here?”

Shane, who was focused on his own curry, glanced at Ilya before looking back down at the dish, avoiding any eye contact as he spoke.

“Family business. My mom and dad had it for years before I was born, practically grew up here since it’s so close to my old high school and all the rinks. Then I got injured, so it was a no-brainer to start working here. Help them with all the guests that come through for games.” He gulped down a bite to end his statement before looking at Ilya.

“And how did you end up here? Blizzard must’ve been a lot of trouble to walk through.”

“Yes, was like the opposite of hell on earth. Literal opposite, not heaven.”

Shane’s lips quirked up at that.

“Had to get away from my team. All mopey and sad, bleh. And the Hilton gets boring after a while. Needed something new.”

“They just let you wander off into an active blizzard? You didn’t even have a hat on when you walked in.”

“Was not too bad. If I did not, then we would not have met.” Shane only nodded at that, pensive.

“What’s it like? Leading a team to the Stanley Cup multiple times.”

“Like... the feeling of something promised to you coming true.”

Shane nodded again. This time, Ilya could see his eyes start to shine, tinged-red, lost in his own thoughts. Ilya could punch himself for upsetting him, for poking at the obvious wound he still had.

“I’ve thought a lot about how different my life would be if I was given the chance to enter the league. The people I would’ve been teammates with, teams I would’ve gone up against. The cups I would’ve won. Thought about you a lot, too. Would’ve given you a hard time. Would’ve been first draft pick.”

“First draft pick?”

“Obviously.”

“Is not all that. I watched you too, back then. Greatest rivalry in hockey, we were supposed to be.”

Shane only hummed in response before standing up with his half-cleared plate.

“I’ll let you finish up the rest of your curry. Have to clean up the kitchen. My room is at the end of the hall from you, so let me know if you need anything at all.”

He didn’t even give Ilya enough time to respond before he slipped back into the kitchen, leaving only the drowsy dachshund at his feet to keep him company. The disappointment of Shane’s absence weighed bitterly on Ilya’s tongue. He gulped down a sip of coke to replace it.

When Ilya woke up the next morning, groggy from the visions of his mama that filled his dreams in his sleep, he noticed that the blizzard outside had slowed down slightly, but definitely not enough for a plane to take off in. Thick flakes of snow still fell, blusters of winds pushing them around. He laid there for a few moments, swaddled in the quilt like a child. He needed a cigarette.

After getting changed and giving Rosie a rub on the head, Shane nowhere to be found, he stepped onto the front porch. He’d only gotten two good drags out of his cigarette before Shane’s voice appeared behind him.

“You can’t smoke there, Mr. Rozanov.” The warmer Shane from last night gave way to his more professional persona, chastising Ilya like he would a dog. Ilya took one more puff before extinguishing it on the collected snow on the rail, the ice blackening with ash.

“My apologies, Mr. Landlord. And its Ilya, remember?”

“Its Mr. Rozanov while you’re smoking on my porch.”

“Sorry.”

“Cigarettes aren’t good for you anyways. Doing you a favor.”

“Its just one.” Shane fixed him with an unimpressed look, right brow tilted up. There probably would’ve been a second one if it wasn’t for his meddling.

“Come in. I made breakfast.”

The spread Shane made was almost overwhelming, piles of bacon and some kind of fried bread topped with cinnamon sugar waiting on serving platters for Ilya to pick at. Everything was perfect, once again. It had been a while since Ilya ate anything that was not pre-approved by the teams dietitian and made en masse for the rest of the team, his other meals being filled with fried bar fare when he took the team out, as well as the occasional sandwich if he had the opportunity to stay in his apartment. Shane’s cooking felt like manna from heaven, beaming directly into his soul.

Shane slid him a can of coke as Ilya tucked in.

“Coke is my favorite.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

“It was in your documentary a couple years ago, the first time you got the cup.”

“You are so obsessed with me, Hollander. Is cute.”

“I made sure to keep up with you. If someone was supposed to be the greatest hockey player in the history of the sport, wouldn’t you make that effort?” It was a leading question, and Ilya knew it. But knowing that didn’t stop the feeling of guilt that struck him. He’d like to think he would, if his teenage obsession with Shane’s style was any indication.

“Of course I would. Did watch all of them, actually. Would have beat you with no problem.”

Shane colored a light pink, either in anger that Ilya was arrogant enough to imply that he would have lost, or in pleasant surprise that Ilya was watching him as intently as he was watching Ilya.

“There’s a rink nearby if you want to test that theory out. They all know me, let me coach with them in my free time.” As he said it, Shane looked away from Ilya, bashful. Bashful is probably not the right word, scared more accurate. Scared of rejection. Scared that the chance to finally play against someone he had waited his whole life to beat would slip away from his fingers. For some reason, Ilya could feel that same fear gripping him, not as obvious as Shane’s, but it was there. Eighteen year old Ilya Rozanov would take Shane up on the offer without hesitation, wanting to prove to himself that he really was the best in hockey. That the future of the sport was in his hands. Obviously, he had proven that it really *was* in his hands, given how healthy his career was. But it almost felt unearned. This would be the chance to prove that Ilya could’ve done it so many years ago.

“I will not go easy on you.”

“Never asked you to.”

Trudging through the snow was as miserable as it was last night, but this time he had Shane next to him as company. They were both bundled high with layers of clothing, Shane looking like he would topple over under their weight. Ilya had said as much, only receiving a glare back from black eyes peaking through a tightly wrapped scarf that obscured the rest of his features except for the picturesque smear of freckles on the bridge of his nose.

The rink was serviceable, empty when Shane unlocked the door with one of his hundreds of keys without even giving them a second glance. After setting their belongings down and changing into the proper equipment, Ilya's branded with the colors and logos of the Bears and Shane's generic sans what looked to be faded rainbow tape on the blade of his stick, they skated out onto the ice.

“Want to do posts for goals?”

Ilya's brow quirked up at the question. Shane must still be pretty confident in his abilities if he could aim with that level of precision.

“Sure. On my go.”

Ilya placed the puck on center ice, both of them moving to the blue line and leaning down in ready position. Ilya's eyes were focused on Shane, who was staring hard at the puck and only chanced an occasional look up to see when Ilya would signal their go. The softness of his features had disappeared, almost looking younger, like the Shane of the past half-day was locked someplace deep within him. Unlike the attempted intimidation of earlier, something about Shane's demeanor was a little scary to behold, even with the difference in height.

Placing his mouth guard in, Ilya nodded once to signal the start of their game.

Shane immediately pushed off and zoomed to center ice, catching Ilya off guard as he gained control of the puck. Side-by-side, they raced next to each other as Ilya attempted to steal it. It was more difficult than he anticipated, Shane expertly handling the puck and deflecting his stick, as if he was able to predict what Ilya would do at any given point. He did study Ilya for his entire career after all, the little idiosyncrasies and nuances that even Ilya was not able to recognize. This game was proving to be more interesting than he thought. Soon, they reached a few meters from the goal before Shane hit a wrist shot. The clang of the puck against metal rang out. Though it was years past the attention from the wider hockey world, it was evident that Shane's talent hadn't waned in the slightest. Spitting out his mouth guard, a wide smile spread on Shane's face as he looked up at Ilya.

“One zero. Thought you weren't going easy on me?”

“Was lucky.”

“Luck this, luck that.”

Ilya's nostrils flared at the chirps.

"Again."

The next round proceeded similarly to start, Shane gaining early possession of the puck as the two duked it out for control. Ilya had put in a lot more effort that time, pulling out all the tricks he would use when going against a center in a regular game. This time, as they approached Ilya's goal he spotted an opening to grab the puck from Shane. As the two of them reached Shane's goal, it felt as though Shane had redoubled his efforts, putting constant pressure on Ilya. A quick snap shot ended the round with a ding.

"One one. You are still very good, Hollander."

"Thanks. Been a while since I've played like this. Just warming up."

"Of course."

Round after round went by, trading point for point. With each go at it, the intensity of both men ramped up as they fed on each other's energy. The enthusiasm he felt when opposing Shane was breathtaking, almost comparable to the joy and enthusiasm for hockey that he achieved in each game that won him a cup. Shane seemed to agree, beaming with each point he scored and honing in on the game more intensely when Ilya did. With each split in Shane's lips and tilt of his head in frustration, Ilya could color in the picture of an adversary that never was. It was a beautiful picture. Hours could go by and he wouldn't have noticed their passage, only noticing the way that Shane's love for the sport transcended beyond any of the bullshit players he had gone against in the past.

"Nine nine. First goal wins?" It was said through heaving breaths from Shane's open mouth, lips glistening with a light sheen of spit. Ilya felt himself staring at them as the question lingered in the air for a tad too long.

"Sure. Cannot wait to prove that I am better than you." Shane scoffed at his words, but the smile on his face remained bright, even radiant. Ilya could feel the fat beads of sweat that rolled down his face dip into the dimples of his own grin.

"You wish, Rozanov."

"Do not need to wish. What do I get if I win?" The shorter man pondered it for a second.

"I'll make whatever you want for lunch. And the bragging rights of beating me."

"Whatever I want?"

"And the bragging rights of beating *the* Shane Hollander." Even in his arrogance, Shane was as cute as a kitten.

"And if you win?"

"You decide." Ilya took a similar pause as he thought about what his opponent's reward would be.

“I will do anything you want for the day.” Shane’s brow raised in disbelief.

“Anything?”

“Within reason. Cooking, cleaning, ironing the curtains or whatever it is that you do in your spare time, Mr. Landlord.”

“It’s a deal.” Shane removed his glove and stuck his hand out, ready to shake on it. As Ilya removed his own and made contact, his hand dwarfing Shane’s, they shared mirrored tight-lipped smiles colored by the determination to beat the other. The competitive air that had developed over the previous rounds felt as though it was climaxing with something more exhilarating, something more meaningful. Ilya could imagine a situation just like this, that last face-off during overtime in the finals, both of them wanting that satisfaction of holding the cup and achieving what they had been groomed into wanting since childhood, when they were just kids fucking around on the ice. In the same way, there was a sense of finality to it. Their last chance to prove to each other that yes, they would’ve been the future of hockey, together. And yes, they would have beat, battered, and bruised the hell out of each other at every turn. He wondered if Shane had come to the same conclusion.

The two got into athletic stance, eyes trained on each other this time rather than on the puck. Each inhale and exhale matched, the world around them slowing down in their mutual anticipation.

Ilya nodded once, and the round began.

As they raced towards each other, Ilya gained early possession of the puck, which was quickly stolen away from him with a well timed sweep of Shane’s stick. They raced towards Ilya’s side, Shane pushed onto the boards in an attempt to block his shot as they got closer. He hit a wrist shot which barely missed the goal, the puck clacking on the far wall of the rink. Ilya picked up the pace, reaching it first as the two circled around his goal and began to charge towards Shane’s. The harsh clash of stick against stick dominated the rink, hiding the deep breaths both took through their noses. As they approached Shane’s goal and Ilya winded up to strike, Shane once again stole the puck from him. The round continued like that, possession for possession, both at the top of their games and unwilling to yield even for a second. Ilya spit out his mouth guard as he maneuvered the puck toward Shane’s once more.

“You will not win, Hollander!” Shane spit his out as well, his next words coming out breathless through his smile.

“Oh yes the fuck I will, Rozanov.”

“You will not be so happy when I beat you.”

“And you won’t be so happy when you’re sweeping my floors.” The *floors* came out stuttered as Shane regained control of the puck, the two of them skating around Ilya’s goal for what must have been the fourth or fifth time in the round. Ilya was not in a good position, now against the boards himself, allowing Shane an opening to quickly snap back around and hit a clear shot towards Ilya’s goal. However, with the change in momentum, Shane’s knee buckled with the swivel, causing him to stumble and fall on his back. With their proximity, he

brought Ilya down with him, the two of them falling into a pile of limbs. All there was now was the trembling form of Shane underneath him and the slide of the puck against the ice.

“Shit! Are you okay, Shane?”

As Ilya pushed up off of Shane, he noticed that what he thought were sobs were actually hearty and silent heaves of laughter. Ilya couldn't help but laugh as well, both in relief as well as euphoria. It was one of the best games of hockey he had played in his life. Scratch that, it *was* the best game of hockey he had played in his life. All the cups and playoffs, all of the time with the Bears and the glamour he received because of his successes, that satisfaction was nothing compared to how he felt, to how he was currently feeling. On top of the world. But most satisfying was the smile that filled Shane's face as he looked up at Ilya. Like something that he was promised finally came true. Fuck. Whatever Ilya was feeling had gone much past interest, veering directly into infatuation. How had he gone this long without meeting Shane?

“Haven't played like that in a while. Thank you, Ilya.”

“Was it everything you dreamed of?”

“Better. Sucks that we don't even know who won.”

“Next time, we will know.”

“Next time?”

“Of course. Now I know all of your weaknesses.”

“Oh, fuck you.” There was no heat behind Shane's words, only fondness to be found.

“Now get up, you're suffocating me.”

Ilya did, reaching out to help Shane stand up. They skated to the benches, slumping onto them next to each other, thigh-to-thigh as they removed their helmets. Shane pulled out a water bottle and took a few quick gulps, a single drop of water escaping and trailing down his throat, which Ilya honed in on in an instant. The slosh of water interrupted his thinking, his eyes flicking back up to Shane's as his skin took on that light pink flush he had seen so many times before, done drinking and bottle outstretched in an offer to quench Ilya's thirst. Though it was unintentional this time around, their fingers brushed against each other, that same electricity from the previous night appearing. It affected Ilya in a more pronounced manner this time around, his heart skipping a beat at the touch. This time, Shane was the one staring as Ilya took long draws from the bottle. Ilya winked at him, the attempt to fluster working as Shane's blush deepened and a soft snort escaped him. They sat in companionable silence, neither one of them willing to break the glow that surrounded them. Still, Ilya broke first, the hunger for more knowledge about Shane outweighing the value of that heady feeling.

“You are very good. One of the best players I have gone against.”

“I know.”

“Is surprising. You are like kitten in the hotel, but on ice you are like... big cat. I cannot find the word.” Shane giggled at Ilya’s inability to express what he was.

“Tiger? Lion?”

“No... leopard! There you go.”

“Why do you say that?”

“They watch their food for many days before they strike. And when they do, they kill them fast.”

“Didn’t know you watch so many nature documentaries.”

“What else would I watch on the planes? Superheroes? I am one already.” Shane shook his head, affectionate.

“Do not worry. I will still help you clean the inn.”

“You don’t have to do that, Ilya.”

“You think I will work for free? You owe me whatever I want for lunch.”

“Deal. What would you like?”

Ilya thought about what he was craving, stomach ready to be replenished. The long list of foods he had tried in his travels flew through his mind, all sounding good, but not enough. He thought about his mama, what she would make after a particularly exhausting game in his youth.

“Pelmeni. Like little meat dumplings. And soup.”

“I can definitely do that. Let’s get wrapped up here.”

The snow had calmed down considerably by the time they left, the snowflakes sparse as they came down. In comparison to that morning, it felt considerably warmer now that he had Shane huddling close to him, walking together quietly. Ilya kept on wanting to say something, express his admiration for Shane’s talent, or about their shared love of hockey. But he bit his tongue. For all his initial bravado and flirts, the quick bond between the two made him more hesitant to express that interest than before. It was different than anything he had felt for his previous partners. Where with them the lust of a one-night stand did nothing for the hollowness within him, everything about Shane seemed to fill him up, the loneliness of being at the top of the league subsiding. That emptiness from the previous days, years even, had receded in ways that he did not believe were possible. Ilya didn’t want to fuck this up.

“Let’s wash off before lunch. We both stink.”

Ilya only nodded in response.

Later, in the shower, all he could think about was Shane. It was almost ridiculous how quickly the man had wormed his way into him. Flashes of his freckles and smiles and cute little nose and frumpy outfits and the way his strides on skates was so uniquely Shane. It all wove into a tapestry of a man that he was grateful to have had the opportunity of finally meeting, no matter how distantly their paths had diverged. If only they had met earlier, as rookies navigating the sport together, learning from each other. Perhaps things would've been different, the immaturity of their teenage years and the pressure of being each other's polar opposites preventing them from even speaking a word to each other. But Ilya was ready to make up for all of that lost time, if Shane allowed him to.

The dining room was empty by the time Ilya finished, hair still damp. Rosie's wet little snout pushed onto his legs, following him as he searched for Shane. Opening the door to the kitchen, he found the man in question standing over a bowl of ground meat, a stack of flat dumpling wrappers next to it as Shane's deft fingers wrapped the pelmeni. Faintly, he could smell something earthy and tangy in the air. The swing of the door alerted Shane to Ilya's presence, looking up with a soft smile before returning to the pelmeni.

"Want to help?"

"Of course."

As he got closer to the counter, he noticed a bubbling pot of soup on the stove, deep red and emanating the characteristic earthy scent of beets. It was stupid, the way that its smell immediately brought him back to his childhood, back to that expansive kitchen in his father's home that became his and his mama's sanctuary. Theirs alone.

"You know how to make borscht?"

"I'll try anything once." Shane said with a wink. This man was going to kill Ilya.

"It smells wonderful."

"Thank you. Just looked it up real quick. You mentioned it in your second cup doc. How your mom makes it for you."

"See, you are like leopard. Stalker."

"Shut up and help me if you want these dumplings." Ilya threw his hands up in defeat as he washed his hands, standing next to Shane as he picked up a wrapper and twisted it with an ease that could only come from his mama coaching his child-sized hands through the motions. All of it, the food and the house and the company he was in, it all reminded him of his mama. A wave of emotion rolled over him as he realized how much he truly missed her, so overwhelming that Ilya's next words came out of his mouth without thinking.

"Did you know it was her death anniversary yesterday?"

Shane's hands stilled at Ilya's confession.

“No. I’m so sorry for your loss, Ilya.”

“Is okay. Was very long ago, when I was twelve. We used to hole up in kitchen just like this, taught me all she knew about cooking.” His sentences just kept on coming out, like something was unlocked within him that he wasn’t able to lock up again. Like Pandora’s Box.

“Explains why you’re so good at it. What was her name?”

“Irina.” There was a slight hitch in Ilya’s breath. When was the last time he had said his mama’s name out loud?

“Irina. It’s a beautiful name.”

“It is. Everything about this place reminds me of her. In a very good way, do not worry. The little glass animals, the colors of the bedding, all of it is something she would collect in our house. There would be no space for anything else.” Shane let out a soft huff of laughter at that.

“We would have got along great then.”

“Yes. She was like light in the world, star that burned up too quickly. She would have... what is saying? Hung the sun for me if she could.”

“Hung the moon,” Shane gently corrected him.

“The sun too. Solnyshko, she called me. Little sun. She would have replaced the sun and the moon with my face, to always see me if she could have.”

Ilya felt the wetness of a fat tear hitting his hand before he realized it was rolling down his face, all of the hurt of his mama’s death coming back to him at once. The last time he had cried for his mother was at her funeral, Alexei and their father standing seriously beside him as row after row of funeral goers came up and expressed their false condolences. Sure, meaninglessness was a constant after her passing, always bubbling under the atmosphere. But never had that grief poured out like this. However, that grief was mixed with something deeper underneath. Relief at the ability to still remember her little nuances. And nostalgia for moments that he had thought were erased from his memory.

“She sounds wonderful, Ilya. Can I give you a hug?”

Ilya only nodded in response. The feeling of Shane gathering him up in his arm, warm and filled with comfort, allowed the grief to ease away in favor of the relief and nostalgia. His chin rested against the side of Shane’s head, who was rubbing soothing circles into his back, flour dusted hands leaving fingerprints on the Bears hoodie he changed into. Ilya left the same marks on Shane’s back as he reached up to return the hug, soft sobs racking his frame. Soon, the tears had stopped flowing, the rise and fall of both of their chests syncing together. When Ilya pulled away first to rub the tears away, Shane took a step back as well, leaving his hand on Ilya’s shoulder, grounding him. Shane’s eyes were red and shiny with the glisten of tears as well.

"I'm sorry, Shane. Tears in the pelmeni, they will be very salty." Shane nodded his head no, thumb still stroking Ilya's shoulder.

"Don't be sorry, Ilya. That's a lot to deal with."

"Yes. Haven't cried like that since she died." Shane's eyes furrowed in concern.

"At all?" Ilya shook his head.

"Has anyone else talked with you about her? You have a brother, your father too, right?"

"They didn't care too much when it happened. And they don't care too much now." Shane just sighed at that.

"Well, I'm glad I could be here for you. Really."

"You've already done more than you could ever know, Shane Hollander."

Ilya turned back to the counter, Shane's hand dropping from his shoulder. He already mourned the loss of touch, of those pacifying little massages. He picked up another dumpling wrapper and spoon filled with meat, feeling as though his entire soul had become filled with lightness. The two of them settled back into a comfortable silence, the bubbling pot of borscht simmering behind them. When they were finished with the pelmeni, Shane brought them over to a pot of boiling water and dropped them in slowly.

"You did a lot for me too, Ilya."

"How so?"

"After my injury, watching you was like watching what I should have been. My family are diehard Cens fans, so I kind of had to hide it. I beat myself up a lot about the fact I couldn't go professional. But watching you hold the cup felt like I was winning too."

"You are still better than 99 percent of the league. I wish we could have gone against each other."

"Yeah. It would have been amazing. But still, I'm honestly kind of grateful I didn't go down that road."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah. That amount of pressure would have killed me at some point. All of that expectation, from the team, from fans, from my family. It would have been too much."

"It is too much."

"I see that now. Plus, I wouldn't have realized some stuff about myself until much after my career."

“Like being gay?” Shane spluttered at that despite the obvious implication of what he was saying.

“Give a guy a chance to come out to you first, Ilya.”

“Your rainbow tape was very visible.”

“Now it is. But I definitely wouldn’t have been so certain about liking men if I was in the league. Even in high school, all the slurs and shit people were saying in the locker room was a lot, even though I didn’t really *know* that I was gay. And on top of that, being the only Asian guy on the team would’ve made everything even more miserable.”

“Is worse in the league. I’m happy you got out. Was not so lucky.”

“You’re gay?”

“Bisexual.” Shane hummed in understanding.

“That sucks to hear. Not the being bisexual part, that’s great. But hiding so much of your identity over the years, your emotions as well. I can’t even imagine it.”

And it did suck. All of it sucked, the hiding and the emotional blankness and encompassing loneliness, it had all weighed on Ilya over the years, heavier and heavier as he got deeper in his career. It was why he broke down like that at the merest stir of his mama’s memory. Why he had so quickly fallen for a man that allowed him to feel like a real person.

“Terrible, is what it is.”

With a surge of confidence, he swiveled his head to Shane, capturing him in a hopefully meaningful gaze.

“Is why I am grateful to have met you, Shane.”

Shane dusted a light pink. Beautiful. The corner of his lip tilted up slightly.

“I am grateful to have met you as well, Ilya. Hockey hasn’t felt that great in a while.”

“Same. Better than all of the cups and bullshit.”

“You don’t really believe that.”

“I do.”

Shane didn’t seem to know how to respond to that. If he was in Shane’s shoes, relegated to a life of watching the person that was supposed to be his greatest competition flourish without him, he wouldn’t know what to say either. But with their meeting, it felt as though Ilya truly had someone else to play for. Because if they couldn’t rise through the league together, then it was up to Ilya to work a million times harder in Shane’s place.

“Go sit down. I’ll bring everything out when its ready.”

“Do not forget some sour cream.”

“I would never.”

Ilya rinsed his hands and exited through the kitchen doors, but not before throwing a wink back at Shane. He was already watching Ilya leave, seemingly looking at his ass if Ilya traced the line of his eyes. Shane looked like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar, lips pursed in embarrassment and ears burning as he turned back to the boiling pot of dumplings. Ilya hoped that his cackle of laughter was able to travel into the kitchen.

Shane brought his platter out first with two bowls, one filled with the pelmeni topped with sour cream, black pepper, and dill, the other filled with borscht. On the side was another can of coke. As Shane set down his own, a can of ginger ale in place of the coke, Rosie walked back up to Ilya and curled down at his feet. Ilya couldn't help the sense of domesticity that suddenly flooded him.

The food was excellent, once again, the taste sending him back on that wave of nostalgia he was riding. His mama would definitely be friends with Shane. In the silence that ensued with their meal, he and Shane stole glances at the other when they thought they weren't looking, catching each others eyes in between spoonfuls of borscht and bites of pelmeni.

“Who taught you how to cook? Your food, all of it is very good.”

“My mom. She was always the chef in the family, but she only started really showing me the ropes after I started training to take over this place.”

“Tell her she taught you well.”

“Don't know how she would react to the center of the Bears complimenting her cooking.”

“A compliment from two-time Stanley Cup winner Ilya Rozanov, who would not be flattered?”

“A Cens fan.”

“Well, next time I play in Ottawa I will try to tell her in person.”

“And when will that be? You still owe me another game.”

“Don't know. Will have to look at the schedule. But now I have a different reason to come here.”

“You'll have to call. We get pretty busy when the weather is nicer.”

“I will pay rent. You have my card already.”

They shared a smile before Shane suddenly hung his head, running his hands through his hair.

“Still can't really believe that you're here. That we're even talking like this.”

“I cannot believe it either.”

“What do you think it would have been like if we did meet as rookies?”

“Oh, I would be very big asshole to you, no doubt.”

“Well, from the all documentaries on you, you kind of still are.”

“Everyone else would say the same. And what about you?”

“Probably would have tried to be your friend, get all that rivalry shit out of the way. Since I would be first draft pick we would be on different teams.”

“In your dreams, Hollander.”

“We’ll figure it out the next time.”

Ilya looked out the window. The snow had stopped completely, once-in-a-lifetime blizzard fizzling out without much commotion. Weather people are liars, he decided then. He would curse them for being liars, because that meant his time with Shane is almost up. It was odd, how with such little time spent with the man, Ilya had felt lighter in years. He hoped Shane felt the same way. With how he put all of his hopes and dreams in Ilya, a man he had no impression of ever meeting, Ilya hoped that he was able to gain some closure from all this. Ilya had no idea when the next time they meet would be. But even if it was only ten minutes away, or hundreds of hours, or a thousand years, he would be counting down each millisecond until he and Shane would be next to each other again.

“We should get sweeping, Shane. Flight is at six.”

It was if the spell cast on both of them broke at that moment. The realization that the passage of time would sweep them away from each other once again was disappointing to both of them, Ilya could see that in Shane’s downtrodden nod and stiff smile. But all of that disappeared soon after, Shane quickly standing up with the same beaming smile that left him increasingly breathless each time it appeared.

“Let’s make the most of it, Ilya. I bet you don’t even know how to vacuum.”

“Hey, I am not that out-of-touch.”

“Your apartment is probably filled with dust right now, makes my skin crawl.”

“Oh, so you want to come to my apartment and clean? Steal cleaning person’s job? I will make you pay rent if you stay.”

“Now who’s Mr. Landlord.”

Ilya stood up, trailing behind Shane as he walked to a closet filled with cleaning supplies. He rolled the vacuum over to Ilya.

“We have two hours before you have to go, and I want this place spotless in one.”

“You think we can do all of this in one?”

“Nope. But its wishful thinking.”

And so they went to work. Like on the ice, it felt like they were in tandem, passing each other bottles filled with bright blue cleaning fluid without as much as a word. In a way, it felt like they were still competing to see who would be the best. Shane definitely had him beat with that regard, moving with efficiency as he swept the hardwood floors. It was cute, how intense Shane was as they went about it. It was true that Ilya was not always the best at cleaning, quickly growing bored and wanting to do literally anything else in its place. But having Shane with him somehow turned the most boring activity ever into something fun. The hour flew by quickly, and most of the house actually did end up fairly clean, at least superficially. But they both slowed down near the end, sitting down on one of the couches in the communal living room. Rosie jumped up as sat between them, curling up into a ball as both Ilya and Shane scratched her back.

“Do you believe in fate, Ilya?”

He considered the question. If anyone else had asked at any other moment in his life, he would’ve responded with a hard and flat no. But the past day seemed intent to prove him wrong.

“Yes. I could have found any other hotel last night and slept the night away. But somehow I found my way to you.”

“You’re really, really stupid for walking through that blizzard. Could have died.”

“But fate did not want me to. You would have found me anyways, watching your documentaries for the thousandth time, find my address in back of shot and somehow break into my apartment.”

“Oh come on, my stalking wasn’t that bad.”

“You knew I love coke, and borscht, and all those other little things I forgot about myself.”

“You were the one that exposed all that, not me.” Shane tossed his head back in exasperation at that.

“What would your mother think, her little boy watching the man who beat her favorite team out of the play-offs three times.” He was teasing Shane and they both knew it, coy smile playing on Ilya’s lips as he watched Shane.

“I think she knew. It was Rozanov this and Rozanov that for a while after my concussion. She just laughed at me.”

“It *is* very sweet. Do not know how many others would follow me so closely.”

“My mom didn’t think so after the fiftieth time. Took me to a gay bar for the first time and left me there with a pat on the back.” They both dissolved into laughs at that, the idea of Shane wide-eyed and alone in a gay bar the stuff of comedic excellence.

“Do not worry. She will fall in love with me. Everyone does.”

“Is that what you tell yourself?”

“You are saying you are not a little in love with me yet?”

“I don’t want to prove you right. Because I think I am.”

It was like all the air was sucked out of the room with Shane’s words, which came out as though they were difficult to say. Ilya’s heart fluttered, his face feeling warm with a rare blush. For all of the casual sex, the drunk hookups with no expectation for more, nothing could have prepared him for what it felt like to fall in love for the first time. Even though the idea was foreign, he was able to recognize it as warmth spread from his heart and the way down to his extremities. It was exhilarating.

“Well too bad for everyone else. Because I think I am in love with you too.”

Shane’s face split in that wide, genuine beam that Ilya could barely stand to look at without the flutter of his heart coming back. It was ridiculous, the idea that it took barely a day for him to feel something as strange and all-encompassing as love. But he knew he would give away everything he had if it meant he could feel that way forever, Shane by his side, like two perpendicular lines becoming parallel.

“All that stalking paid off.”

“And you struck like leopard. While I’m off guard.”

“Seemed like a good time to say it.”

“It was. I am going to kiss you now.”

Ilya didn’t even wait for Shane to react, surging forward and slotting his lips onto Shane’s. Never had anything been as perfect as the passion cascading out of both of them, as if they were trying to say sorry to each other through the kiss. Sorry for all the time that had passed without each other, all the time that could have been theirs. Ilya brought his hand up to Shane’s cheek, thumb resting on his constellation of freckles, lightly rubbing them as if to make sure they were still there.

They weren’t the rivals that the world wanted them to be, diametrically opposed and untouching, lives revolving around hockey and petty competition. Instead, being with Shane felt like completing the sky. Because if his mama was able to make Ilya both the sun and the moon, then Shane was like the stars that filled up the empty space around him.

Neither one of them wanted to be the first to pull away, but Rosie had made that decision for them as she sat up and started licking at both of their faces.

“Rosie! You’re not a part of this.”

Rosie sneezed in reply, waddling off to some other corner. Shane turned back to him, eyes shining in adoration. Ilya had that same look on his face, dumb and love-struck like it was

some kind of grand awakening. And it was. Shane leaned into him and smashed his lips onto Ilya's, the passion of their first kiss coming back at an instant. Ilya pulled away by choice this time, leaving one more chaste kiss on Shane's lips.

"I wish I could have you forever, Shane."

"You can, and you will."

"Fuck whoever that was who pushed you. They can go choke on bag of dicks."

"Some nobody."

They kissed one more time, more gentle than the rest.

"It's four PM, Ilya."

"I know. You should come with me, will fit into my carry-on."

"So now you want to replace your cleaning person?"

"They do not make food as good as you do." Shane shook his head in fondness, eyes closed.

"Come on. Let's pack your stuff up. I'll call you a taxi."

The whole process of folding his clothes and shoving them into his luggage was bittersweet. Domestic in that way it was as they ate the pelmeni and borscht. Like then, they kept sneaking glances at each other. But each of them felt meaningful, as if they couldn't go a second without making sure the other was still there.

Locking the door to his room, he placed the key in Shane's hand, before turning that touch into a firm grasp onto Shane's hand, the key in between their palms. They held hands all the way down to the front door.

"I will miss you. So much, Shane."

"You have my number." He gestured toward the hotel's telephone.

"Is not the same."

"Well, it's not like I'm going anywhere else. You'll see me soon."

"I already do, in my mind. When I win the cup, I will be thinking of you now. Right next to my mama. I'll be winning them for both of you."

Shane just hugged him, warmth spreading into Ilya. It didn't feel like a goodbye, not really. It felt like the beginning of something that should have started a long time ago. The hug transitioned into a kiss, deep and sensual, holding onto each other for minutes before they pulled away.

"Make sure you leave a good review on Yelp."

“The Centaurs fans would not appreciate it.”

“Maybe not. I would, though.”

“That little box cannot contain all the things I am thinking, Shane.”

“Maybe just a phone call then.”

The beep of the taxi sounded from outside. It was time to go.

“I will be back soon to beat you.”

“I’m counting on it. I’m definitely going to win, though.”

“Whatever you think, zvyozdochka.”

“What does that one mean?”

“Little star.”

Shane puffed out a little laugh at that, before kissing Ilya one more time for good measure. Then he opened the door and pushed Ilya out onto the porch, closing the door quickly. The curtain next to the door rustled as Shane peeked out with Rosie in his arms, as if Ilya would not notice him staring. Ilya was almost grateful for that shove, because if Shane didn’t do it then he would have given up the rest of his career to stay there forever. But he couldn’t, because he had a cup to win. And this time, there would be one more person standing at the front of his mind, keeping his mama company, his constellation of freckles and all.

Chapter End Notes

(Updated 12/27/2025) Thanks for reading! I mention this in the next chap, but what started as a one-shot really took on a life of it's own. I hope you enjoy the coming chapters, and many thanks to FandomNic for their ideas and inspiration.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

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

Zegras' left side is going to be weak tonight, make sure you get in there.

Need to get in somewhere else tonight ;)

Is now really a good time for this

Any time is good time for you

I beg you to focus

In the midst of all the commotion in the Bears' dressing room, adrenaline running high for their bout against the Philadelphia Flight, Ilya's focus sat squarely on his phone. It had been a few months since he and Shane had crossed paths, but Shane and his observations had become a pre-game ritual of sorts, him dropping tidbits of advice or info about whatever team the Bears were going against. Most of the time they were the little things that Ilya had already noticed, a limp in the opposing right wing or a tightness in their center's jaw. Nonetheless, he valued each and every text, because if Shane was able to recognize these little nuances as well, it meant that he was on the right track. It also meant that he could tease his boyfriend, likely sitting at the front desk of the Hollander Inn or busy in the kitchen preparing dinner for himself, game playing on the tiny screen of his phone. The playoffs were in full swing and Ilya was practically locked down in his room to prevent any distractions. Thus, the moments in between all of the hubbub were filled nearly exclusively with covert phone calls and texts under the table.

"This Ottawa girl has you whipped, Roz. Never seen you blush like this."

It was only when Marlow spoke up that he realized the goofy grin on his face was definitely not appropriate given their circumstances. It dropped into a flat line in a second, a long-reliable expression of indifference.

"Fuck off, Marlow, I do not blush. Russians do not do this."

"You are a little red," Connors said as he sidled to Ilya's left, sitting on the bench and preparing his stick with tape.

"Fuck you too, Connors."

"Whatever you say, cap."

"So when are we going to meet her?" Marlow asked, leaning against his locker. For as much as Ilya liked Marlow, he had been obsessed with Ilya's 'Ottawa girl' these past few games, and it was getting annoying. Ilya turned away from him and towards the rest of the team, raising his voice to get their attention.

“Anyone have a nice girl for Marlow? He is like goalie on island, dick in hand and watching everyone else fuck around.”

Marlow scoffed at his statement, shaking his head before proceeding to get the rest of his gear in order. The rest of the team lit up with chuckles with the exception of Feller, one of the goalies, who looked up with a mock-offended expression. Ilya mouthed out a quick *sorry* to him.

“You’ll peep one day, Rozanov. You’ve been carrying us ever since Ottawa, not my fault I want to meet your lucky charm.”

“Get your own. Tonight, if possible. Philly girl will be perfect for you.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

The game against the Flight was easy, Zegras’ slight limp easy to exploit and score two goals on. He didn’t even need to grab any penalties to get them. After all was said and done, the Bears returned to their locker room. A few WAGs were milling around the place, giving their significant others kisses or hugs and toting their children. Ilya tried not to stare at them too hard.

Later that night, alone in his hotel room, Ilya’s phone lit up with the contact *zvyozdochka*. A facetime preview of Shane appeared, glasses clad and shifting around to get comfortable on his bed. It only rang once before Ilya picked up.

“Hi, moy pomidor.”

“Hey, baby. You did great tonight.”

“Like every other night.”

“Like every other night. Told you that Zegras’ left side was jacked up.”

“Yes you did. Definitely would not have remembered that his ankle shattered into thousand bits last season without you telling me.”

“And you’re welcome for that reminder. What would you do without me?”

“Use my eyes. And brain. And google. And the million podcasts about his injury.”

“You’re telling me you’d prefer the opinions of Man in the fucking Crease over my expertise?”

“They’re never wrong about Scott Hunter. Good enough for me.”

“I call him hot one time and now I mean nothing to you.”

“Nothing at all. Zilch. Now where is my baby?”

As if on cue, Rosie jumped onto Shane's bed and positioned herself right next to Shane's face to look at the camera.

"There she is! Aw, you miss me so much, don't you Miss Rosie?" Ilya's voice slipped into the baby voice he used when talking to the dachshund, ridiculous and over-exaggerated.

"She knew you for less than a day and loves you more than the man who raised her."

"Because she knows who her real dad is. Don't you, Rosie?"

Rosie whined in response, her wet nose coming in closer to the camera to give it a sniff.

"See. She knows."

"Whatever. What was dinner for tonight?"

"Sad piece of salmon, brown rice, same old shit. What about you?"

"Tried making some pirozhki. Almost burned down the inn since I was too busy watching you."

Ilya smiled at that. The day before Shane made shchi, and the day before that it was blini. Their text history contained walls of recipes, all of them his mama's. Or at least as much as Ilya could remember of them.

"Your mother and father would not be happy."

"They certainly wouldn't. Speaking of, they're staying over here for a while. They finalized a deal over in Montreal."

"Good for them."

"Yeah, really great. We watched your game tonight, actually. I think that they think my crush on you is coming back."

"Like it ever died?"

"I got better at hiding it. But all the Russian food and stuff, they just had that look in their eyes. Like they knew."

"You think your mother will take you to gay bar again?"

"It was enough of a disaster the first time that I think she learned her lesson."

They both chuckled at that before lapsing into a comfortable silence, staring at each other's portrait. Rosie had curled up into a ball next to Shane, the rise and fall of her chest and dreaming snuffles filling up the quiet.

"You think she will mind? That we are together?"

“Other than the fact that she hates you for knocking out the Cens last year, I don’t think she’d actually be mad about it. Why do you ask?”

“Nothing.”

Shane gave him a look that was just as cutting through the screen as it would be in real life.

“You can’t be serious.”

“I don’t know. Thought you would like to tell her.” It was said with an air of indifference, one that Ilya could tell Shane saw through immediately.

“Ilya, we’ve already talked about this. Like, a thousand times over at this point. You don’t have to do anything that would put you in danger just for me.”

“I know. Just...”

Ilya’s eyes scrunched closed. He brought up his hand to pinch at the bridge of his nose. Figuring out what he would say next was hard, despite the numerous times the two of them have had this conversation. Those times didn’t make his next words come out any easier. If anything, they only made them harder to bear.

“I am hiding you like secret, zvyozdochka. And I want you to be happy.”

“My happiness doesn’t depend on other people knowing about us. It depends on you winning the cup this year.”

They laughed together before staring at each other again, unblinking. Ilya traced the path of Shane’s freckles, from cheek to cheek. Every night, looking at them felt like looking at the night sky after only seeing shadows for one’s whole life. Ilya thought back to the WAGs. All of them gathered in the locker rooms and going up to their partners without a second glance. He imagined Shane with them, disgusted expression as Ilya’s drenched-in-sweat face came close to his to plant a kiss on his freckles. Would his teammates pay them any mind in the same way they ignored the other WAGs?

“Besides, what the hell is my mom going to think if I just spring the fact that we’re dating onto her? She’ll think I’m crazy.”

“Maybe you are a little crazy for dating me.”

“Maybe. You are definitely crazy for dating me.”

“You are telling me it is crazy to date my stalker?”

“Definitely one of the worst meet-cutes you can have.”

“What is meet-cute?”

“Like in a romcom. Romance comedy. The two leads spill coffee on each other, they meet at a record store and grab the same record, they carpool together and have a lengthy

conversation, so on and so forth.”

“All at same time?”

“No, genius. Whenever you come back we’re having a movie marathon.”

“Isn’t there another type of marathon you would rather have?” Ilya waggled his brows at the camera, causing Shane to devolve into a fit of giggles.

“You act like we can’t do both.”

“One is much better use of time than the other.”

“To you, pervert.”

“You are saying you do not want to have 24 hour sex marathon with *the* Ilya Rozanov?”

“We’d be getting noise complaints from the guests, it would be worse for business than a one-star Yelp review.”

“Okay, Mr. Businessman.”

Shane stuck his middle finger up to the camera.

“You’re going to be playing Ottawa next week, right?”

“Yes. I have tickets if you and your family want to come.”

“You want us to watch you beat the Cens’ asses? Definitely won’t be on my mom’s good side.”

“Probably not. Was being serious, though. About telling your parents.”

“We don’t have to.”

“And yet I want to.”

Shane looked at him with a little smile, both sad and affectionate.

“Okay. Will we have time to see each other when you’re here?”

“Enough time for dinner.”

“Then we can tell them together.”

“You will have to hide the knives from your mother.”

“Noted. Nothing but soup then.”

Given how much Shane had told Ilya about his mother, headstrong and passionate, a spoon in her hands would be more than enough to kill Ilya. If anything, it would only make her efforts

stronger.

“So do you want to...” Shane trailed off, his tone suggestive.

“Of course.”

“One second, then.”

Shane’s phone shook a little as he carefully picked up Rosie, disappearing from the camera briefly. As he returned, his ears were tinged a light pink, glasses off and shirtless. This was another mainstay of their calls, acting as their bookend to whatever conversation consumed them previously. Watching Shane open up to him like a flower was like some kind of reward for the emotion that poured out of Ilya when they talked. Today, it had a two-fold edge of satisfaction: the lingering glow of his victory, and the unburdening relief that they would finally let whatever they were come into the light.

“Glasses back on.”

“Ottawa girl here tonight?”

“Get your head in the game, Marlow.”

“Should take your own advice. A hawk looking for mice in a field is less observant than you.”

Ilya was being as observant as Marlow said, scanning the throng of people and trying to make sense of the layout of the Canadian Tire Centre. When his eyes eventually did wander onto Shane, his parents sitting together next to him, he felt the edges of his lips pull up into a near imperceptible smile.

As the first line of the Bears and the Centaurs got into position, Ilya looked up at the opposing center, Boyle.

“Deja vu, eh Rozanov?”

“Yes. Hat trick will make me just as happy as last season.”

“Remember when we beat you in January? Will be just as easy.”

“I am shaking in my skates,” Ilya’s voice moved in an exaggerated warble.

When the puck dropped, Ilya gained possession first, darting off towards the Centaurs’ goal and immediately scoring on them. One third of the way to a hat trick. It really was deja vu.

As soon as Ilya opened the door to the Hollander Inn, he could hear the sound of claws against wood.

“My baby! How are you doing today Miss Rosie?”

Rosie jumped at Ilya, short paws only coming up to his knees. He kneeled down, allowing her to get a few good licks at his face while he scratched behind her all-too-big ears.

“And what about me?”

Ilya looked up at Shane, clad in a yellow cable knit sweater and his glasses, hair slightly dampened from showering off all the excitement from the game. It was only when the two of them made eye contact that Ilya realized how much he truly missed Shane. How their digital selves were no replacement for the real thing.

“And how are you doing today, Mr. Landlord?”

“Well my home team got their asses beat, so not the greatest.”

“You should have known better than betting on them to be anything but bad.”

“Oh I know. That’s why I bet on you this time.”

Ilya stood and moved closer to Shane, ducking down to give him a peck on the lips. Before he could make contact, Shane playfully pushed his head to the side and opted to give him a hug, arms wrapped around Ilya’s stomach. The touch was satisfying, a million times more contact than they had in the past months, but it was not nearly enough to quench the thirst for Shane that had developed in their distance. He came in closer to Ilya’s ear, voice dropping to a whisper.

“There’s guests around.”

Ilya nodded in understanding, but that understanding did not erase the pang of hurt resonating within him at the idea that this was all they could be when in public. Not just in public, but in any room in Shane’s house not behind closed doors.

Ilya disengaged from the hug first, his touches lingering on Shane until the very last moment they couldn’t make contact, looking into Shane’s eyes all the while. Shane also seemed to be dissatisfied with the limited touch they could get away with, glossy eyes shining up at Ilya and that sad little smile coloring his face. Ilya would much prefer to see those wide, face-splitting grins of his, but this would do for now.

“Come to the kitchen. My parents are waiting.”

“Did you tell them that I would be coming?”

“Kind of. Told them a ‘good friend’ got me the tickets.”

“You’re going to give them a heart attack.”

“They’ll get over it.”

Shane paused.

“At least, I hope so.”

The two of them walked through the inn towards the kitchen, Rosie trotting alongside them as they went. Along the way, Ilya noted all the little knick knacks that Shane had procured since his last visit. On top of one of the dining room cabinets was a set of nesting dolls, lined up in a row from mother to child.

As the door to the kitchen swung open, Ilya saw the forms of Shane’s parents fluidly maneuvering around the space like it was second nature, wordlessly passing each other ingredients and utensils without looking at each other. Shane’s mother looked up first, face slackening from the silent satisfaction that filled it previously. Shane’s father, his hand reaching backwards, noticed the stillness that possessed his wife and turned away from the steam of the stove to face Ilya as well, shock written across his face like a mirror of Shane’s mother. It definitely wasn’t as bad as the face she was pulling, though.

“Shane. Why the hell is Ilya Rozanov in my kitchen?” Shane’s mother said it carefully, cautiously, like she was defusing a bomb or negotiating for hostages. Her eyes were trained directly on Ilya’s, and he pulled an awkward smile in turn.

“Surprise!” Shane yelled out, arms presenting Ilya like he was a big prize.

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

The two of them were baffled, that much was obvious. It didn’t seem like Shane had hidden the knives as he promised, as Yuna Hollander was frozen halfway through slicing a cucumber. The knife made a sharp clunk against the wooden cutting board as she completed the cut, putting it down (thank god) and moving to stand in front of him and Shane. Shane’s father followed behind her.

“So. This is your... good friend?” Her eyes flicked between the two of them, analyzing the twin looks of apprehension on their faces.

“In a way. Why don’t we all sit down. Please.”

Shane’s dad’s eyes widened, seemingly struck by some huge revelation.

“Shit! The soup.”

He scurried back to the stove, leaving his wife to stare at Shane and Ilya with suspicion.

“I thought I taught you better than to fraternize with the enemy.”

“Let’s just sit down. We can explain.”

“You think I want to sit down with the man responsible for knocking the Cens out of the playoffs? Twice? And we had front row seats this time.”

“Sorry, Mrs. Hollander.”

Shane's mother simply shook her head and sighed, resigned to whatever the fuck she was being confronted with in the same way she was resigned to the failures of her team. That was a bit harsh. But true. He wasn't really sorry, to be honest. It wasn't like the Centaurs were a hard team to beat when he put in even a little bit of effort, but he would rather not get off on the wrong foot.

"Call me Yuna. Come, sit."

"And you can call me David, Ilya," Shane's father called over his shoulder.

Yuna returned to the island and her cutting board, while Shane and Ilya sat themselves down on one of the chairs opposite of her. She picked up the knife again, which made Ilya's heart skip a beat.

"So what's going on with the two of you? How did you guys even meet?"

"Back in November, when the Bears were going against the Cens—"

"Which we won," Yuna interjected.

"Honey, let him finish," David responded, hand outstretched backwards. Yuna passed him a bottle of sesame sauce without looking back.

"Sorry. We have to take our wins where we can get them."

"Is okay. We played very bad that day, is true. But also, they are the reason why me and Shane met in the first place."

"It was because you were stupid enough to walk through a blizzard, but okay," Shane shot back at Ilya.

"There have been snow storms in Moscow on any day that were worse than that joke of a 'blizzard.' Weather people were lying that day. Don't trust them."

"So wait, you left your team to stay here?" Yuna questioned.

"Not to stay *here*, just wanted to get away from all of them. Was accident that we met."

"Fate," Shane added. Ilya looked at Shane, soft and loaded with the memory of what went down that day. Shane returned the look with a similar expression. Out of the corner of his eye, Ilya could see Yuna's eyes darting between the two of them. He couldn't tell if she was starting to figure out what was happening between him and Shane, but if she did, then she was being remarkably calm about it given her previous chirps.

"And then you became... friends? I'm surprised you even recognized Shane. It's been, what, eight or nine years since you were supposed to be in the same rookie class?"

"I didn't remember who he was, not at first. We start talking about hockey, his injury, all that, and it comes back to me. And—"

Ilya was interrupted by David slamming down a gas burner in front of him, along with a large pot of steaming broth, clouding the air between Ilya and Yuna.

“Is only soup we are having?”

“Shabu shabu,” David corrected as he returned with a large platter filled with various thinly sliced meats and vegetables. “You cook everything in the soup, really great stuff. Anyway, what were you saying before I rudely interrupted you?” He leaned on the island, other hand holding onto his hip as he looked expectantly at Ilya. Looking at the two of them now, standing opposite to him and Shane, it was easy to pick out the little details of both of their genetics on Shane’s face.

He looked over to Shane, brows furrowed and hopefully transmitting the message that he didn’t know what the fuck to say in terms of their relationship. Shane seemed to understand and took over.

“Well, Ilya stayed the night and we just sort of... clicked. We talked a lot about hockey and that stupid rivalry stuff everyone was obsessed with. It’s actually pretty funny, I didn’t think we would get along as well as we did.”

“Well, it was mainly your cooking. You did good at teaching him, Yuna. Everything was amazing.”

Yuna gave him a closed-mouth smile, comforting. If Ilya closed his eyes, he could imagine his own mama looking at him in the same way after they finished up in the kitchen, sitting down at their dining room table as his mama watched Ilya dig in.

“Thank you, Ilya. Had to teach him everything I knew, it wasn’t like David was going to be teaching him.”

“She’s a liar. And you are too, Shane. I’m usually the cook around here, I even made the soup!” David joked.

“You make the same five things, dad. I can only have so much chicken parm before getting tired.”

“True. And all you did tonight was turn on the burner, honey. Anyways, let’s eat. The food at the Tire has not gotten any better,” Yuna said as she gestured to the pot before leaving to grab some bowls and chopsticks.

They proceeded to dig in, Shane turning to him every so often to point out his favorite vegetables out of the spread. Every time Shane did so, Ilya could see Yuna and David share a meaningful look out of his peripherals. When Shane turned to him once more to extol the virtues of enoki mushrooms, Ilya leaned in close and dropped his voice to a whisper.

“When do you want to tell them?”

Shane glanced up at his parents before dropping his eyes.

“Soon. It’ll come up.”

“We don’t have to do this.”

“And yet I want to,” Shane joked back. Ilya gave him a little smirk and returned back to his bowl, grabbing a slice of ribeye and dunking it into the soup. David cleared his throat before speaking up.

“So, what else did you guys get up to while Ilya was here? Just cooking?”

“Mostly. We actually ended up making some Russian food, Ilya showed me how.”

“Is a lie. He figured it out all on his own. Only helped him to make some dumplings, we call them pelmeni.”

“No wonder you cook so much Russian food now,” Yuna said, staring at Shane with a knowing look. Shane blushed and looked down, obviously feeling called out. Something about his embarrassment was so cute to Ilya that he couldn’t help but join in.

“He has told me all about his experiments. Was insult to my mama’s recipes,” Ilya teased, sarcasm laid thick.

“I’m never cooking for you again, Rozanov.” The look Shane was fixing him with was venomous, humor still dancing underneath his dark eyes.

“You will not be saying that when I win our next bet.”

“You guys bet on Shane making Russian food?” David asked.

“Either Shane making Russian food or me cleaning the inn. We played a game at that little rink nearby, had to raise stakes.”

Whatever the right words to say were, the ones that came out of Ilya’s mouth did not seem to be them. Shane stiffened next to him, and Yuna and David paused. A tense silence broke the warmth that had slowly developed between their group.

“You took him to the rink? Shane, what were you thinking? Coaching the kids is one thing, but your knee is still messed up. You could’ve gotten hurt again, and god knows what would’ve happened if Ilya was as dirty as he is in a regular game and checked you into the boards. No offense, Ilya.”

“None taken. And you did not tell me it was that bad, Shane.” Ilya felt his brows draw together as he turned towards Shane. Shane stared back at him and his mother with exasperation, one that did not serve to calm Ilya down any bit. This was one thing that was silently agreed upon to be a boundary not to cross during their nightly calls. Ilya vaguely recalled some of the finer details of the injury, his own internet stalking of Shane yielding various news articles about what happened, but he never probed any deeper than the words ‘concussion’ and ‘broken’ for the same reason that he couldn’t bring himself to watch the actual footage. And directly asking Shane about what happened was definitely not in the cards that first day. Looking back on that day now and the way that Shane fell before they ended their game, Ilya couldn’t help the stomach-churning guilt that began to take over. What

would've happened if that fall was any worse? He was tempted to ask Shane right then and there. However, given the way that Shane's parents were reacting, that aspect of their game didn't seem appropriate to reveal at that moment.

"Because it isn't that bad."

The looks on everyone's faces were disbelieving, as if they were pinning Shane down with doubt. He groaned in response, tossing his head back and closing his eyes. As he brought his head back up to face his mother, father, and Ilya, his eyes were averted and trained only on the bubbling pot of soup.

"I'm a fully grown adult. Besides, it was, like, the only opportunity I had to play against him ever, and I wasn't about to pass it up. You remember how much I wanted to go against him before the injury."

"You are as stubborn as a damn mule," David said while shaking his head.

"Like throwing peas at a wall," Ilya added in agreement. With the way everyone else was staring at Ilya, it was like he sprouted another head.

"What? Is Russian saying. Means same thing."

"Can we please just drop this?" The way Shane said it was so tired, so filled with upset, that Ilya knew that his boyfriend was probably spiraling in that little head of his. Of course the topic wouldn't be dropped, but it was probably for the best to wait until they were alone.

"Fine," Yuna said, resignation evident in her voice. "And of course I remember how excited you were to go against Ilya, how could I ever forget? Limping around the house, it was Rozanov this and Rozanov that. Watching all his games, reading all the articles about him, you were obsessed with him."

Yuna turned to Ilya.

"Did you know that he was obsessed with you?"

"Oh yes. Was very obvious when we first met."

"Really? Well, did he tell you he named—" "I don't think Ilya needs to know that, Mom."
"—his dog after you?"

Oh. Ilya slowly swiveled his head towards Shane, who was currently covering his face, ears burning bright crimson in embarrassment. Rosie. Rozy. Now that it was spelled out for him, it was quite obvious. And it was so cute that Ilya couldn't stop a stupid grin from flooding his face.

"He did not tell me that. No wonder she loves me so much more than Shane."

"I put the food in her bowl and the clothes on her back, and that's how she repays me."

"She knows who her real dad is, I have told you this, Shane."

While it was a good comeback on any other night, the word *dad* was probably not the best choice of words. If Shane's parents weren't sure before, then that was definitely what pushed them from skepticism into belief. Yuna and David looked at each other once more with that knowing look, raised brows asking 'are you seeing what I'm seeing?' before turning back to him and Shane, silently asking the question that was hanging in the air. Shane noticed that glance between them and let out a deep breath before lacing his fingers into Ilya's and placing their hands onto the table. He straightened his back to gear up for his next words, nerves disappearing.

"Yes, me and Ilya are dating. Have been for the past few months."

His confession worked in fulfilling his parent's suspicions, tension being released from their shoulders and faces.

"Oh thank god you said it, honey. Cause if you weren't, I was just about to ask," Yuna said, hand placed over her heart.

"Good thing that crush of yours worked out," David added.

Shane's parents had smiles on their faces, directed at both him and Shane. Having finally said that aloud was relieving, and revealing it to the most important people in Shane's life only made it more satisfying. Shane seemed to be pleased as well, his board-straight back relaxing.

"You had us thinking your stalking habit was coming back, would've had to call the police," David joked.

"Or take him to gay bar," Ilya tacked on. Yuna and David burst out laughing at that, and Shane rolled his eyes with a small and affectionate smirk on his face.

"Oh god, he really told you about that?" Yuna rubbed at her eyes to remove the tears of laughter pooling in them.

"Just that you took him. I need to hear everything that Shane is not telling me."

"I don't think that's really necess—"

"I'll do you one better, I have pictures."

Yuna pulled out her phone, opening it to the gallery and scrolling years back. Pictures of her with David, her with Shane, and various large houses flew by until she found what she was looking for. It was a picture of her and Shane in front of some gay bar, rainbow lighting cast behind them and the bright flash of her camera exposing their faces. A much younger Shane was at the center of the photo, eyes widened and mouth pulled into a semi-terrified smile. Meanwhile, Yuna had her arms around his shoulders, a broad grin that was both proud and shit-eating occupying her face. It was a cute photo, knowing how it kick-started Shane's journey towards self-acceptance with his mother behind him to support him all the way. An opportunity that he would never get to have with his own mama. Ilya's heart thumped in its chest at that reminder.

“Wow. I see your sense of fashion has not changed.”

“You’re acting like you’re any better.”

“You are saying you do not like Gaultier?”

“I would burn that ugly leopard in a second.”

Ilya turned to David.

“Did you take this?”

“Oh, no. Yuna took him without telling me. It was a big surprise when they came home and told me everything that went down.”

“Well I had to do *something*,” Yuna added on, “and I went up to the most attractive guy there and asked for his help. I think he ended up flirting with Shane after I left.”

“He was not flirting, mom.”

“He definitely was, Shane. I saw those eyes, you can’t convince me otherwise.”

“Well, it’s not like I would know.”

Shane looked at Ilya.

“Pretty sure I told you this, but I tried to lock myself in the bathroom and call my mom after one too many hands tried to grope my ass. Probably the worst thing I could do, when I went in it was like that orgy scene at the end of The Matrix.”

Ilya couldn’t help himself from laughing at Shane, who looked like he wanted to curl into a ball. At the same time, he could feel the heat of jealousy simmering in his stomach, at the idea that anyone else had touched Shane in ways more intimately than he was able to, ways that he was craving to do for the past months. Ways that he would have if they had met any earlier.

“And you did not take that opportunity?”

Shane gave him a look that screamed ‘really?’, right eyebrow tilted upwards and a light flush appearing on his cheeks. Yuna giggled at Shane’s expression.

“That’s what I was saying. It didn’t even work, even when he came home it was still Rozanov, Rozanov, Rozanov, as much as he tried to hide it. You should’ve seen the way he was watching you when the Bears went against the Cens in 2011.”

That cooled the envy within him. The idea that Shane was so obsessed with him that no one else would ever measure up to him was comforting. If he was any saner, he might’ve found it weird. But they were way past the point of sanity.

“Shane confessed his feelings first, you know.”

Shane's parents looked impressed at that.

"Didn't know you had it in you, Shane," David said.

"Wasn't like I could hide it any longer. I was acting like an idiot in front of him..." Shane trailed off, blushing as he remembered those shaky first moments.

"Yes you were. Thought you would ask for autograph."

"I still have your receipt from that day, just as good."

"Ah, so on top of stalking you admit to fraud?"

"You were the one that told me you were renting out that room. Don't think that counts as fraud."

"Found somewhere better to stay," he winked at Shane, "will need to cancel lease."

"Oh really? Where are you planning on moving?"

"To the room at the end of the hall."

"Pretty full up already. I have a real estate mogul and his dog staying there."

"Too bad for them."

The two of them attempted to stifle their laughter, failing almost immediately. Yuna and David watched on with affectionate smiles as he and Shane fell apart, Shane's breathless little giggles causing Ilya to laugh even harder. How was he lucky enough to have this? Acceptance, love, they were both striking Ilya's heart. They were things he thought were lost to him forever, yet somehow they wandered back into his life by chance.

The rest of the meal went by quickly, and Ilya was stuffed by the end of it. The sheer amount of food that he ate would definitely make the team nutritionist have an aneurysm, but it was worth it.

"Are you ready for the rest of the playoffs, Ilya?" Yuna said.

"Of course. I think it's the Bears' year again." As Ilya said those words, he looked over at Shane. Everyone was at top form, due in part to their captain finally having his head in the game.

"Watch out for the Admirals. Scott Hunter has been on a roll this season. Their second and third lines aren't anything to scoff at either."

"We can deal with them. I'm sure of it."

"We're sure you will. Can't believe we have to root for the Bears now," David joked. Yuna slapped his shoulder playfully before picking up the pot of soup, now largely reduced in

volume and darkened with the flavor of the various meats and vegetables cooked in it throughout the meal.

“Let me help you, Yuna,” Ilya said as he started gathering all the utensils and plates left on the island.

“Thank you, Ilya. Shane, can you take Rosie out? I hear her running around out there. And David, I need you to call the agent in Montreal, she's been on my ass all night and I just can't deal with her right now.”

“Of course, honey,” David responded, giving Yuna a sweet kiss as he grabbed her phone and walked out the kitchen.

“Sure you don't need my help, mom?” The words were even when they came out of Shane's mouth, but one look at his face told Ilya about the apprehension he was feeling at leaving the two of them alone.

“Me and your mom will be okay, zvyozdochka. Rosie needs her second dad.”

Shane rolled his eyes at that, but he seemed less on edge. He kissed Ilya on the cheek before getting up and exiting the kitchen as well, the patter of Rosie running up to him floating into the kitchen briefly.

Ilya and Yuna stood at the sink, quiet and taking their time with the dishes.

“I've never seen him this happy, you know.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah. After he got out of the hospital and recovered I could barely get him out of his room. He would sleep all day, barely ate for a while.”

Like Ilya. Like his mama.

“You've probably heard all about this, but he was really devastated. Didn't know what to do with himself, and we didn't know what to do either. We made him work here and he seems to like it okay, but we can tell it hasn't ever been enough.”

“Yes. He has told me about how he beat himself up. I saw it all in his eyes that first night.”

“You know what they say about eyes.”

“I do not think I do, sorry.”

“They're like a window into a person's soul. And Shane's soul was not happy at all.”

Yuna turned off the sink and turned to him.

“Do you love hockey, Ilya?”

Ilya shrugged. It was a tough question to answer.

“I like it enough.”

“But not love?”

Silence stretched between them. Yuna passed him a dish to dry.

“No. Not love. Not like Shane, or you.”

Yuna nodded in response.

“I do it to get away from Russia. Also because I am good. The best, only second to Shane, supposedly. I think I would love it more if I was going against him.”

“He would have loved it a lot more too, if that's even possible.”

“Where do you think he would be?”

“He would’ve taken your spot on the Bears. First draft pick,” Yuna winked at him.

“Funny. He said same thing.”

“Of course he did. Why, where do you think he would end up?”

“Probably the Voyageurs. All that rivalry bull.”

Yuna laughed at that and passed him a handful of forks, pointing out the utensil drawer.

“God, that rivalry stuff really was the worst. I’m not going to lie and say that I wasn’t invested in it at some point, but pitting two teenagers against each other like that would’ve ended up bad.”

“Was not all bad. Made me feel like I had something to prove. Someone who could actually challenge me.”

“Was he?”

“Was he what?”

“A challenge. When you did your little bet at the rink.”

“Oh, absolutely. Still one of the best games of hockey I have ever played.”

Yuna smiled, sad and filled with years of guilt at the idea that she wasn’t able to help Shane achieve the dreams that he had worked for his whole life towards. Sad at the idea that Shane would’ve been at the pinnacle of the sport if he had the chance.

“Good. I’m glad that he could finally go against you. Even beyond all the boyfriend stuff, I think it helped him, in a way. Helped his soul to finally heal.”

Yuna turned to him, that smile still on her face, but now directed at Ilya. It almost made him stop breathing. Because beneath all of that guilt was a mix of pride and satisfaction. It was striking, the way those emotions instantly made him think of his mama. Those first few games at that little rink in Moscow, his mama on the sidelines cheering him on like that was her purpose in the world. He could see that same fire in Yuna, that same need to brighten the world for Shane by any means necessary. And Ilya seemed to be her solution to her son's pain. Ilya wasn't sure what to say in response.

"You're good for him, Ilya. Oddly enough I can see it in the way you two bicker. But I also see it in the way you just seem to know what he's thinking. He's never had that kind of love before."

"I have not had that before either. I am lucky to have him."

Yuna nodded once, turning back to the big pot to dry it.

"You said you play to get away from home? Boston must be such a change from Russia."

"Yes, very. I love it, though, much more than Russia. Russia has many memories that I can't seem to escape."

"Like what?"

"My family. My father is sick. Dementia. My mama is dead. My brother is dick."

"I'm very sorry to hear all of that, Ilya."

Ilya shrugged.

"Is okay. Very complicated. But with Shane, everything is less complicated."

"Well, I'm happy that he could help you out too."

"He always does."

With all of the dishes dried and put away, Yuna turned back to Ilya once more.

"Listen. I want you to know you will always be welcome here, or in Montreal, or wherever we decide to take the inn. It takes a lot of bravery to do what you two did tonight."

"What, like coming here after I beat the Cens?"

It was said with a smile, one that Yuna matched, accompanied by a roll of her eyes.

"That too. But you know what I mean."

Ilya did. His mind ran through every permutation of this night since he and Shane first broached the topic of revealing their relationship to Shane's parents. They all felt catastrophized, visions of slammed doors and sour looks coloring his fantasies. Very few of them felt like a fairy-tale ending, and none of them measured up to the reality of what would

happen. These same thoughts were mixed and matched with every person in Ilya's life, past and present. His team, his father, his mama. The world. This night was one step in the right direction, and suddenly it felt as though nearly all of his fantasies about coming out were marked with acceptance and love rather than disgust.

"We'll be rallying behind you from now on. You better win that cup, Ilya Rozanov."

"I cannot imagine any other ending."

Yuna came in close and pulled him into a hug, tight and warm. He had heard so many words about a mother's embrace, about the ability to cure any wounds someone was facing, but it wasn't like he had that opportunity since he was a child. That last touch between him and his mama was cold, her lying on the floor as he pleaded with her to blink her eyes and tell him everything would be okay. Now, feeling Yuna's small frame against his and her love being transmitted through that touch, he could finally define what a mother's embrace felt like in adulthood. It felt like a bed, blankets tousled and warm with the heat of a body previously there, the clang of pots and pans in the kitchen traveling through the walls letting him know that everything would be alright in the world, that he could do anything. Ilya's arms scrambled to return the hug.

Yuna pulled away, but there was still that pride in her eyes. Now, Ilya really needed to win that cup, the image in his mind stretching to fit Shane's parents right next to Shane and his mama.

"Good luck, Ilya."

"Thank you, Yuna."

At that moment, Ilya felt his phone buzz in his pocket. It was Marlow, reminding him of their curfew.

"It is late. I have to say goodbye to Shane."

"Go do that. He's probably back by now, check in his room."

Ilya moved to leave the kitchen, but as he stood in the doorway, Yuna called back out to him.

"And Ilya! Have you ever thought about doing any commercials?"

"I did an Adidas campaign in my third season, was okay."

"Well, give me a call if you change your mind. Can't let those good looks go to waste, those cologne ads would kill to have you."

Ilya barked out a laugh at that.

"I will keep it in mind, Yuna."

He exited into the empty dining room, taking a deep breath. The events of this night were unfolding in a way that he did not expect, regardless of how much Shane had reassured him

that everything would work out fine. He spent the rest of the walk up to Shane's room replaying everything in his mind. When he reached the door, he gave it a few sharp raps.

"Come in."

Opening the door to Shane's room revealed a very minimally decorated space, most of the furniture and accents navy blue, in contrast to the vibrancy of the rest of the inn. A few pictures of Shane with his parents and Rosie were framed and sitting on his bedside table, and his gear kit was leaning on one wall. The blade of his stick was freshly wrapped, rainbow tape on the blade shiny. In the corner was a small dog bed, black and yellow like the Bears' colors. Above his bed, two pennants were attached to the wall. One of them was for the Centaurs, while the other was for the Bears. Underneath them was Shane, sitting on his bed and wiping Rosie's paws off. Ilya sat down next to him, the bed buckling under both of their weights.

"That went well, *zvyozdochka*."

"Of course it did, Ilya. Told you everything would be fine."

"You didn't keep your promise, though."

Shane looked at him, confused.

"What promise?"

"That you would hide the knives. Thought your mother would stab me."

Shane let out a little huff of laughter, relief obvious in his features.

"She wouldn't actually do that."

"I know, Shane."

Ilya scooped closer to Shane, laying down onto his lap and looking up into Shane's eyes. The weight seemed to be a lot for Shane, who let out a little *oof* as Ilya flopped onto him. They stared at each other for a while, silently, eyes scanning each other's faces with soft admiration.

"Can we kiss now, sweetheart?"

Shane smirked as he leaned down and planted a kiss on Ilya's forehead, then his temples, then his nose, and then finally on his lips. It was a trail of love, and each one felt more satisfying than the last. His hand landed in Ilya's hair, gently massaging at his scalp.

"What did you and my mom talk about?"

"She wants to be my manager. Sitting up on one of those billboards advertising watches."

"Of course she did. Anything else?"

“Your injury. How hard it was for you.”

Shane grimaced at that, pulling back from Ilya slightly. Ilya’s hand moved to grab onto Shane’s, his thumb rubbing at the skin.

“It wasn’t that bad.”

Shane rolled his eyes at the expression of disbelief Ilya was pulling.

“It really wasn’t, Ilya. I had to get over it at some point.”

“But you are not over it.”

He seemed much more offended at that, pushing Ilya off of him and standing up. For all of Ilya’s supposed skill at perceiving the little details, it wasn’t until Shane started pacing that he noticed the slight limp in his right leg. Ilya stood up to follow him, standing behind Shane and wrapping his arms around his stomach, his head resting on top of Shane’s.

“I see it in your eyes, sometimes.”

“See what?”

“Sadness. I thought it was just because you were not playing or whatever, but I didn’t know you were *sad*.”

It made Ilya’s heart hurt, the thought of Shane going through the same motionless days as he did. That same emptiness in his heart that could consume him whole, blacken his thoughts, throw every bit of progress and growth into the garbage in favor of staring into the void of nothingness.

“I’m doing better.”

“What is better, to you?”

“Eating, sleeping, getting out of bed in the morning. It’s still hard, some days. And my knee definitely doesn’t help. Sometimes I wish they had just cut it off entirely.”

“Mm, and you would walk around with peg leg? How sexy.”

“Shut up,” Shane laughed out, lightly slapping Ilya’s arm.

“Why do you want to get rid of it?”

“It just... reminds me too much about what I’ve lost.”

“And you think amputating it would be better?”

“No. But at least it wouldn’t be like... I don’t know how to describe it. It’s kind of like living in halves. I can walk but I can’t run, I can skate but I can’t play, I can’t do the things that my whole life revolved around, that I loved. And my knee is the wall that blocks me from doing

anything. If I got rid of it, I could still do the Paralympics. Would kill to be there, actually. But as it stands, I feel kind of... worthless.”

Shane let out a wet snuffle, which made Ilya hold him even tighter. He walked both of them backwards onto the bed, carefully pulling Shane down to lay next to each other. Shane resolutely stared up at the ceiling, tears threatening to spill over. Ilya gently grabbed onto his chin and turned Shane’s face to look at him, his eyes tinged red and bottom lip wobbling. He calmed it down with a kiss, sensual and loving and salty with tears that Shane finally let flow.

“You are worth more than you could ever know, zvyozdochka. You aren’t just hockey, you know.”

“I do know that. But that doesn’t stop those feelings from taking over.”

Shane brought his hand up to Ilya’s cheek.

“You said you also feel like this? Depressed?”

“Always. Some days, it is too hard to bear.”

“I know how that feels.”

“You have made those days easier. I hope that I have done the same.”

“You have.”

Rosie, who was previously laying in her bed, jumped up and scooted in between the two of them. She licked at both of their faces, cleaning the tears off Shane, as well as the tears that Ilya didn’t realize were gathering in his own eyes.

“Tell me about what it was like. The injury, your life after, the inn. I want to know it all, moya lyubov. So I can be there for you when the days get hard.”

“Well. I don’t even know where to start.”

“Then how about what hockey felt like when you were growing up?”

Shane fell quiet at that.

“It was everything to me. When I was eight, I actually had a Cens themed birthday party, back when they were actually something. I spent so much time training, playing out on the ice with my team, doing everything I could to be the greatest because I knew I would be. Because I needed it like oxygen. Because I didn’t know any other way to live.”

“And the injury?”

“Terrible. Was a dirty hit, got boarded. I was out of commission for months. Had a concussion, torn ACL, and a herniated disc. I was in so much pain, I could barely move. Sometimes it still gets really bad, but it's a lot more manageable now. Had to do physical therapy for years after.”

“What happened to the guy that hit you?”

“I don’t even know. Think he got cut from his team, but I wasn’t paying any attention to that. Everyone else on my team and their team came to see me and support me, which was great, but they all kind of moved on afterwards. Barely had any friends on the team, so it wasn’t like I had any insider info.”

“You did not have any friends on your team?”

“Not really. Being only one of two Asians there wasn’t really helpful.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, beyond all the slurs and shit being thrown around... I guess it goes back to that thing about halves. I was white enough to be accepted by the team and good enough to avoid any of the harassment, but I wasn’t Asian enough to be accepted as one by anyone else in the community. Add on the whole being gay thing and it was the perfect storm for loneliness. Like I said that night we met, there’s parts of me that are grateful that I didn’t go into the league, because if I did then I think that self-hatred would’ve consumed me whole. Made me become someone who I’m not. But still, I’d like to think I could have made some difference for those little kids that looked like me, watching me become the best.”

Ilya understood how that felt. Not in the same way as Shane, of course. But hockey often felt like a prison. All of the culture molded him into the person he is today, and sometimes, he could feel that same self-hatred Shane was feeling burn him up inside.

“You would have been the best role model. Your name, your face, up on those billboards advertising watches. Sales would have been booming.”

Shane laughed at that, seemingly lighter having said everything that was weighing on him. In the low light of Shane’s room, even his freckles seemed to sparkle brighter than before. Ilya’s fingers brushed over them as they lay there, quiet and enjoying each other’s presence.

“And how about you, Ilya?”

“How about me what?”

“What’s on your mind? Playoffs, your family, whatever you want to talk about. I want to know it all.”

Ilya sighed. What was there to talk about? There was actually quite a bit, but transferring those thoughts into words would still be difficult. When he landed on a topic, it was one that he knew he could speak on with confidence.

“I told you about my mama. How she died when I was twelve.” Shane nodded.

“Well, she was the same as you and me. Sad. I... I was the one who found her. After she 'accidentally' swallowed a bottle of sleeping pills. Sorry,” he said, as he suddenly covered his face. Talking about his mama was one thing, but describing that nightmare was another. The last time he tried to describe it was when the police came to their house that night, and he

could barely get a word out without bursting into tears at the reminder of how his mama looked that night. Tinged blue, the dried salt of her tears marring the side of her face, hand grasping onto the smallest figurine from a matryoshka doll. Him. His mind flashed back to that series of matryoshka dolls in the dining room of the inn, arranged from mother to child. Typically, they are meant to symbolize motherhood, or the lineage of mother to offspring. How with each generation, there would be new life to revitalize the roots of the family, and the cycle would begin once more. But one night, his mother explained how they could also mean depth, or deep-rooted truths that could only be uncovered by one who puts the effort in. When Ilya thinks back to that bathroom, gaudy accents standing in contrast to the ugliness of death, he thinks of that little doll clenched in his mama's stiff fists. What was her truth? What were the facets of her story that had to be so delicately peeled away to find out who she truly was?

"My father. My brother. They never truly tried to know her. Never try to know me. I'm like a fucking ATM machine to them. And I hate them for it. But at the same time, I cannot help how much I want to know them as well."

Shane pulled his hands away from his face, tears in his eyes mirroring the ones that were openly falling from Ilya's. He brought Ilya in closer, their sniffles reverberating in each other's ears.

"I am so scared, Shane. About losing my father, as much of a dick as he is. Losing myself. Losing you in the same way I lost my mama."

"You will have me forever, Ilya. Me, my parents, this inn, we will always be here for you. Even if the world turns it's back on you, I'll be there right beside you."

Ilya nodded, wiping away the tears in his eyes. Rosie came up closer to his face and laid her head on his shoulder, soft whines coming out as she begged for Ilya to cuddle with her. Ilya was all too happy to oblige.

"Thank you, Shane. I do not want to know a world without you."

"And you never will. Not anymore."

Shane pulled him in for a kiss, chaste and gentle. If a mother's embrace was like a warm bed, then kissing Shane was like opening the door to a home filled with laughter, with memories.

"We should probably get you a therapist, Ilya."

"And you do not need one either?"

"I've had one. For the past few years. I think it would really help you."

Ilya thought about it for a second. The idea of talking to a stranger about his feelings was quite unappealing. It was different with Shane, that shared history served as a bridge. But if Shane was insistent upon it being able to help, then it wouldn't hurt to give it a try.

“Okay, zvyozdochka. And in return, you will promise me that you will not play hockey with me like that ever again.”

Shane whined, obviously sad that they wouldn't get their rematch after all. Honestly, Ilya was quite upset about it too, but it was much better this way. To make sure Shane would never get hurt like that again. And in the end, not knowing who would be better and chalking it up to a tie might be a more satisfying ending. Because if Shane won, Ilya knew he would hold that over his head for the rest of their days. Ilya probably wouldn't mind too much, though.

Ilya's phone buzzed in his pocket. It was Marlow, once again reminding him about their curfew. He was cutting it really close at this point.

“I have to go.”

“Alright.”

Shane stood up first, but Ilya grabbed onto his wrist and pulled him back onto the bed, locking their lips into one final kiss, one that they wouldn't be able to have outside of the secrecy of Shane's room.

“I love you.”

“I love you too. Now come on.”

Shane stood up again, pulling Ilya up. As the two walked downstairs, Ilya could hear the rustle of movement in each of the rooms they passed, laughter from couples, child-like thumps of feet running across the rooms, everything about the inn felt like it was alive with love.

“I'll grab my parents. Give me a second.”

Shane disappeared into the kitchen and reappeared with Yuna and David in tow. Yuna came in for a hug, whispering in his ear as they got closer.

“Remember what I said. I have connections at Armani.”

Ilya laughed at that, nodding in confirmation. Yuna looked up at him with that same pride that was in her eyes in the kitchen, before letting go and allowing David to come up to him for a solid handshake and hand on Ilya's shoulder.

“Make sure you win this season. We're all counting on it.”

“I will bring the cup here when I do.”

“Attaboy,” David smiled at him, patting his shoulder before pulling away.

Shane walked up to him next, giving him a tight hug, one that Ilya matched.

“Call me, okay?”

“I will be. Tonight.”

Ilya winked at Shane, causing that addicting blush to appear on Shane’s cheeks. Yuna and David laughed behind Shane, knowing of what would be going down. He should probably feel embarrassed, but all he felt was a growing sense of safety. It was because of that safety that he felt it appropriate to leave a final kiss on Shane’s cheeks, right on top of the splatter of freckles that spanned Shane’s visage. As he pulled away, Shane looked up at him, surprised, yet eyes filled with affection. Letting go of him was hard to convince himself to do, but he really had to leave or else LeClaire would have his head.

“Goodbye, zvyozdochka.”

“Bye, Ilya.”

And so Ilya left the inn, heart and stomach full, floating on a cloud of satisfaction. After leaving the Uber and getting to his room, he immediately called Shane to finish off the night on a high note. That night, coming undone with Shane felt much more meaningful, charged with a renewed sense of need. He went to sleep, mind filled with visions of Shane, of Yuna and David, of his mama, all of them together under one roof. This was a good day.

It only made the next morning feel even worse, like a comedown to the greatest psychedelic experience he’s ever had. His phone was blowing up, missed calls and texts from Shane, from Marlow, LeClaire. From Alexei. Alexei’s was the newest.

What is the meaning of this?

What followed was an article, the thumbnail a picture of last night, when he kissed Shane on the cheek. They both were so happy, satisfied. But the manner of the picture seemed to twist those emotions into something much uglier, something that was supposed to be hidden. It was taken at the top of the staircase in the Hollander Inn, its covert nature obvious in the way that the railing of the stairs nearly blocked both of their faces. If seeing the picture was bad, then the title of the article was even worse.

EXPOSED! ILYA ROZANOV CAUGHT KISSING MALE LOVER — FAMILY SECRETS, RUSSIA, AND WHO SHANE HOLLANDER REALLY IS

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed! This whole thing started as a one-shot but it spiraled out to so much more very quickly, and I want to thank everyone for their kind comments and support on the first chapter. Look out for the next chapter soon, as well as for future fics in this universe. Also, look forward to another chapter of [Hot Cue](#) in the coming days.

Kudos and comments deeply appreciated as always, much love <3

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya was no stranger to a bad morning-after. Usually, he tried to fall asleep while riding high on that triplicate wave of dopamine, oxytocin, and serotonin, before they could all fade into him like vapor in the air. That emptiness, those feelings, they were all reserved for when he would wake up next to the quickly dissipating warmth of a naked body on his sheets, or for when one of them was cuddled up next to him, unknowing. Those liminal moments, where he was halfway to connection and halfway to strangerhood, were the moments that Ilya had somehow come to crave. These little self-centered destructions colored his life with meaning; however, just like the rush of an orgasm or the mountains of cocaine burning a hole through his brother's nose, they lose their shine and leave his life more desaturated and dull with every hit. That only meant he had to have more of these moments. Bringing another body into his bed, or lighting another cigarette, or shouldering some rookie until he was flat on the ice; he needed them all. Or else there would be nothing within him to feel.

A little over a month after meeting Shane, he silently resolved to quit smoking. When he went to throw his pack out in that dinky little trash can in his room, he opened it, fingers itching to have one last cigarette as some sort of goodbye. The lucky one in particular seemed to shout out at him, packed tobacco staring up at him instead of the lily-white filters of the others, reminding him of how much relief just one more smoke could give him, and consequently reminding him of what he would lose when he discarded the habit. His rookie year, one of the players on the brink of retirement, Yelle, caught him outside the TD Garden mid-cigarette. As Ilya threw it on the ground and stomped it out, Yelle only laughed before pulling out a pack of menthols and asking for a light. Ilya did, before pulling out another one of his own and lighting it as well. They just stood there, smoke curling between them silently amidst the bitter air of Boston, one at the end of his career and the other at the beginning. When Ilya asked him about that turned-over cigarette in still-heavily accented English, Yelle explained the superstitions that he grew up with when he was a young buck sneaking cigarettes from his mom.

The story went something like this: During World War II, American soldiers flipped around a single cigarette and saved it for last, and when they finally went to smoke it amidst the gore of war, it was all the more satisfying because they were lucky enough to live one more day. It also meant that they could hide the brand of the cigarettes, obscuring their nationality, who they truly were or belonged to.

Ilya was typically not prone to superstition. All that bullshit about touching the cup or lacing his skates a certain way, he looked at all of them sardonically and used them for chirping fodder. But something about Yelle's words got to him. Perhaps it was how accurate it was to his life, a reminder of how lucky he was to see the next day. Perhaps it was a middle finger to Russia, an act of Americanization in retaliation to the country that gave him so little yet asked for so much. Whatever it was, from that day forth he turned a cigarette over in each of his packs and hesitated for a second when he finally reached it, in memory of Yelle. Of

course, that little habit didn't quite work out for Yelle, who apparently developed throat cancer a couple years after his retirement. But that seemed to be a problem for future Ilya. One that future Ilya was only able to confront after having something else to remind him how lucky he was to see the next day.

Shane was more satisfying than the thousand of lucky cigarettes Ilya had. There was that realization of living one more day, this time for another person rather than anything as meaningless as tobacco. But there was also that hiding away, that removal of identity in order to obscure who Shane, and Ilya by extension, truly was. As he paced around his hotel room he scrolled through the pile of tabloid headlines and text messages from people he barely knew, words written in Cyrillic and English and French, they all asked the same question. Who is Shane Hollander?

Ilya stared at Shane's contact, terrified, eight missed calls and a bevy of text messages glaring back at Ilya. That last message of Shane's was the most prominent. *Call me, please, solnyshko*. As much as Ilya wanted to, fear was striking directly at his heart at the idea that Shane would be mad. It was irrational, Ilya knew this. It wasn't like Shane could be compared anywhere near Alexei, or worse, their father. But that didn't stop him from spiraling. His phone lit up one more time with a facetime preview of Shane, dried tear marks obvious on his face and an expression of what could only be described as desperation. It hurt to look at Shane in pain like that, caused solely by Ilya's own stupidity and carelessness. He picked up the call, if only to stop seeing that pain.

"Hi, zvyozdochka," Ilya said, voice cracking and tiny.

"Oh, thank god. Don't you ever scare me like that again," Shane breathed out, relieved.

"What did you think I would do?"

The answer was obvious to both of them. Shane's face screwed up in anguish, eyelids closed to prevent any more tears from dripping from his full lashes. Silence stretched between them, heaving breaths and Shane's quiet sniffles the only things to be heard. For as shell-shocked as Ilya was throughout the entire morning, this was what caused his first tears to fall.

"I am so sorry, Shane."

Shane looked up in alarm.

"What? Why are you sorry? There's nothing to be sorry about."

"Because it is my fault that this is all happening."

"Nothing about this is your fault," Shane said as he sat up in his bed.

"Yes, it is. I was not careful enough. I thought we were safe. And now we are both in this mess."

"Ilya, I couldn't care less about that right now. I just want you to be okay."

"I am not sure what okay would be right now."

“At least you’re talking to me. That’s more than enough.”

Ilya hummed, noncommittal.

“Is everything okay at the Inn? How are Yuna and David?”

Shane sighed.

“It’s been a little wild. A few reporters tried to come in and talk with me, but my dad kicked them out pretty quick. Dealing with the guests is the real problem. It’s not like we can sit all of them down and interrogate them about who took that picture, so we’ve been on edge around them. My parents are taking it as well as they can, though. Told me to take the day off and just lock myself in my room until everything settles down. Haven’t been isolated like this since... well, in a long time.”

As if on cue, Rosie jumped onto Shane’s bed and sniffed at Ilya’s picture. A small smile pulled at Ilya’s lips, the first spark of happiness throughout that entire morning.

“Good. Fuck those vultures and whoever took that photo.”

“Fuck them,” Shane nodded with a slight smile.

“How is your team taking it? And your family in Russia?”

Ilya grimaced at the reminder of everyone else that he would have to deal with.

“Have not talked to anyone else but you. Didn’t even open their texts. I do not know what to say.”

“What do you want to say?”

Ilya thought about it for a second.

“That I love you more than the entire world. That I would throw everything away to be with you forever. That whoever took that fucking photo should die.”

Shane let out a watery chuckle.

“That’s a good start. Maybe not that last part, though.”

“No, definitely that last part.”

They both laughed at that, before Ilya started to break down in silent sobs. Shane looked on with concern.

“I cannot go back home now, Shane. I always knew this day would come, but I thought it would be when there was nothing to call home to come back to. As much as my family are dicks, they are all I have left. Aside from you. I cannot see my childhood bedroom again, or gather what’s left of mama’s things, or even leave flowers on her grave. Pizdets!”

In the middle of all of those tears, he begged his mind to remember what his mama's tombstone looked like the last time he visited during the off-season. He went there, alone, white lilies in hand as he knelt down next to it. The grass nearby was verdant and undisturbed except for a small circle tamped down by years of his visits, his own private desire path straight to his mama. Engraved on the marble, right next to a monochrome picture of her in her twenties smiling at the camera, were the words 'Вечная память': Memory eternal. It was like a curse only now coming to fruition. His father, lounging all day in that big chair he claimed forever ago, swaddled by a thick quilt like a child, staring into the empty bliss of nothing. His brother was too busy to think of her, or more likely, didn't care enough given how the stems from the lilies Ilya left last summer were still there, browned and molding. And now Ilya, forced into only having his mama in memory rather than being able to touch that portrait of her and compress that patch of grass one more time.

"Was this how it felt like? Your injury?"

Shane looked at him, brows furrowed in offense, along with a deeper kind of pain that Ilya wasn't able to disentangle.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"No, no, I am sorry. Is just..." Ilya trailed off, trying to gather his thoughts into some coherent metaphor that would explain what he meant. English was hard enough as it is, but distilling the storm of emotions in his brain was a whole other monster to defeat.

"Hockey was your whole life. Is still. You loved hockey so much that you could not go on living without it. My hockey is my mama. My memory of her. Her death was terrible, you have seen what it has done to me. But I still had my home to remind me of her, her grave to talk to, touch. Now that is gone too," Ilya paused, voice cracking. "What we love most, what keeps us standing, being stolen away from me, from you. Without any warning. We cannot have what we love anymore without being doomed to more pain, we have to live with every moment reminding us of what we cannot go back to. We are forced to watch from a distance. I think I understand you a little bit more."

Shane sat there, struck by silence, long enough that Ilya started worrying that his connection cut-off midway through his little monologue. He was proven wrong when Shane took a deep breath and wiped a tear from his eye.

"When did you become Mr. Poetry?"

Ilya laughed at that.

"Mr. Poetry and Mr. Landlord. Sounds like a romcom. But something about you brings the Chekhov out of me, *zvyozdochka*."

"I guess I'm your muse. And you're not totally wrong about my injury. But I don't think that it's necessary to compare the two."

"Why not?"

“I don’t think they’re at quite the same level. Yeah, it fucked up my life up for a bit, but they’re definitely different.”

“Maybe so. But their meaning is the same to our lives. You cannot deny that.”

The gold chain on Ilya’s neck weighed heavier than usual, the cross officially the last tangible memento of her love that he could grasp. His hand went up to grab onto it, thumb rubbing the body-warmed metal. With the sudden loss of anything else of hers that was material, his mind turned to all her little habits he could remember, the same ones that rang out in his mind after her funeral. The slide of her hand from the back of his head down to his shoulder, leaving a few pats there. The tuts of her tongue after he spilled the batter for blini all over the countertop. The rub of her thumb on that same gold cross as she watched him out on the ice, alone, praying to some archangel for his success.

“Sometimes I wish that bullshit blizzard went on forever. Us two, alone in that little Inn. No more media bullshit, no more pain. Just us two making food in your kitchen, Rosie begging for food at our feet.”

Rosie perked up at the mention of her name.

“I wish it was that simple too, Ilya. But reality always has to come crashing in at some point.”

“True. But this is a fucking nightmare. All of it,” Ilya said, hands coming up to cover his face.

“Then maybe it’s time to wake up,” Shane responded gently. Maybe it was time to wake up. There was no turning back now, no running away and hiding from the terrible truth of love.

“How do you do it? Live with that pain?”

Shane seemed to turn those words over in his mind, eyes averted and looking up at the ceiling.

“I guess you just... I don’t know. You endure. You fill your life up with meaning elsewhere, even when it doesn’t fully measure up to what you lost,” Shane paused, then gazed directly at the camera, “you count on someone else to carry on that love.”

“Like a big, strong, Russian man?”

Shane threw his head back in laughter before looking back at the camera, the corners of his lips tilted upwards in a small and affectionate smile.

“Like a big, strong, Russian man,” Shane agreed.

“Well, I think I have two of those three things. I just have to learn how to endure, now.”

“What are the other two things?”

“You. The thing is, I think you do equal what I have lost. A grave is just a grave, but what we do with her memory... It can be eternal, if we make it so. And you have carried on her memory more than anyone else has, more than I have, if that is possible.”

“You really think so?”

“Of course.”

Ilya’s mind thought back to those matryoshka dolls. At that moment, he understood his mama more than ever before, because it was not he who was that center doll. It was her. Like that tiny figurine hidden in the center, she was the product of everyone who came before her. Her mama and her babushka and the long line of women stretching backwards into time, she carried them all with her, surrounded herself with their memories, their sorrow. And so she imparted that knowledge onto him through the flavor of her hands in her pelmeni. And, like that second meaning that she recalled, of deeply hidden truths that define a person, the layers of her life hid something much deeper. Clutched in her unfeeling hands, her body was her truth. The weight of her lineage could no longer support her, battered after years of disbelief from his father, and so something had to give.

Ilya was not that center figurine, the seed at the core of the dolls, the end of everything. He was the next layer, one that would have to carry on his mother’s memory within him forever. Or rather, allow himself to be surrounded by it, all-encompassing and untouching. And like his mama, he would have to reveal his truth to the world no matter how terrible it seemed to be.

“I wish I could be with you right now, zernyshko.”

“What does that one mean?”

“Little seed.”

“Out of all of the nicknames you’ve given me, that’s somehow the weirdest,” Shane chuckled.

“What, you do not think my tomato is worse?” Ilya’s brow raised, questioning.

“Well, that’s one of them.”

“My star.”

“Better.”

“My little leopard.”

“Back to worse.”

They both giggled at that.

“I think I am ready to tell everyone now. Maybe not the press, but everyone else that matters.”

“Good. Let me know how everything goes.”

“You must do the same. And send me pictures of Rosie. I will need them.”

Rosie sat up and came close to Shane’s face, leaving a few good licks on his cheeks. Shane recoiled in response, hands playfully pushing Rosie away in spite of the smile on his face. Ilya looked on with a similar smile.

“Will do. Not like there’s much else I can do. And make sure you focus up with these next few games. Fuck all the noise.”

“I will. I promised David I would bring the cup home, I have to now.”

“He’ll love that. Bye, Ilya. I love you.”

“I love you too, zernyshko. And I love you too, Miss Rosie.”

Shane brought Rosie’s paw up to the camera to wave goodbye, which seemed to be quite hard given how much the dachshund was squirming in his hands. Ilya waved goodbye as well before hanging up and taking a deep sigh. His body craved a cigarette. Ilya took another deep sigh in response to the thought.

His phone pinged with another notification, this time not a team mate or his brother, but a close-up selfie of Shane and Rosie, both of them on their stomachs and staring directly at the camera. It was blurred with motion, likely Rosie jostling Shane as he tried to get her into position. Though the rest of his face was cut off, Ilya could see that constellation of freckles that he loved. He made it his lock screen immediately.

Who would he call next? Marlow, Alexei, LeClaire, the collection of texts from women with qualifiers like (Boston) and (Miami) attached to their contacts, they were all blowing up his phone. Definitely not those women, he decided. He went down the list and blocked each one.

Ilya made up his mind and responded to Alexei first. His brother had left three calls and several text messages.

What is the meaning of this?

What have you done?

Yuri and Ivan have been calling all afternoon

We are a laughing stock now, pidor

How dare you do this to us? To me?

Ilya’s hand trembled, clenching onto the phone in a vice-grip. He steeled himself, briefly, before pulling up his brother’s contact and calling him. It rang five times before Alexei picked up.

“There he is. The cowardly homosexual.”

“Oh, fuck off, Alexei.”

“Me? Fuck off? You’re the one that’s fucked us over forever. Papa, me, my wife, my daughter, we cannot show our faces in public anymore because you couldn’t help yourself from giving in.”

Ilya scoffed into the microphone, *“Giving in? Alexei, I have been fucking men since before little Nata was even a thought, I know myself more than you ever will.”*

“And look what good that has done. I knew it, I knew that your running around America would turn out with you becoming one of those faggot extremists.”

“Faggot extremist,” Ilya chuckled, hanging his head in anger.

“Yes. You’ve spat on me, you’ve spat on our papa, you’ve spat on our mama—”

“Don’t you fucking dare use her name like that. You don’t have the right.”

“And you do? You think she would be proud of having someone like you as a son?”

“You really didn’t know her. Because she would. All those days in the kitchen, all that time on the ice, all she wanted was for me to be fucking happy. And you know what, I apologize if you feel like you deserved more from her. But that is no one else’s fault other than yours. If you were a better man, then maybe, maybe she would have done the same for you. But you are not. Instead you stuffed your nose with cocaine and drank the days away with your little friends, when you should really be concerned with making some amount of money to support your family that doesn’t depend on my bank account. One that you didn’t have to beg papa for.”

The line went silent except for heaving breaths from both men. It was satisfying, just how much Ilya was able to get out, express his true feelings in a way that he never had. All those built-up thoughts were coming out, no matter how ugly they were. Even with that burn of satisfaction, Ilya couldn’t help but feel stung by guilt. How did they get here?

Alexei took a breath before speaking into the phone again, low and dangerous.

“What are we going to do, pidor. Papa is slipping by the day, Polina is falling ill too, what the fuck am I supposed to do now that you’ve fucked us all over? You and that faggot boyfriend of yours. Who the fuck even is he?”

“No one you deserve to know. You are pathetic. A pathetic, scared, sad little man, Alexei.”

Ilya didn’t even think about it for a second before speaking up again.

“You can keep my apartment. I will send over twenty thousand, and after that you will never talk to me ever again. I will block your number and act like you never existed in my life, because you haven’t other than as a blood-sucking leech. I don’t care anymore. You better be smart with that money, because you aren’t getting another cent from me.”

“You will make it fifty. Or else I will go to the tabloids and expose every little bit of your life.”

Ilya pulled the phone away from his ear and simply stared at it.

“You are seriously trying to extort me right now? And what part about ‘I don’t care anymore’ don’t you understand? Go ahead, tell everyone about how evil I am, make up bullshit excuses to make yourself feel better about being some lowlife riding off the back of your little brother.”

“You want me to take care of our family off of scraps? You’re a traitorous, cheapskate, no good cock sucker.”

“Scraps are more than you deserve, you bastard. Get a real fucking job.”

Those last words were yelled into the phone. Maybe he would get a noise complaint from one of his neighboring hotel rooms, but the situation called for a level of anger and righteousness that Ilya typically reserved only for when he was trying to rile up his team or when he really wanted to hurt one of the players on the opposing team. He slammed his phone on the hang up button and chucked his phone on the bed, bouncing twice before it thumped onto the carpeted floor.

It was only when Ilya heard the rapping at his door that he realized who his next door neighbor was. Marlow.

Somehow, he felt like the most daunting person to confront. With Shane and Alexei, their reactions and ensuing conversations were obvious, one marked with endless love and reassurance and the other one marked by hatred. But Marley, he had no fucking clue how Marley was going to react. Ilya wasn’t even sure if he was allowed to use that nickname anymore.

When Ilya looked out at the peephole, he could see Marlow standing there, face twisted in worry that felt out of place on his usually coolly handsome features, biting his lip as he shuffled back and forth on the balls of his feet. Ilya steeled himself for the third time that morning, and slowly opened the door.

When the two of them made eye contact, the worry in Marlow seemed to dissipate, his shoulders dropping their tension. He quickly entered Ilya’s room and shut the door behind him, using both the electronic and mechanical locks to prevent any further entry. He peered out the peephole, practically bouncing with nervous energy.

“Is serial killer chasing you? Stalker?”

Ilya forced his questions to be indifferent in tone, that same flatly sarcastic chirping rhythm he and Marlow slipped into. Marlow turned around from the door, and in his face Ilya could see disbelief.

“Roz— Ilya, what the fuck is going on?”

How could Ilya even begin to answer a question as loaded as that? He could've waxed poetic about how love could conquer all, could've broken down into breathless sobs right on that hotel floor, could've even kicked Marlow out of his room to avoid any semblance of confrontation. But he didn't. All Ilya did to respond was shrug his shoulders, jaw set tightly, lips a thin line that didn't betray a single one of the emotions that Ilya wanted to explode with.

It wasn't enough for Marlow. He scoffed, one hand on his waist and the other massaging his wrinkled forehead.

"I'm being serious. LeClaire's been on me and Connors' asses since seven. I don't know how the fuck you managed to sleep through all of our calls."

"Was ignoring them. There is a difference."

"You understand how that's worse, right?"

Marlow shook his head and moved to sit at the desk, flopping down into the chair with a deep sigh, head hung low. The air was tense, silence stretching thin between them. Suddenly, Marlow looked up, directly into Ilya's eyes.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Because I was scared. Because I didn't know how you would react.

"Because that is not what we do."

"What do you mean? We talk about our hookups all the time, it's basically all we do."

"That is what I am saying. We talk about hookups, about sex, about our one-night stands in whatever city we are playing, but when do we ever talk about anything else?"

The way that Marlow's eyes bugged out of his face was almost comedic, and in any other situation Ilya would've barked out some chirp that would make both of them laugh.

"...We talk about hockey?"

"Because hockey is our jobs. And when we do talk about anything else, we cover it up with sarcasm and irony and insults, and we use that shit on the ice, and then we move on and never talk about it again."

Marlow didn't respond, mouth slightly parted and staring up at Ilya with that same ridiculous look on his face. Ilya really wanted to say something like close your mouth at that point, but he kept his own mouth shut.

"When are we ever honest with each other? About how we are feeling?" Ilya said.

Marlow thought about it for a second.

“Never. Do you really think I would be that shitty to you for being open about what you’re going through?”

“I do not know, Marlow. And it is not just about being open. Is about being with a man.”

“Brother, I don’t care about all of that.”

“But how was I supposed to know? We are in the same locker rooms, you know what everyone says. We have joined in some times.”

“Well it’s—” Marlow cuts himself off.

“Well, what?”

“I was going to say something about how that shit doesn’t matter, but it does. And now I’m realizing I probably haven’t been as good of a friend to you that I could be,” Marlow says, mumbled and small.

“You are a good friend, Marley.”

“But not enough of one. Do you remember when we went against the Guardians a few years ago?”

Ilya chuckled.

“Who could forget? You broke Dallas Kent’s nose, was all we talked about for months after.”

“Yeah. Highlight of the season. But, um, we never really talked about why it happened.”

Ilya’s brow raised.

“You said he chirped you.”

“Kind of an understatement. He called me a fag.”

Marlow’s eyes widened as he realized what he said.

“Shit! Sorry, probably shouldn’t have used that word.”

It was at that point that Ilya couldn’t handle himself any more. He burst into laughter, the kind that made him bend over and clench his stomach, the kind that made him think that he would die. He glanced back up at Marlow, ready to calm down, but that same wide-eyed expression was stuck on his face mixed with an element of confusion, which only made Ilya laugh even harder. Ilya wiped a tear from his eye as he stood back up.

“Sorry, sorry. Go on.”

“I’m glad you find me being an idiot funny.”

“Well, you are always an idiot so not much is different,” Ilya teased, before softening and adding more genuinely, “Is sweet you are trying so hard, Marley.”

“Thanks, I guess? But that’s not the point. What I’m trying to say is that I didn’t punch Kent because he said that word in general, or because I’m the greatest ally or whatever the fuck. It was because I thought that word is the worst thing that one of us could be.”

The two of them mused on Marlow’s words silently.

“Is terrible, isn’t it? The worst thing a hockey player could be is gay.”

“Not a rapist, not an abuser, but liking men,” Marlow agreed. His brows suddenly furrowed in confusion.

“Wait, so are you gay?”

“Bisexual,” Ilya responded.

“Gotcha,” Marlow said with a nod. “Anyways, that’s all to say that I’m sorry that I haven’t been the greatest, and that I made you feel like you couldn’t trust me with everything going on in your life. Also, sorry for being weird about your relationship, trying to dig into it and all that. Just wanted to learn about your little lucky charm, that fire from you came out of nowhere.”

It really was heartwarming, how much Marlow was trying to understand and learn.

“I forgive you, Marley.”

“Thank god. Now who is this boyfriend of yours? Shane, right?”

And there was the question of the day. How was he supposed to encapsulate Shane in a few sentences? What he means to Ilya, his story, it would take a million words to explain.

“Yes. Do you remember when we lost against the Centaurs?”

Marlow scoffed and rolled his eyes.

“Don’t remind me.”

Then, he seemed to be struck by a sudden realization.

“Wait, he owns a hotel, right? That’s what all the tabloids were saying.”

“Correct.”

“You left during that blizzard—”

“Not a blizzard.”

“Whatever. You left during that snowstorm, and you stayed there, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Did you also see he was a former hockey player?”

Guiltily, Marlow looked down to his feet.

“Yeah. They really hammered that point in. How you were supposed to be rivals or whatever.”

“Mhm. We were supposed to be the next big thing in hockey. I did not know who he was, at first. But it was almost like fate brought us back together.”

“It’s like a story out of a movie.”

“Like meet-cute?”

“You watch romcoms?” Marlow said, perking up excitedly.

“No,” Ilya said, causing Marlow to deflate.

“Oh. Damn it.”

“You do?” Ilya’s eyebrow raised.

“I like watching cute stories about love, sue me. Yours really is like some Hallmark movie, though.”

At that point, Ilya made the decision not to expand upon Shane’s stalking habits at the risk of shattering whatever Marlow was thinking about their ‘love story’.

“Did not know romcoms involve the whole world knowing about the relationship.”

Marlow winced.

“Yeah, they typically don’t,” He said, before standing up and moving closer to Ilya, placing a firm hand on his shoulder.

“Listen, regardless of whatever LeClaire, or the rest of the team, or the world says, I’ll be right here for you, brother.”

Ilya felt his lip quiver. Brother.

“Thank you, Marley,” Ilya said, voice weak and watery. He swallowed it down.

“Of course,” Marlow responded warmly, patting his shoulder one more time before schooling his face into a serious expression, “So what’s the plan? Just lay low for a while? Come out and say it?”

Ilya thought about it for a second.

“I have one idea.”

The Bears’ dressing room was abuzz with energy. Somehow, they had clawed their way to the finals despite their poor performance during the regular season, but most of that success originated from the fire that was lit under Ilya’s ass.

Most of them still didn't know about Shane. Or at least, how much the former hockey player meant to their captain. Ilya had done a good enough job chalking up their interaction to the tabloids as a mix of 'boys being boys' and stereotypical European behaviors, and the hockey world at large seemed to accept the excuses. Combined with several 'donations' to the more credible news outlets, and everything worked out in his favor. He expected that the more conservative fanbase would delude themselves into believing that the kiss was nothing more than friends showing affection, but what he didn't expect was a message from a certain player from the Admirals expressing support and admiration, offering a few encouraging words as well as confusion as to what Ilya was playing at in hiding his relationship. Ilya responded back with a winky face.

Shane took to it surprisingly well, once Ilya explained what he wanted to do to wrest control of the world's perception of their relationship. There was some pushback, of course, given how much Ilya expressed his wish to be out to the world. But overall, Shane found it hilarious, a middle finger to the league, to the world of hockey, to Russia, all of the institutions in Ilya's life that committed themselves to tamping him down. Now that his Canadian citizenship application was all in order, everything was finally primed to reveal his truth.

"You ready, Roz?" Marlow said, clapping his hand onto Ilya's back. The double-edged meaning was obvious to both of them.

"I have been for months."

"Gonna miss you. A shit ton."

"You can visit us whenever you want, the address is on Yelp. Shane has been asking to meet you in person."

"Fuck yes. Can I finally try those dumplings you were talking about?"

"Pelmeni? Of course. I will tell Shane, after we win this fucking cup," Ilya said as he knocked on Marlow's helmet twice.

"Three cups in nine years, soon to be four. We should be hanging your number in the rafters."

"Eh, I do not care that much. Have better things to do."

"I'm sure you do, brother."

Ilya's phone buzzed, reverberating on the bench.

"I'm assuming that's better things?"

"Fuck off, Marley."

"Yeah, yeah. Send him my love."

Ilya flipped him the middle finger as he retreated, moving to hype Connors up. Ilya looked back at his phone, a fresh text lighting up his screen.

Just sat down

My parents wanted to pick up some bbq.

If they thought the tire center is bad then they will somehow be more disappointed

Let me try it

And then a few seconds later,

You were right

As always))

You thought my mom would stab you when you first met her.

I still do think that sometimes

I would never do that. And you better focus up, Ilya! Love you lots.

Hi Yuna :) Do not worry, I will shut off my phone after.

The cup will look beautiful at the inn.

It definitely will! David is counting on you.

I will not disappoint.

Sorry, she just wrestled my phone out of my hand.

And it will look nice at the inn :)

:)

Are we still good for the plan?

Of course

We do not have to do it if you are feeling nervous

I am feeling nervous

But I still want to

Good

Can't wait to see what everyone will say haha

Me too

This win is yours as much as it is mine

Your first cup

Of how many?

I do not know

**Maybe the last if the Centaurs stay the same after the trade, and if they take me on
Don't joke about that.**

;))

**Anyways, you already know Hunter will be out for blood, but make sure you watch out
for Vaughn and Wagner. Their last few games were killer, but they rely on dekes a lot.**

I know, zvyozdochka.

That advice wasn't from me by the way

My mom was looking at my texts :|

))))

Thank you Yuna :)

She said 'you're welcome, honey'

See you on the ice after

FUck Scott Hunter up for me

I love you.

That was always going to happen tonight

And I love you too, zernyshko.

Before Ilya's phone shut off, it pinged with another text from Shane. It was a picture of Rosie wearing a pet-size Bears jersey, cuddled up in Shane's arms as they looked into the camera. Ilya laughed and shut his phone off, placing it at the top of his locker. He turned to face his teammates, raising his voice into a yell.

"Alright! So. We all know that this will be my last season with the Bears."

There's a few humorous jeers from his teammates.

"Was fun," Ilya said with a small smirk, sitting down on the bench.

More boos.

"That can't be it, cap," Connors said.

“Of course not,” Ilya said, standing up, spine straighter than before.

“This team has given so much to me. All of you have. This will be the fourth time—”

“Fifth,” Marlow interjected.

“We do not talk about 2012,” Ilya responded.

There were a few grumbles of agreement.

“That is not the point. We know what the fuck we have to do, how to fuck up the Admirals. You don’t need me to say that Hunter uses his stick like a cane or all of that shit. What I need you all to do is play tonight like you are being traded too. Like it’s the last game of your life. You all better, because I fucking will.”

His last words came out at a yell. The taps of his teammates' sticks on the floor were harder than ever before.

This was it.

Scott Hunter slid up to center ice, eyes trained on the puck. The crowd fell to a hush as they watched on, a mixed sea of red, white, blue, yellow, and black.

“Will be fun, Hunter.”

“What will?”

“Disappointing all of your fans. I will visit you at retirement home, do not worry. Do you like chocolate or vanilla pudding?”

“Go fuck yourself, Rozanov. Your little lucky charm here?”

“So what if he is? I know you are old, but I didn’t realize you were from the 1940s.”

“You know it’s not like that.”

Hunter’s head moved to look into the crowd, eyes determined to find someone. As Ilya followed, he noticed them land on one person, a man, short and clad in Hunter’s jersey. A soft smile filled Scott’s face, before he turned back to look at Ilya.

“Ah. I see now.”

“You do?”

“Da. I planned this months ago. You will not steal this from me.”

Ilya looked back at the crowd towards Hunter’s own lucky charm. A few rows in front of him was Shane, flanked by Yuna and David, all of them wearing Bears merch. Ilya’s eyes connected with Shane’s, and that radiant smile beamed back at him.

“Do you want to bet on that?”

“I have already paid off the tabloids. What is another hundred thousand to me?”

Hunter laughed at that. Ilya felt his own lips pull upward into a smile.

“You were right, Rozanov. This is going to be fun.”

The puck dropped, and Ilya immediately took possession, darting towards the Admirals’ goal.

He thought back to that rink in Ottawa, nearly half a year away but feeling like an eternity in that lapse.

Back then, love seemed like an incapability, something he was doomed to watch happen instead of experience. Love was hard to come by, and so he ran away from it or replaced it with the only thing that felt as burning: pain. The smoke in his lungs, the bruises on his body that he prodded at just to feel, they all served as the same false facsimile of that little word whose meaning was locked away from him. But when that pain became all that he knew, the world around him degraded as a result.

Finding Shane was like seeing the stars, the moon, the whole night sky for the first time, exposing Ilya to a kind of brightness that he could only feel on his skin when there was a break in the clouds during a falsely deemed blizzard. So, as the game began, Ilya couldn’t help but think about what Shane would do if he was in Ilya’s skates.

Hunter steals the puck, knocking into Ilya with a shit-eating grin. 0 - 1.

Who is Shane Hollander?

Shane Hollander is that lucky cigarette. That reminder that Ilya is lucky enough to see the next day. But that war is over. Or rather, he is not alone in fighting anymore.

Ilya hits a snapshot, strong and assured. 1 - 1.

Who is Shane Hollander?

Shane Hollander is that seed at the center of Ilya Rozanov, the truth that was nearly clawed out of him without any consideration. The man that would continue that long line of dolls, support him in the way that those figurines did.

Vaughn tries to deke him, but Ilya sees it a kilometer away and skates around him, deftly maneuvering the puck and backhanding it towards the Admiral’s goal. 2 - 1.

Who is Shane Hollander?

Shane Hollander is the constellations in his night sky. The two of them, together, used to be two shooting stars that zipped away from each other a millennia ago, one that always looked back in with the wish that their dreams would be carried on and one that only realized he could look back a thousand years too late. Now, they were stationary, staring and wishing upon each other like they should’ve been eons ago.

At the top of the second period, Hunter slides up to Ilya and tries to push him into the boards, the clacking of their sticks against each other loud over the din of the crowd. It doesn't work.
3 - 1.

The game goes on and all he can think about is Shane, Shane, Shane. Each goal, every slide of his skates against the ice, Shane stands there with his little tidbits of advice. More than that, he cheers Ilya on, turning each wheeze of his lungs or bead of sweat dripping down his back into something that doesn't feel like pain, but a quiet reassurance that what he was fighting for actually meant something.

By the third period, the Admirals and the Bears are neck and neck, with the scoreboard reading four for the Bears and four for the Admirals. There's one minute left before the game is over, and Ilya returns to the ice, joining Marlow. Ilya reaches center ice at fifty seconds. Marlow bites his lip while he passes the puck to Ilya. He jukes around the opposing players, handling the puck in the same way Shane did when they played together. Forty seconds. He reaches the Admiral's goal, just in time for Hunter to slide in and attempt to steal the puck from him. Thirty seconds. Instead of allowing that, he skates around the goal, positioning himself so that Hunter is now pushed onto the boards. Twenty. With a glance back, he sees that the Admiral's goalie is positioned far from the net, giving him a clear opening. He pivots and snaps the puck towards the goal. Ten. The swivel makes him fall backwards until his helmet thunks against the ice, the swish of the puck the only sound audible as the crowd drops to silence. He's tired as fuck and can barely bring himself to look up at whether the puck made it in, instead looking up at heaven, at his mama, still hoping that whatever angel or saint she prayed on so long ago was still looking out for him. Thankfully, it seems like those prayers didn't expire. Flat on his back, the only indicators Ilya has of his success are the roar of the crowd and the fall of black and yellow confetti from the rafters of the arena.

Ilya let out a sigh of relief. He fucking did it.

Hunter helped Ilya stand up, a smile evident on his face despite how he should be feeling the sting of defeat.

"Congrats, Rozanov."

"Thank you, Hunter. Looks like I won our bet."

They both laughed at that.

"Well, it had to be one of us," Hunter pulled him closer until he could say his next words at a volume that wasn't a yell.

"Thank you," he says, genuine and vulnerable.

"You would have done the same," Ilya responded with a nod.

Hunter pulled away, that same smile still on his face as he skated towards the rest of his teammates, each of them holding a look of devastation that Ilya knew intimately.

Almost immediately after Hunter's retreat, Ilya was tackled by the rest of the Bears, Marlow whooping loudly in his ear. The rest of the ice was flooded by the coaches, coordinators, and WAGs, joyful and cheering for the win. The keeper of the cup walked up to the team, cup in gloved-hand, and handed it off to Ilya. As he hoisted it up, the Bears fans cheered even louder, but he was barely paying attention to all of that.

Instead, he was looking over at Shane, who was beaming down at him from his seat, Yuna and David clapping and matching that beam next to him. Ilya nodded once, and Shane responded with his own nod before walking down to the ice. His parents patted him on the back, proud looks on their faces as they watched on.

Ilya passed the cup to Marlow, who, with a knowing look, took it graciously. Skating away from the pack of his teammates, he stood at the sideline and helped Shane onto the ice, holding onto each other's hands as they moved onto center ice.

"Like I said. Your first cup," Ilya shouted behind him.

"And hopefully not the last," Shane shouted back.

It won't be.

Spinning to face Shane, Ilya scanned his face for any sign of hesitation, but there wasn't any to be found. Instead, there was that shining look of what could only be described as love, as hope, as something that was promised to him finally coming true. How were they so lucky to have this?

The answer to that question, like the answer to all the other questions that burned away at Ilya's mind, didn't matter any more. Neither did all of those fanciful comparisons to the stars, to cigarettes, to the core of a matryoshka doll, to any object that didn't fully express who Shane Hollander is. What mattered instead was kissing Shane like it was the only thing he knew how to do.

If their first kiss was a thousand sorrys, then this one was a thousand thank yous. Thank you for winning, thank you for fighting, thank you for dreaming. Thank you for loving me.

Whatever came after this kiss no longer felt like a catastrophe. If the world chose to reject his truth, then Ilya knew what he would keep instead. There was always that inn to come back to.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for reading, for your kudos, bookmarks, and kind comments. I didn't really expect the kind of reception I received, and I'm super proud of myself for challenging myself with this and completing it. I hope you all loved reading this as much as I loved writing this. Also, look forward to a continuation of this AU! I have two more fics planned: a much heavier prequel focusing on Shane in the aftermath of the

injury leading up to the events of The Hollander Inn and a fluffier one focusing on life at the inn and Ilya with the Cens. Much love <3

Edit (2/18/2026): Prequel is now out!! Check out [我慢 - Gaman](#) if you want a closer look into Shane before this fic. It tackles a few heavy topics (Racism, Internalized Homophobia, Substance Use Disorder, Eating Disorders, Cultural Assimilation, Parasocial Relationships) so please make sure to look at the tags before starting.

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