

the soviet montage

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by [pressuretoparty](#)

Summary

"Listen, Mr. Rozanov." The general manager is talking out of the side of his mouth, his cigarette dropping ashes all over the hotel table. "We like you. We want you. We understand you are putting yourself under a fair amount of risk here, meeting with us like this. I hope it's obvious that if you play for us, we will set you up for a good life in Canada."

He pauses, looks Ilya in the eye. "But you have to understand, if you agree to this, you have to be prepared to leave with us right now."

Red Army superstar Ilya Rozanov defects from the Soviet Union. A Cold War-era hockey AU

Notes

I get a little creative with hockey history and hockey timelines. Also, this is a work of fiction. this fic was born out of my coinciding fascinations with heated rivalry and the cold war. match made in heaven <3

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya stares at the suitcase full of cash dispassionately.

"Okay," the general manager for the Ottawa Centaurs takes a long drag of his smoke. "Looks like I need to sweeten the pot even further."

He pushes over a glossy photo of a dangerously beautiful Chevrolet Camaro. It sits, unassuming, next to a small-fonted NHL contract, a brochure for a luxury high-rise by the river, and, of course, \$10,000 in cash.

Ilya, who's been sleeping in an army bunk with no windows since he was ten, tries not to look too seduced by this.

"Listen, Mr. Rozanov." The general manager is talking out of the side of his mouth, his cigarette dropping ashes all over the hotel table. "We like you. We want you. We understand you are putting yourself under a fair amount of risk here, meeting with us like this. I hope it's obvious that if you play for us, we will set you up for a good life in Canada."

He pauses, looks Ilya in the eye. "But you have to understand, if you agree to this, you have to be prepared to leave with us right now."

Ilya considers this. Takes a drag out of his own cigarette—a good honest Moscow brand he's held onto despite the shortage, none of that girly bullshit North Americans smoke. "You are asking me to defect," he says, slowly. His English outside of an academic context sounds clunky to his own ears. "To desert the military."

The general manager drops the salesman act. In this context, he looks quite serious. "Yes."

"All this trouble," Ilya drawls. "Just because you want me to play?"

"We think you are worth it," The general manager repeats.

"You are familiar with my father?" he asks. Grigori Rozanov is a high-ranking official in the party and has aspirations for his son to follow in his footsteps. "I could become a felon. If I am a criminal in Russia, I cannot get my visa to play for your little team."

"We will take care of it," the general manager says confidently, though Ilya can pick up that this guy, who is trying hard not to look over his shoulder, is scared. The KGB has been hot on Ilya since he arrived in Stockholm, and considering that this is the fourth time the GM has pushed to change their meeting location, they're probably following him as they speak. "Leave the legal stuff to us. You just need to figure out—do you want to play?"

This guy is scared. Like, real scared. Yet, he is still willing to stick his neck out, all for the possibility that he can get Ilya to play on his team.

"Your team is shit," Ilya says, bluntly.

"Actually," The general manager corrects. "Shane Hollander recently got traded over to us. Shane Hollander? Japanese guy? Montreal? Familiar with him?"

Of course Ilya's familiar with him. "That was two seasons ago. You are not winning with him."

"Yeah, because having him on The Centaurs is, like, giving a bazooka to a team of five year olds." The general manager laughs heartily at his own joke. He glances at Ilya, who remains stone-faced, and stops. "He has no support. We are looking to get more players who can play on his level. Happy talent, happy team, is what my dad always told me. And with this new owner, we are primed to really shake up the roster this year."

"You have pizza money," Ilya says, shortly.

The general manager laughs. "Oh no, that's Detroit. God bless Little Caesars. Terrible pizza, but the owner's got good instincts. That's actually a really good example of what we can do for you here. In Canada, you'd be a rockstar. Like Detroit, Ottawa's been itching for a cup win for the past fifty years. You come in, you cinch that for us, you'd be a legend."

Ilya stays silent, arms crossed. The general manager sighs and leans in.

"Is there someone here? Holding you back?" the general manager whispers, lowering his voice. "Come on, man, I'm on hands and knees here. Do you have a wife? Kids? Someone you don't want to leave behind?"

Ilya thinks about his father. His piece of shit, good-for-nothing brother.

He thinks about a stadium of twenty thousand people, screaming his name.

Finally, he thinks of his mother, may she rest in peace.

"... Because I can help them too! Sure, it's definitely more of a hassle, but you know, for you ___"

"All this," Ilya says. He leans in, with a smirk, stabbing his finger on the papers littering the table. "Just to play some hockey?"

"Like I said," And the general manager's face changes. Ilya thinks this guy might actually be American. Because his face gives it all away, the evil his country warned him of. The smile of a capitalist devil, knowing that a deal's about to close. "We really need to have you."

Ilya picks up the pen.

Every day Shane is on this crappy team is a day he's closer to killing himself.

He doesn't know what's wrong with them. What's wrong with him. Individually, they are all solid players. But Jesus Christ, together they just can't win. It's downright depressing to watch. Nevermind play.

Shane stays behind after training. He's sitting on the bench, scribbling furiously in a spiral notebook. He's chewing idly at his hoodie strings, trying to come up with another play that Coach Wiebe and his teammates will probably ignore. He's just about to finish up when suddenly Centaurs' goalie Wyatt Hayes runs up to him.

"You have to come to the locker room. Now."

Shane frowns. Holds up his notebook. "I'm busy."

"Forget that, man. It's all over the news. Ilya Rozanov has just defected from the Soviet Union."

Shane freezes.

He lets himself get pulled up and dragged into the locker room. The entire time, all Shane can think is *please not Montreal, please not Montreal*, even though the Voyageurs already replaced Shane with a talented Quebecois native three years younger than him.

However, considering Shane's luck as of late, Rozanov joining his former team would really be the last great fuck you the city of Montreal could give him.

Inside, seventeen grown men are crowded around a tiny television set that had been haphazardly scooted out in front of the coach's office.

Shane can't see a thing, but he hears it loud as day.

Not only has Rozanov defected, reports are saying he's already landed in Ottawa International.

Shane turns to Wyatt, horrified. Wyatt matches his expression with a grim one of his own. "You have to be fucking kidding me." Shane says, disbelieving.

"That's probably why they traded Kent away," Wyatt replies.

Kent getting traded was nothing but good news to Shane, especially since on top of being a dogshit player, Kent was also a total asshole. But replacing him with a Russian, especially with one as unpredictable as Rozanov—

Shane gets a lump in his throat.

Paranoia, a learned but sure emotion, surges. He used to be much better about not succumbing to jealousy and competition, but considering the past two years, Shane's wise to watch his back.

His hand tightens into a fist, and unconsciously, he's gathered his hoodie strings into his mouth again. He's chewing hard, and he thinks he's going to break plastic soon when there's a loud protesting sound next to him.

"Bro, you need to relax on that."

"Shit." Shane spits, and to his embarrassment, a bit of saliva stains his hoodie. Wyatt tries very hard not to look grossed out to be nice, but Shane can tell he's kind of disgusted. "Sorry, I do that when I'm stressed."

Or experiencing any kind of strong emotion. But Wyatt didn't need to know that.

"No, it's cool. I'm stressed too." Wyatt says. "Why would Ilya Rozanov want to play for the Ottawa Centaurs? That actually makes no fucking sense."

The Russian play style is defined by its structure. Check one guy, the team closes rank to take his place—a calculated, weaving motion. It's what makes playing against someone like Rozanov, who's been training with the same team since he was ten, fucking infuriating. Because if their opponent lets go of the puck for one second, it'll be swept up in a torrent of constantly moving assists that only ends when the puck falls in Rozanov's hands, and he sends it straight into the goal.

What that means is bringing just one Russian makes no sense. A Russian superstar without a team behind him? He'd be useless—too unfamiliar, too infamous to really work with anyone.

Like Shane.

Was Shane not good enough? Sure, they brought him in to turn things around for the team, and Shane hasn't been able to do that.

Shane cinched Montreal back-to-back cup wins in his first two seasons on the team. Before Shane, the last time the Voyageurs won the cup was 1968.

Shane's heart sinks. Is he going to get traded again?

The idea that Rozanov is expected to just swan in and fix Shane's shortcomings makes him angry to the point of frustration. His hands keep clenching tightly into fists, and even though he always cuts his nails down to the beds, they still manage to dig harsh crescents into the meat of his palm.

"Woah," Wyatt says again. "You good man?"

"This is such a..." Shane laughs, a little hysterically. "This is such a Rozanov thing to do. He always had to be the center of attention."

Wyatt snorts. "Remember when he wiped your ass at that fucking bloodbath—the Helsinki Hellhole?"

Shane's face flushes indignantly. "He didn't 'wipe' anything! It was a completely even fight, dickhead!"

Wyatt, like many of his new teammates, has only ever participated in the World Junior Ice Hockey Championships behind a TV screen.

When Shane was with Montreal, he'd already played with half the guys on the Voyageurs for almost five years. His experience handling the USSR in international youth tournaments earned him the respect he needed for his teammates to follow him unquestioningly on the ice. No matter how they treated him outside of the game, when Shane was charging through another team's defense, he never doubted that they would be right around the corner to help him send the goal in.

Shane tells himself he never played for trophies or titles, except who is he kidding? It's all he plays for, because Shane plays to win.

Which makes it hard not to resent his Ottawa teammates for being so much worse than him.

Helsinki Hellhole, more formally known as the 1979 World Junior Hockey Championships, had occupied a unique spot in international hockey history. It had followed four years after the USSR's first international appearance on the hockey stage, and since then the Soviet Union quickly had established themselves as the unbeatable heel of the sport.

Canada finally had someone to beat. The hatred for the Soviet Union had turbocharged fan participation. Shane still remembered sitting next to his mom, watching the 1976 Super Series on their tiny TV screen. His mom had been shouting the nastiest expletives known to man, telling the *damn Ruskies to lose the fucking puck!* while his dad had read Ulysses in the corner.

To make matters worse, international youth tournaments, the biggest source of talent for the NHL, had only reaffirmed the USSR's dominance. Russia had proceeded to sweep gold for four consecutive years, completely embarrassing Canada at every turn.

So in Helsinki, people that night had been out for blood. Hatred for Russia had hit an all-time high back then. It felt like war. While Canada had outnumbered Russia in the stands by numbers, the USSR had always known how to show up loud. There had not been a single person out there who didn't make it very clear who they hated, and how happy it would make them to see the other team smeared across the ice.

Shane had entered the hockey world as a twelve-year-old wunderkind. He was a one-of-a-kind talent in just about everything—except human relations. So even as the eighteen-year-olds had given him the cold shoulder for outperforming them on the team, Shane knew he had their respect. He had definitely gotten everyone's respect when, with ten seconds left of the second period, he had tied the game with Russia using a whip-quick backhand no one short of superhuman could've blocked.

When the buzzer sounded, Shane only got a second to smile to himself, face flush with victory, when suddenly—

Shane heard before he saw the punch.

One of Team Canada's seniors had fallen onto the ice with a sickening crack, as the Russian starting forward lunged at him with a scream. In response, one of Canada's defensemen had jumped in, throwing gloves off. Quickly, a pile-up had formed right on the center of the ice, as each team member scrabbled to find the nearest person wearing an opposing jersey to tear into.

It had only taken fifteen seconds for everything to descend into chaos. Panicked refs had raced onto the ice, desperately trying to separate the biggest players as gleeful commentators shouted over the nationalist roaring of the crowd.

Shane had been completely frozen. When it came to checking, Shane was better than seasoned pros. If he had to fight for the puck, he would do everything in his power to regain control. But when the game ended, and it was time to throw gloves, that was when Shane started to feel less like a wunderkind and more of a... well.

A child.

A broad Russian was skating up to him in the distance. Shane had sucked in a scared breath, clutching his club in anticipation. He'd never thrown a punch, but if he needed to he had more than enough examples around him to learn from, as his teammates kept pile-driving their nearest opponent into the ice, spraying what definitely looked like blood across the rink.

When he had gotten closer, Shane recognized the Russian as Rozanov.

Rozanov had been a monster that game. Shane had not been able to shake him—anytime Shane let down his guard once, he would get sent straight into the boards. But in turn, the guy could never shake Shane. When he approached, Shane raised his club protectively over himself, psyching himself up to throw a punch. But Shane was already smaller than the average hockey player, and he had been trembling uncontrollably even as Rozanov skidded to a stop in front of him.

"You need to hit someone," Rozanov had told him, in a thick Russian accent.

"What?" Shane had asked. The English from the Russian teams had never been particularly good to start, without the added challenge of trying to understand them over the commotion of about forty teenage boys pounding each other into the rink.

"Your country will think you are a coward. You need to hit someone."

"I don't..." Shane swallowed. "I don't want to get ejected. I don't want to break the rules."

Rozanov scoffed. "You are a hockey player. You do not want to break the rules?"

Shane's hackles rose. "This," Shane gestured widely around him. "Is not the kind of hockey I want to play."

"I am helping you." Rozanov then had picked up his club and lightly jabbed Shane in the chest, right where his name had been printed on his jersey. "Hol-an-der," he sounded out slowly, using his hockey stick to trace over each syllable in his name. "Do you want your teammates to hate you, Hol-an-der?"

Shane had felt himself get angry, a flush rising hard and fast on his face.

"I don't need your help," Shane snapped. "This is stupid. Hockey is better than this. It's not just some lame excuse for a bunch of roided out jocks to beat the crap out of each other."

Rozanov shot Shane a condescending look. Shane wished Rozanov would just punch him and get it over with. But he just kept standing there. "This is all hockey. And this is your team." Rozanov gestured to the pandemonium behind them. "Take her or leave her. You cannot pick and choose."

And to punctuate his statement, Rozanov suddenly skidded his skate, kicking up a fistful of shaved ice right into Shane's face.

Shane had flinched at the movement, which only made him angrier. "I'm not fighting you," Shane snapped again, even as ice sprayed across his jersey.

Rozanov kept staring at Shane, which was weirding him out. It felt like he was reading the fine print on Shane's soul. Then, after a beat, he smiled. He held his head high, sizing Shane up.

"Maybe you are scared. Maybe because you fight as well as you shoot?" Rozanov whistled, smiling meanly.

The insult had landed, as intended, like a bomb in Shane's chest. Staring at Rozanov, who had just stood there, smirking at him, Shane felt, for the first time, a rage completely unproductive to his game.

And so, there was only one thing left to do.

Shane dropped his club, his gloves. He took a deep breath, and then he swung.

And just as his fist connected with Rozanov's nose, the arena's lights switched off.

There was a tense hush of silence that had fallen over the arena. The quiet only lasted three seconds before sparking a round of violence that only got more frantic and brutal in the darkness.

Shane had no idea what the fuck he was doing. There was no way he would ever, in a million years, beat Rozanov in a fight, but he had given it his best effort. All around him, chants of "Kill the Reds!" had drowned out the blood roaring in his ears. Shane had only landed that one punch before Rozanov shoved him, back-first onto the ice, knees on either side of him, weight pinning him down as he laid into him.

Shane kept his arms up in front of his face, which blocked the worst of Rozanov's blows. But Shane was still trapped under him, completely unable to move. It helped when one of his

teammates, J.J., saw him tied up and joined in—yet Rozanov, even with two people on him, held his own, just managing to shake them loose. Shane's mad scramble for survival continued until, twenty minutes later, the lights came back on.

The crowd went wild at the sight of red all over the ice.

Shane, shakily trying to get back up, had found himself on his knees in front of Rozanov, with Rozanov's fists clenched tightly in his jersey.

Rozanov's hands were frozen cold, and Shane winced when he realized he could feel them like knives through his jersey, digging into his chest. Shane was breathing hard, gaze forced up, staring right into Rozanov's face—the Russian's nose pouring blood, the beginnings of a bruise forming over his right eye.

Both their helmets had tumbled off in their fight. J.J., who had come to Shane's aid, was nowhere to be found.

Without everything on, Shane could see Rozanov's face now perfectly. And Shane had found he could not look away.

Rozanov's head suddenly jerked to the side, and Shane flinched. Mostly because he thought Rozanov was going to punch him again, which was really embarrassing.

Instead, Rozanov, maintaining full eye contact with Shane, fingers warming up against his collar, turned to spit a fat glob of blood right next to Shane's knee.

The refs had announced over the comms that they were nullifying the game, to Shane's horror. When this only brought out a louder roar of protest from the stands, Rozanov finally dropped Shane's jersey.

He smirked.

"You are welcome."

Shane hissed. "Fuck you."

Rozanov's hand moved, and Shane flinched again, completely against his will. When he had recovered enough to look back up at Rozanov, Shane felt an overwhelming desire to punch the pleased look the Russian had right off his face.

Sadist.

"I am just helping you up, man." Rozanov had laughed. "I scare you that bad?"

"As if... pussy!" Shane had shouted, desperately trying to mimic locker room trash talk. This just made Rozanov laugh harder. "None of that even fucking hurt me! You hit like a girl! Just like your entire fucking country!"

"Woow," Rozanov had said. "That hurt my feelings," he had smiled then, proud of himself. "Good thing I totally kicked the shit out of you."

Shane had tried to bat Rozanov's hand away. Instead, Rozanov caught Shane's hand in his, stopping it easily with a firm grasp—keeping him in place. Before Shane could protest too hard, Rozanov hauled him up, so they were standing face to face.

"Hollander." Rozanov had drawled. "Does not sound Chinese."

Man, fuck this guy. "I'm Japanese," he had snapped, "Dipshit. We don't all look the same."

"No, you do not look like anyone I have ever seen," Rozanov had said, plainly. "Tell me your name."

Shane squawked. "Doesn't fucking matter! I'm Hollander and I'm going to kick your commie ass, that's all you need to know."

Rozanov had smiled then. "Commie ass is hard to kick. The comforts of capitalism have made your country soft. Probably why you can't fight, and are so easy to beat."

"Tch," Shane had snapped. "My name is Shane. Shane Hollander."

Rozanov blinked, pleasantly surprised.

"You better remember that name," Shane continued, defiant. "Because next year I'm going to make sure Canada wipes the floor with you guys."

Rozanov laughed. "Not with that backhand you will."

Shane gawked at him. "There," he said, slowly, as his anger started to reach unprecedented levels of hysteria, "is nothing wrong with my backhand."

Instead of responding, Rozanov had smiled at him, wide. "Ilya. Ilya Rozanov." Rozanov paused. "You will never forget me," he declared. "I will make sure of it."

Shane had stared at him, affronted. Instead of responding, he tried to yank his hand free.

"Hey," Rozanov had warned. "Stop that." He had readjusted his grip, forcing Shane to stop struggling. With the arena lights shining down on his dirty blonde curls, blue eyes dancing in the harsh, fluorescent lights, Shane thought he looked like the devil. "Nice to meet you, Shane Hollander."

And he finally let Shane go.

Russia and Canada got disqualified from the standings that year, which meant for the first time in junior hockey history, the United States got to place. Finland took home the gold.

All the players who participated in the fight were banned from playing for the next three months.

That was Shane Hollander's first international tournament.

Once the newscast finishes, the locker room descends into total chaos.

Half the room is angry because they don't want to play with a communist.

The other half just don't want to play with Ilya Rozanov. "The guy's a fucking psycho!" one of the senior teammates yells.

Shane can empathize.

Coach Wiebe, trapped inside his office by the crowd of panicked athletes, attempts to regain order, to no avail.

"I know you have concerns—" he tries to shout.

"I knew a guy on the Crimson who couldn't shit for three weeks after that freak slashed him in the Super Series." someone shouts. "The guy's gonna kill us!"

"Rozanov is a talented player who would—" the coach tries to cut in.

"Did you know," another teammate pipes up, "his dad is like, KGB royalty or something?"

Coach Wiebe grits out a sigh. "Ilya Rozanov is not affiliated—"

"Aren't they all KGB? Like don't they have to join?"

"Dude," the teammate continues. "I watched a PBS special on KGB sleeper agents, and it was the craziest shit ever. They said they like, make these guys get American or Canadian citizenship, embed themselves in the community, and then when they say their like, activation word, they just like wake up like from a bad dream and fucking kill all of us."

Wiebe looks at his wit's end. "I don't think that's quite accurate—"

"PBS would never lie to me man!"

Shane thinks Wiebe is a nice guy, but he's young. Like most of the team, there's certainly potential for him to be a good coach. But right now, he looks completely out of his depth.

So Shane decides to take pity on him and cut in. "Hey!" he shouts. All it takes is one word and suddenly, the room falls quiet, and eighteen pairs of eyes swivel over to look at him. "Rozanov is a strong player, and we all have a lot to learn from him. Don't you think that's someone you'd want on your side?"

In all honesty, when Shane last played Rozanov, Shane thought he was a talented but impulsive player. He lacked control. He got into fights. He collected unnecessary penalties. His penchant for obnoxious, attention-seeking behavior made him a distraction on and off the

ice, sometimes completely costing his team the game. Shane definitely has his hesitations playing with him.

But he, under no circumstances, would ever badmouth a potential teammate, especially when they are not there to defend themselves.

"Of course Hollander likes him," another one of his teammates, a former Kent goon, snaps.

Shane whirls on him. "Now what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

The teammate raises his chin, meets him hard in the eye. "He's another outsider. Another fucking interloper."

Fucking asshole. Shane thinks, rolling his eyes. Teammates who hate him always try to call him that—an outsider. Considering Shane isn't ten anymore, the insult bounces off him harmlessly.

However, the comment does make him wish, not for the first time in his career, that hockey was a solo sport.

"Everett!" Coach Wiebe shouts, vein bulging out of his forehead. He's furious. He looks like Shane's grade one teacher, red and angry and helpless as he repeatedly lost control of the classroom, "The next words out of your mouth better be a damn apology—"

"Yeah! We love Hollander, take that shit somewhere else—" Wyatt chimes, next to Shane.

"Yo, fuck you Everett!" Ottawa defensemen Evan Dyskstra pipes up as well. "Just 'cause Shane's Asian—"

"Dyskstra, Hayes," Shane snaps. They both obediently fall silent. In a more subdued tone, Shane turns to Coach Wiebe. "I can handle myself."

The room just keeps watching him. Waiting for him to make a move. Everett is glaring daggers at Shane, unwilling to apologize and unwilling to back down.

Two years ago, Shane had stared down his old Voyageurs teammates, meeting their silent expressions of disgust with his head held high.

Ten years ago, Shane had stared down Ilya Rozanov, after covering his face with blood.

Everett didn't stand a chance.

Shane walks slowly toward him, and his teammates part to make way for him. He walks until he stops right in front of Everett, who meets Shane with his chin raised high.

Shane leans in.

"You have it in you to make sure this team can really win," Shane says, deliberate, "if you just stopped being so insecure."

His eyes widened. "I'm not fucking insecure, you f—"

Shane cuts him off, turning away disinterestedly to address the room. "We will welcome Ilya Rozanov," Shane says, voice hard. "Because he's a part of our team. That's final."

Shane doesn't really know if anything he said resonated with the room, but no one actively disagreed with him, and it at least caused the commotion to die down. His other teammates grumble to themselves, dispersing to change out of their gear.

Everyone seems calm for the most part. All except one.

"I am not fucking insecure," the former Kent goon shouts. *Holy shit, is he still on this?*

And as Shane turns back around, one of their rookies shouts. "C! Watch out!"

Everett punches Shane in the face.

A couple things happen next. Shane lands on the floor, eye and cheek throbbing. Coach Wiebe is yelling something Shane can't quite catch, as Wyatt and a couple of his teammates pull Everett off him. Everett struggles against Wyatt and he shouts something Shane can't quite hear, and wrestles him into a chokehold. As the chaos unfolds around him, Shane stands up, hand over his eye, as his teammates are now dragging him out of the room, to loud and angry protests.

"I know what you did in Montreal!" Everett shouts. "You think we wouldn't know?! You think we'd ever let someone like you be a part of our team, tell us what to do—"

"Get him out of my locker room!" Coach Wiebe says, voice hard. Shane thinks he sees Everett start to mouth something horrible, when finally, Wyatt throws him out, shoving the door closed behind them.

Shane dispassionately watches him leave.

Thirty minutes later, Coach Wiebe waits until the players all filter out before he turns to look at Shane. "I'm sorry I lost control of the situation," he says, tiredly. "I hope you know that I won't tolerate a guy like that on our team."

Shane sighs. He touches his face one last time. Nothing feels broken. Shane will just have to enter the new season with a black eye probably. The Hollander good fortune continues.

"I hope the higher ups know what they are doing," Shane says, flatly. "These draft moves—it looks like you guys are throwing spaghetti at the wall."

"Trust us," Coach Wiebe says, eyes lit. "Rozanov is a once-in-a-lifetime get."

The jealousy consumes him in a wave. No wonder Everett acted the way he did, if he felt like this all the time. *They used to say that about me.* He thinks. He tries to blink away the horrible expression that must've crossed his face.

Coach Wiebe looks at him. "I know..." Wiebe trails off, trying to think of what to say. "I know the past two years have been hard for you."

Understatement of the century. "They have," Shane says, bluntly.

"I hope you know," he continues, awkwardly, "You'll always have a home with us on the Centaurs."

Montreal's coach said that to him, too, once. "Yeah, I know Coach."

"And maybe with Rozanov, you might get the support you really need from this team," Coach looks at him, pointedly. "On the ice."

Shane's had a bad day, and he's already upset. So very quickly, Shane's initial confusion about what Coach said very quickly gives way to anger. It comes flying out of him against his control, the way he wished it did two years ago.

All he ever wanted was to play hockey, and yet there's always all this bullshit standing in his way, all the time.

"If you coached your players better," Shane snaps, voice rising. "I would've had all the support I needed right here at home."

It was out of pocket, especially since, at least, it seemed like Coach Wiebe was just trying to be decent to him. Wiebe looks like he's been slapped. Shane swallows, tries to get his emotions back under control.

"I'm sorry," Shane says, reluctantly. "I didn't mean that. I don't know what came over me."

Coach Wiebe swallows back any visible hurt Shane might've inflicted on him. He walks over and shakily gives Shane two pats on the shoulder.

"You meant every word of that," Coach Wiebe says. "And it's okay."

He sighs, looks around the locker room, before staring back at Shane. "Just... be nice to Rozanov Monday got it? Help him feel welcome."

Shane just wants to go back onto the ice and drill through his plays, alone. So to save himself the energy of arguing, he just nods.

"You got it, coach."

"That Larry King is a fucking idiot!" Ottawa's general manager shouts. "First off, he got the kid's damn name wrong, and also—no one fucking kidnapped him!"

Ilya wonders when they can go to his new apartment so he can drive his new car. He's currently stuck in the general manager's absolutely massive home, waiting for him to get off the phone. To occupy himself, Ilya is watching an American movie called E.T., on the richest, sharpest, widest TV screen he's ever seen.

It certainly beat his father's home in Moscow.

Ilya is what is colloquially known as a bad communist, but even he can't help but be bemused by the sheer amount of waste around him. All of this space, this luxury, for just one person? There's awe mixed in there for sure, as he gazes around the home hungrily.

This man probably makes a lot of money off people like him.

"The State Department can eat my ass!" the general manager shouts. "Yeah! Go get your boss, I'm not fucking scared."

There is garbling on the other end. On screen, Ilya watches the little boy speak to a very ugly alien. The TV is so high-tech that the details make what could've been a cute animal into a grotesque beast.

He continues to watch the movie for a while. Even though he can understand the English perfectly, he finds he doesn't want to commit the brainpower to do so. He decides to just let himself get lost in the pictures instead. It's not a hard movie to grasp.

"Idiots!" the manager shouts, as he hangs up. Just as he slams the landline down, the phone starts ringing off the hook again, and the general manager curses when he picks it up. "What the fuck do you want?!"

Garbling, the accent this time unmistakably Russian. Ilya focuses harder on the movie, trying to ignore his heartbeat quickly picking up speed.

"As I said to our guys here," the general manager says, slowly, like he's explaining something to someone he thinks is very stupid. "Mr. Rozanov chose to do this. He's left out of his own free will." More garbling. "That's not my understanding of the situation."

The manager sighs, pinches his nose. "No, if you want to talk to him, get me a government official. I'm not letting you Red Army fucks strong arm me here—"

And as if he spoke this person into existence, the call drops, and the house is rewarded with only a minute of silence before the general manager has to pick up the phone again.

"Hello—" He is cut off. The general manager, for once, doesn't throw a fit—just stands and listens.

The manager sighs. Counts to five. He turns to Ilya, who is still pretending to watch E.T. with vested interest. "Mr. Rozanov, the State Department wants to talk to you."

Ilya can hear his heartbeat now thundering in his ears. He still calmly takes the phone from the general manager.

"Hello?" Ilya asks, in English. His voice is coarse—Ilya realizes he hasn't spoken to anyone in the last twenty-four hours.

The man on the line is a high-ranking, bilingual bureaucrat. Ilya knows this because he tells him so when he switches back to Russian. "Ilya," the man says, softly. "Is what that man is saying true?"

"Yes." Ilya replies back in Russian.

There's a long pause on the other end. "When did this happen?"

"I do not have to tell you that." Ilya says, flatly.

"Do you have any intention of coming back to Russia?"

Ilya stares unbrokenly at the TV screen. The alien is lifting the boy and his friends up into the air, the small shadows of their bikes casting harsh, dark lines against the setting afternoon sun. "No," Ilya says. He thinks of what he'd like to say next, and realizes he cannot come up with anything. "Never," he adds.

A longer pause. "You understand how this reflects on your father?" he asks, still in that smooth, professional tone.

"My father," Ilya spits, "is none of your business."

"He will lose his title. You will cost your family everything."

Ilya rolls his eyes, even though the man on the other end cannot appreciate it. *Party bureaucrats*. Ilya genuinely cannot think of another class of human being more despicable. Other than American capitalists, that is. "That man is a shell," he snaps. *On most days, he barely recognizes where he is*. "The party will lose nothing."

The man doesn't respond, like he's waiting for Ilya to calm down. Ilya grits his teeth and, against his better judgment, in a moment of weakness, continues to fill the silence. "I applied for a work visa. I am not coming back. I will play hockey for Canada."

"Very well," the man continues. He remains unaffected by Ilya's barbs. "As long as you understand the consequences." He pauses now, for emphasis. "Because Mr. Rozanov, there will be consequences."

The man hangs up. Ilya lowers the phone. The general manager looks inquisitively at Ilya, arms crossed in front of his chest. "Well?"

"I do not think he will call again," Ilya says. He hands the phone wordlessly back to the manager.

"Jesus Christ," the manager mumbles to himself. "That was such a shitshow." He takes a look at Ilya, and claps his hands together. The showboat salesman persona slaps itself back onto his face. "Well, thank god that's over," he smiles wide, like he's a proud dad about to surprise

his child with candy. "What do you think? Time to see your new digs? That'll definitely cheer you up."

"Car." Ilya orders in response. The manager laughs good-naturedly.

"Ah, yes. Car! Car. Don't worry kid. Your car will be waiting for you, too."

The manager fishes around for his car keys, and in doing so looks at the TV. "Man, I fucking love this movie," the general manager says, stopping in his tracks. He sighs happily as the credits scroll down the screen. "It makes me cry like a baby every time," he looks at Ilya. "Too bad the Reds won't let you kids watch stuff like this, huh?"

Ilya stands up and stretches his legs. He thought the movie was okay. It was sad that the alien had to go back to his homeworld. "The party let us watch some American movies," Ilya explains. "Some Like It Hot. The Apartment." Ilya stops, because he's pretty sure that's it.

"Jesus, those are ancient," the manager scoffs. "That's so fucking depressing."

"You are... film guy?" Ilya asks.

The general manager snorts. "No. I'm a sports guy. My friggin' ex-wife, though, she loves movies. Back when we were together, she only let our five-year-old watch E.T., because she thought all the other shit would rot his brain."

"My past girlfriend also really liked movies," Ilya says, easily slipping into a time-honored male bonding ritual of talking about past women in their lives. "She smuggled American films over sometimes. No E.T., though. Too difficult. Too new."

"I have no idea what you guys watch over there," the general manager admits. "I thought all your guys' movies were like about factory workers or whatever."

Ilya tilts his head. "Are you familiar with Soviet montage?" he asks.

The manager scoffs. "What is that? Like a KGB thing?"

Ilya shakes his head. "No. Movie thing. Battleship Potemkin? Have you watched?" The manager looks blankly at him. Ilya sighs. "Okay. How about Psycho? Hitchcock?"

At this, the general manager nods, unsure of where this was going.

"Soviet filmmakers say cuts should be seen," Ilya continues. "They should be... obvious." He spreads his hands out, looking around the general manager's extravagant living room through the makeshift lens of his fingers. He then turns to put the general manager in his frame, an exact center third.

"Popular example—we have an actor, no expression, looking into a camera. Then, boom, you cut to a bowl of soup. Then, boom, you cut back to the man."

Ilya drops his hands. He picks up his jacket from the couch, shoulders his duffle bag. He turns back to face the general manager. "No words said, but viewer thinks man is hungry. You

cut to dead woman instead, viewer says man is sad. You cut to woman on a couch, viewer says man feels desire."

He starts heading toward the door. "Russian filmmaking is everywhere," and as he says this, he turns to shoot a smirk at the general manager, who looks baffled. "The West always got its best tricks from us."

In all honesty, Ilya could give less of a shit about old movies. He wished Svetlana spent less time trying to smuggle old American movies, and more time helping him get his hands on the Nintendo NES.

The phone call successfully called Ilya's bluff. The bureaucrat tried to threaten his family, which was a dumb idea, because Ilya hated his family. But Ilya saw how these investigations work. How they infected a community like a virus in order to root out the cause of defection.

Ilya knew of this risk when he defected. Which was why he was careful. None of his teammates knew what he was prepared to do. Especially not Svetlana, whom he hadn't heard from in six years now. If the KGB tried to question them, they would genuinely have nothing to offer.

He tried to be as coldhearted as his actions made him out to be. He had to have been a horrible son to abandon his father, especially in the state he was in. He had to have been a horrible teammate to abandon his friends after over ten years of playing together.

But truth was he cared for them all. He didn't love his family, but against all odds, he did care about what happened to them. He loved his teammates. He loved Svetlana.

But he needed to leave Russia more.

Svetlana was the daughter of legendary Moscow hockey player Konstantin Osipov. Ilya had idolized him when he was a kid. However, when he met him, Svetlana's father was bedridden due to a career-ending injury. He rarely spoke, rarely left his room. His daughter spoke enough for both of them however, equally the loud-mouthed asshole her father was back on the ice.

She loved movies more than she loved hockey, which was saying a lot.

When he was fifteen, on the very rare weekends he wasn't training, he would spend long afternoons fucking Svetlana, the two of them laughing as they desperately tried not to be heard by her parents. This was then followed by even longer evenings of Svetlana, pack of smokes in her hand, endlessly explaining tapes she borrowed from the Moscow Film School to a half-asleep Ilya. She would also pepper in one or two American films she managed to smuggle over.

Ilya hoped she was okay.

"Well," the general manager says. His words echo in the empty apartment. Ilya's back faces him, as Ilya is finding it difficult to tear his eyes away from the riverview, along with the bustling and prosperous downtown chattering beneath him. "This is where I guess we say goodbye."

The manager tosses Ilya two things. One, the keys to his apartment. Attached to it, an access card for a place called Centaur Ice. It had the team mascot on it on a bright red background. Ilya looks at it, but soon the manager lobs another, much more important set of keys. Ilya catches both but quickly tosses his apartment keys on the floor. He scrabbles to look at the second set of keys, and his face breaks into a smile when he sees it. The Chevrolet logo.

The general manager chuckles at this. "I left a catalogue on the kitchen counter. You should be able to buy most of your furniture there. Since I'm such a nice guy, I made sure you are all set up with a mattress in your bedroom, so you at least have somewhere to sleep. There's also a pretty sweet mall just a couple blocks away if you need new clothes or anything."

"When can I go to the rink?" Ilya asks. He picks the apartment keys back up and throws them long so they land on the kitchen counter. He keeps the car keys clasped tightly in his palm.

"Well, since getting you out of Sweden and into Canada was such a fucking nightmare," the general manager starts, "The team's pre-training workouts are just about wrapping up. But thankfully, due to my fucking ingenuity, we were at least able to get you in before training camp started. You'll meet everyone on Monday."

"So," Ilya says. "Today?"

The general manager frowns. "Uh, today's Sunday."

Ilya looks at him, confused for a second. "No?" he asked. "Monday." While the journey out of Stockholm and out of Europe had been long and trying, Ilya knew time zone calculations—especially to Canada—like the back of his hand.

"You've been on too many planes this week, man," the general manager clicks his teeth. "I swear, it's Sunday."

"You are tricking me," Ilya snaps. He suddenly feels a little paranoid. The empty house doesn't alleviate fears that Ilya might've been pranked or actually kidnapped. "I know how to count."

The general manager sighs. He untucks the newspaper shoved under his armpit, something Ilya saw him pick up before they walked in. "Look."

He sees the date. Sunday.

"You can go out into the hall and check everyone else's newspaper, too. You missed a day kid."

Ilya also sees his name in big bold type. Above the fold is an action shot of him from three years ago, slamming Montreal center Shane Hollander against the boards in the 1986 Super Series. Shane's face isn't visible, but Ilya can recognize that jersey number anywhere.

Defecting Soviet Hockey Player.

Ilya Rozanov.

He beat Hollander in that game. It was also the last game they ever played against each other.

"Look," the general manager says, "It's been a very long few weeks, yes? I'm exhausted. I'm sure you are exhausted."

"You are not actually kidnapping me, correct?" Ilya says, just to be annoying.

"I am not kidnapping you. Your team is very excited to meet you. Tomorrow. Monday." The general manager reaches his hand over, as if hesitating. He then pats him awkwardly two times on the back. Ilya tries not to cringe. "Until then, get some rest, yeah? Do you uh," he gestures loosely. "Do you observe?"

"Observe?" Ilya asks, confused.

The general manager cuts Ilya a sidelong glance. "You guys don't practice that kind of thing do you? Religion? Opiate of the masses and all that?"

Ilya's crucifix chain feels cold against his skin. "My mom was religious," Ilya says, and he doesn't elaborate further.

"Okay, well, god bless her. Anyway, the arena will be completely abandoned today, given that it's Christ's day of rest and all that. If you really wanted to take a look around, no one's going to stop you." The general manager gives him an apprehensive look. He taps at the newspaper clutched in Ilya's left hand. "Just you know. Be careful."

"Thank you," Ilya says. He finds that he means it. He puts the newspaper down. He gets up, and sticks his hand out. "For everything."

The general manager smiles. He grabs his hand, and gives it a hearty shake. North Americans are always so friendly. "We are really happy to have you Mr. Rozanov. Please, if you ever need anything, do not hesitate to reach out."

Ilya agrees, and after they've said their goodbyes, Ilya's shepherd into the dark heart of the west—Ottawa, Canada—turns around and heads out.

Just like that, Ilya's alone.

He looks at his car keys, and a wild grin breaks out across his face.

It's time to go for a drive.

Shane knows he's not supposed to be practicing today. He tries to make up for it by taking it easy on his legs, skating loosely around the ice without any weights.

Rest days were never easy for Shane. If he is not playing hockey, his brain drives him insane. It pushes him to do other stuff. Like running until he passes out. Lifting until he passes out. Crunching until he passes out.

None of which exactly gives his muscles the break they need.

So Shane decides to walk through his plays.

One. Shane counts in his head, as he moves his balance to the right in a wide base position, repeatedly swiping an imaginary puck from an imaginary opponent.

Two. He switches left, the motion natural and fluid as his club follows him easily in the opposite direction.

Three. Back on his right skate again, and like clockwork, he feels like he's starting to hear it. Players, slamming against each other. The noise of the arena. It only makes his skating pick up pace, almost against his will. *One two three*—Shane swings, shooting an imaginary goal. *One two three*—he sees a player bigger than him head his way. Shane changes his leg over, expertly weaving past them before they get a chance to check them, as he touches his hand quickly on the ice.

He lets the momentum from his skate propel him across the ice until he hits the boards. He sighs and pulls his tiny spiral notebook out from his back pocket. He quickly starts crossing out old positions, directing arrows to better areas of the ice.

He stares at his notebook. Everything looks like gibberish. Shane tries not to let his frustration overwhelm him. *Everything is so fucking pointless.*

He needs to continue skating.

And even though he keeps warning himself against it, his body, as if betraying his brain, starts picking up speed. His legs easily move their balance from one side to another, gliding him across the ice, and the cold air rushes against his cheeks, making his heart thump joyously with adrenaline. A smile breaks across his face, as he swerves around the rink, pulling into a backwards position as his skates immediately find their equilibrium, skating him along the right side of the ice, impossibly fast until—

Shane slams himself against the boards. He yanks his helmet off, as if that would help him smell better.

He narrows his eyes. There's a figure at the very top of the bleachers. Shane can't quite get a good enough look to see who it is. But one thing he knows for sure, because he absolutely cannot stand the smell.

Someone's smoking.

"Hey!" Shane yells, on the top of his lungs. He skates closer to the edge of the ice, facing the bleachers. "Hey!"

The figure doesn't respond. Shane tries again. "You can't smoke in here!"

Technically, Shane's incorrect. Smoking is normalized and highly encouraged in most sports arenas—to Shane's dismay. Once, Shane had a coach who tried to ban smoking in the locker rooms, and players just smoked in the hallways instead. Shane could never escape it, so the few times he can, he tries very hard to keep it that way.

Sunday is his one day he gets to have the entire rink to himself, undisturbed. And now, even that's taken away from him.

Some motherfucker had the audacity to disturb his peace.

"Hey! Can you hear me?!" Shane shouts again, reaching the edge of the ice. "Put that out or go outside!"

Now that Shane's gotten closer, he narrows his eyes again. His entire body goes cold when he realizes he cannot believe what he is seeing.

Ilya. Fucking. Rozanov.

Wearing a hoodie and a red "*Welcome to Canada!*" baseball cap that he clearly got at an airport.

Standing on the top bleacher, smoking nonchalantly as he lords over Shane on the ice.

Jesus fucking Christ.

"I see no sign," Rozanov says, finally, "telling me I am breaking any rules."

Shane's stunned into silence. Rozanov decides to take this opportunity to continue talking.

"I have never been to a hockey rink I cannot smoke in. Is Ottawa special?" Smoke escapes from Rozanov's nostrils. "I may have to go back to Russia, if so."

"Jesus fucking Christ," Shane repeats, this time out loud. He stands there, awestruck. "You motherfucker. Are you a wizard?"

Rozanov frowns. "Wizard? Like Rasputin?"

"Yeah," Shane huffs, even though he doesn't know what he is talking about. He usually wouldn't greet a new teammate like this, but they usually weren't Ilya Rozanov. "Like Rasputin. A teleporting Rasputin. Just last week, I saw you on TV, playing hockey halfway across the globe. The next second, I hear you've defected from the Soviet Union, and then not only that, I see you landed in Ottawa International."

Shane takes a deep breath and finds he has the momentum to keep ranting. "And now, not even two days later... tah-dah! Here you are!" Shane laughs hysterically. "You are actually fucking unreal. None of this makes sense unless you can literally teleport."

Rozanov doesn't respond. He just keeps standing there, so high up from Shane, smoking disaffectedly.

"Don't just stand there," Shane snaps. "Answer me. You look scary."

"You suggest I know magic," Rozanov says, smiling now. Like he's trying not to laugh. "Because I am Russian?"

"No," Shane insists, not even sure what they were talking about anymore, just that he needs to make Rozanov feel as stupid as he's making him feel. "I'm saying you know magic because you... you're insane!"

Rozanov sighs. "Imagine me," he says, sadly. "I am very scared—new country, you know? And to feel better, I come to my happy place, hockey, my one normal," he actually looks distraught now, to Shane's disbelief. "Only to find my captain. Calling me names. Calling me a witch, calling me Rasputin—"

"I did not say that!" Shane shouts. In the empty arena, it almost echoes, so Shane forces himself to control his volume. "I did not say that. And stop—stop talking," he orders, before Rozanov can derail the conversation further. "This is so not the point! How long have you been standing there?" Shane demands. "The rink is closed, you're not supposed to be here until Monday."

"I am on this team now, Hollander," Rozanov challenges. "So actually, I can be here whenever I want." He takes another drag, really taking the time to let the smoke filter around them before answering. Shane tries very hard not to cough. "Also, thirty minutes—"

Shane gapes. "Thirty minutes—?!"

"That is how long I have been watching," he says, casually. "After watching for a long time, I light a smoke. And now," he gestures vaguely in both of their directions. "Here we are."

To Shane's horror, he realizes blood is starting to rush to his face. "That—" he cringes at how he must've looked on the ice. Spinning around, swinging past imaginary opponents, talking to himself as he works through positioning. He probably looked like such a tryhard. "You weren't supposed to see that."

Rozanov shrugs. "I liked watching you skate," he says, matter-of-factly. "You always moved beautiful on the ice."

Yeah, now Shane's definitely blushing. "I—" Shane stammers, disarmed. He guesses the polite thing to do would be to thank Rozanov for the compliment. Too bad Shane doesn't feel particularly polite at the moment.

He also doesn't feel like practicing anymore. He walks off the ice, sits on the bench. He turns his back to Rozanov, trying to regain some of his equilibrium. "I didn't mean to be rude. I was just surprised," he sighs, resigned. "I was supposed to meet you Monday," he repeats, as he kicks his skates off and pulls his sneakers on.

Rozanov's quiet for a while, and instead of taking solace in the silence, Shane finds himself tensing up, like he's preparing to take a punch.

"I do not want you to stop practicing," Rozanov says, bluntly. "If I am bothering you, you should have said so. I would have left."

Shane laughs sharply. "You didn't put out your cigarette when I asked you to. Why would I expect you'd listen to anything I have to say?"

"With cigarettes, you say I am not allowed, which is not true. You did not tell me that it was bothering you." Rozanov explains, and of course, coming out of his mouth, he sounds perfectly reasonable, while Shane sounds crazy.

"Okay, well—" Shane's getting worked up again, and against his better judgement, he whirls around. All of a sudden, Rozanov has, again, teleported behind him, sitting on the bench right above him. So when Shane turns around, he's unexpectedly close to Ilya, crouching in a squat. "God! Stop doing that!"

"Stop doing what?"

"Teleporting!" Shane yells. "And yes! It does bother me! Cigarette smoke gives me migraines, and it pisses me off that everyone in this league is so fucking addicted to them—"

"Okay," Rozanov says, simply. "I'll put it out then." He moves to throw the butt on the ground.

"Are you kidding me?!" Shane shouts again.

"What!" Rozanov says, voice starting to rise as well. He sounds frustrated. The swoop of pleasure that gives Shane is worrying, to say the least. "Both things I do you get angry. What is correct? What will make you happy?" Rozanov snaps. "Tell me."

Shane looks at the cigarette butt burning in Rozanov's hand, feeling outside of his body. To get his attention, Rozanov snaps his fingers in front of Shane's face. "Hello?" he calls.

"You should put it out outside," Shane says, distantly.

"Okay, fine." Rozanov snaps. He stands up, shoves the cigarette back into his mouth. "I'm leaving. See you Monday, Hollander."

"No I—" Shane reaches out, grabbing Rozanov's wrist with his right hand. Rozanov looks startled. It's a good look on him. Shane doesn't know what to say, just that he doesn't know how it happened again. Him starting on the wrong foot with yet another teammate. Even though Rozanov makes it very easy to hate him. Shane doesn't need to—he doesn't need to always push so hard—

"Have you been to the mall yet?" The words tumble out of his mouth, against his will. "Or, has anyone shown you around?"

Rozanov tilts his head, looking at Shane curiously. "No," he pauses. "You offering?"

Shane guesses he is. "Just for today," Shane says, quickly. "Because it's a rest day."

Rozanov gestures at Shane. "You are not resting." He smirks. "Is bad for muscles."

Jesus, give this guy an inch... "Do not lecture me about physical fitness, I know what I am doing," Shane snaps. "I'm agreeing to show you around today, and today only. Every other day you spend in our great city, you are on your own."

Rozanov smiles wide. It still manages to make him look disingenuous and conniving. "Right now?"

"No, I need to shower."

"I can wait."

"No," Shane insists, loudly, blushing. Shane absolutely does not want Rozanov just waiting around while he showers. Shane knows this bodes very poorly for when he has to share a locker room with the guy for the rest of the season. "Like, later."

"It's already evening," Rozanov fires back. "How much later are you thinking?" He smiles, innocently. "Going to show me somewhere fun?"

"Look," Shane says. "I don't live that far from here. I just need thirty minutes to shower and change." Shane smiles. "Let's meet at the mall. It'll be fun. It'll be like a cute, capitalist field trip, acclimating you to your new economic reality."

"No," Rozanov disagrees. He pulls the cigarette back out of his mouth, stabbing it in Shane's direction. "I will pick you up."

Shane rolls his eyes. "No."

"I want to show off my new car." Rozanov insists. Shane tries to protest, but Rozanov cuts him off.

"I am picking you up in an hour," Rozanov says, final. "You take me to your 'mall,' and you will show me around."

Not wanting to be outgunned, Shane matches Rozanov's smirk with his own.

"Okay, fine," Shane says. He pulls out his spiral-bound notebook. He writes his address on it. He stands up, tilting his head in challenge to Rozanov. He hands him the paper. "It's a date."

Rozanov frowns. Shane watches him to see if this made him uncomfortable. Shane usually can gain the upper hand on most of the hockey players in the league by making them feel unmasculine, or, god forbid, gay. It's not a tactic he uses often, but Shane really, really wants to see Rozanov squirm.

Instead, Rozanov shoots him a real smile this time, not hiding behind any mirth or boredom. It lights his entire face up.

"You will love my new car," Rozanov says, happily. "Is a Chevrolet Camaro." And at that, he turns around and leaves.

Chapter End Notes

i have a tumblr now! :) [come say hi](#)

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

note updated tags!

so. that episode 5 huh.

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

"Oh my god," Hollander looks bewildered by his amazing car. "It's so yellow."

Ilya smiles at him from the rolled-down window of his Camaro. "Beautiful, yes?"

"It's *so* yellow," Hollander repeats.

Hollander's house lies in a quiet suburb off Ottawa proper, in a gated cul-de-sac with five residences spaced no closer than 800 meters from each other. The house itself is sleek and oddly geometric, and based on the material, it looks like it has been built within the last five years.

Hollander had been sitting on the front steps when Ilya drove up.

His head had been down, and he was fiddling with his fingers, black hair falling loosely into his eyes. He seemed preoccupied, and Ilya wondered if people visited him a lot. His neighborhood was very quiet.

It reminded Ilya, inappropriately, of the barracks he trained in.

Ilya leans over the console and pops the passenger door open for him. When Hollander sits down, he examines the interior of Ilya's car. He first reaches over to touch the dash, letting his long fingers trail over the leather, as if in a trance. Ilya follows the movement absently before he realizes Hollander has looked up and is now staring at him.

Ilya clears his throat. "You look nice. Like a businessman. Or a newscaster."

Hollander doesn't return the compliment. He's frowning. "They gave you this thing?" he asks, incredulous. "When you signed?"

"One thing both our countries have in common," Ilya says cheerily. "They take care of their athletes."

When Ilya starts the Camaro, he feels it actually purr to life. He can't help the awed smile that spreads across his face. He backs out of Hollander's driveway with a screech, and they take off for the main road like a shot.

"Oh my god," Hollander yelps. He has his hand clenched tightly to the side of the door, but Ilya doesn't slow down. "Please be careful," he says, louder.

"Relax," Ilya orders. Hollander does not. He keeps glancing nervously ahead on the road, cringing when Ilya doesn't brake soon enough. "I know how to handle a nice car. Is why people in charge gave it to me," he says.

He must've said something wrong, because at this Hollander's frown deepens. "Don't go around advertising that," Hollander says, shortly. "If you want the team to like you."

Ilya scoffs. "Advertise? I do not have anything to sell."

"Like, don't be a show off. Don't flash your new car, or how much money they paid you to be here, or how big and nice your new apartment is or whatever. Just like, be cool," Hollander says.

This concept seems ridiculous and alien. Why hide the fact you have nice stuff? "I am driving a beautiful car," Ilya says, "because I am amazing at hockey. I do not understand what I need to hide."

"None of us got this stuff when we joined, okay?" Hollander snaps, like he's explaining something to a child. "So if you show up with this crazy car, and and all your cash, and you are super loud and... well, let's be honest, Russian about it—"

"Ah," Ilya nods understandingly. "Buying the enemy. Does not allow for positive feelings."

"I'm glad you get it," Hollander says, and his face softens. "Look, I just want to help you, you know. I know it's hard. Fitting into a new team."

"No, I understand. Thank you for your advice." As Ilya drives further, they start to approach a busier part of the Greater Ottawa Metropolitan Area, and as he passes, several people in equally nice cars honk appreciatively at him. In an amazed stupor, he honks back at them, and even revs up his engine a bit, giving them a show. His new best friends love it, and Ilya speeds away to the sounds of distant cheering.

Ilya smirks. "I just have to be so good, my teammates know I am worth the price."

Hollander's face falls, giving way to irritation. Ilya wonders if he regrets agreeing to show him around. Was this how people in his new country did things? A childhood rivalry, forgiven in the name of a little Canadian hospitality?

"Whatever," Hollander says, hard. "Don't take my advice, see if I care. Just don't go crying if you get shut out from the team."

"I cry a lot, so that will be very hard."

"Man fuck you," Hollander says, and means it.

The two of them fall quiet.

Driving in, Ottawa is a much smaller city than Moscow. Full of shorter, ornately constructed buildings, indulgent and nostalgic flourishes topped by then seemingly gigantic and garish billboards, hocking a variety of products Ilya could not recognize. It creates an admittedly underwhelming and ugly skyline, but Ilya finds himself strangely comforted by it. Moscow was an efficient beast—tall, brutalist buildings densely packed in with thousands of families, mixed in with then awe-inspiring historical structures that remind passersby of every pain and joy Russians have collectively ever experienced.

To say the least, it was kind of intense.

Ottawa, Canada is definitely not intense.

Whenever the team played international games, Ilya rarely got to explore the surrounding city. The KGB always ushered them to their sleeping quarters the second hockey ended. The brief glimpses of a foreign world stayed with Ilya, however. Not even because what he saw was especially luxurious or covetous—Moscow made most cities look provincial in comparison.

It was more how the foreignness made every bygone city look like a beautiful fantasy.

Now, Ilya props his elbow on the edge of the open window, just barely sticking his head out. The cold air bites his cheeks, and Ilya feels it now, this lightness in his chest, like he's in a dream. Alien buildings, alien landscapes—they all flash by him in a fantastical blur.

For a moment, Ilya feels like he can just float away.

The feeling beckons him to sneak a peek at Hollander, just because he can. However, to his absolute joy, he finds that Hollander is already watching him, and might have been for a while now. He blushes, caught, his lips parting in embarrassment, and Ilya follows the movement hungrily.

Hollander looks away, his face quickly trying to regain its composure. He clears his throat. "Can I ask you a dumb question?" he asks.

"Think harder so it becomes a smart question," Ilya responds, lightly.

Hollander looks even more flustered. "Oh, okay."

Hollander chews on his bottom lip, face concentrated in thought. Ilya tries to focus on the road, but his eyes keep drawing themselves back to Hollander's face—his lips, redder under his teeth, his long eyelashes.

Entirely helpless to the charm of watching Hollander doing exactly as he says.

"Did you get to see much of Canada? When you played?" he asks, finally.

Ilya wonders what his dumb question was if this was his smart question. "No, the party was too scared of defection," he laughs. "Smart of them, in the end."

"Why... here then?" Hollander presses. "There have been a few American teams, much better than the Centaurs, looking for your kind of talent for years."

Ilya shrugs. "Well. They did not approach me. Maybe too concerned with risk, who knows. Ottawa got there first."

Hollander blinks, a bit stunned. "So you picked this team... because they were the first to ask?" he says, incredulous.

"I wanted to leave. They gave me a good opportunity," he replies. "I can play good hockey anywhere. North America always complicates with business and numbers."

"So you weren't scared," Hollander insists. "Like you were just totally okay picking just a random team, leaving your home, and trusting them with your life."

Ilya's eyes stay focused on the road. "I could think forever. Would not make leaving any safer," he says, his arm still slung comfortably outside his car window. "Too many people I know think too much before they leave. Is why they fail."

He smiles to himself. "Like Nike says. Just do it."

Hollander keeps staring at Ilya. "You must've wanted to leave Russia very bad."

To say the least. "I had to do it," Ilya says instead.

"Why?"

The question makes Ilya tense up. He tries to play it off. "Is dumb question. Ask me a different one."

Hollander squares his shoulders. "It's not that dumb."

"No. Is very dumb."

"The press will ask you stuff like this. You have to give them a good answer."

"Your western newspapers answer this question for you," Ilya says, shortly. "To you all, Russia is hellhole. No running water, no electricity, bad government. Everyone wants to leave and come to beautiful North America."

Hollander doesn't give up. "I'm asking you why *you* left," he pauses, glances down at his fingers, and when he looks back up his eyes look a little sad. "You were... Russia... Russia loved you."

Ilya's had enough of this line of questioning. "Okay, my turn now," Ilya snaps. "Why are *you* here, Hollander? You were two-time cup champion, number one in the league," he grips the steering wheel, hard, and the Camaro starts to quickly pick up speed, "You were youngest player ever to score seventy—*seventy*—points in a season," Ilya laughs ruefully. "Even I cannot do that, and I can do everything. You were unmatched and now you are playing on a team that cannot even make playoffs."

Hollander doesn't back down. He holds his head up high. "I'm here because I love my hometown. The Centaurs have a lot of promise, and they need a strong leader to get them where they need to be."

Ilya laughs. "Bullshit," he snaps. "Bullshit answer. Press will smell it right away. Come on Hollander. Something happened in Montreal, everyone knows it. Why did you leave?"

"Players get traded all the time," Hollander insists. Ilya can even see his face, glazing over, like he's reciting. "Montreal is a great team, and I continue to look forward to playing against them—"

"People knew of the trade even in Russia," Ilya continues, just to prove he could, just to wipe that rehearsed look off Hollander's face. The practiced expression makes him unbelievably angry, and he doesn't interrogate why. "Called it the worst in NHL history—"

Ilya finally gets what he wants, because suddenly Hollander slams his fist against the car door. "*You don't have to tell me what people are fucking saying!*" Hollander yells, and then reels back, as if shocked he lost his temper.

Ilya falls quiet, gritting his teeth, eyes not leaving the road. Hollander jerks his head away, clenching his hands into tight fists in his lap. "Fine," he grits out. "Point made. You don't want to talk about Russia. I'm sorry I asked. Trust me, I'll never do it again."

The car descends back into silence, this time significantly more oppressive than before. Hollander stares resolutely out the window, not even glancing Ilya's way.

Ilya definitely shouldn't have done that. It's not that he necessarily feels bad. If he didn't want to talk about why he left Russia, he shouldn't have to. But, of course, he is not naïve—he knew this was a question everyone would want to know the answer to if he left. And in North America, they all wanted one answer. This country always treated defectors as a political spectacle. They want some easy story, these free press nations just as excitable by some good piece of propaganda as his home country.

Why did Ilya leave Russia? Because it made him miserable to be there. Why was he miserable? Because he felt trapped. Why did he feel trapped? His past depressed him. His present made him lonely. His future felt hopeless.

So he left. Nothing more complicated than that.

Ilya still tries to say something, however. Maybe extend some gesture of peace. He did not mean to upset Hollander this much; he for some reason just seemed particularly talented at it. But just as he opens his mouth, buildings pull in closer, and Hollander sits up, looking ahead at the road.

"We're here," he says flatly. "You just need to keep down this road a few more blocks, then make a right."

Ilya does exactly that. And when he pulls up, Hollander directs him to a concrete building, one that says PARKING in huge letters.

What Ilya sees in there is nothing short of absurd.

Cars, of every kind. Shitty ones, normal ones, cool ones, like Ilya's. Parked in a concrete structure that went on for four or five floors. Hollander points him to a free parking space, shoved in the corner between two massive cars that look like war tanks, and Ilya tries not to look too flustered when he finds that he's never had to park around this many vehicles before.

The Rozanovs were one of the few families with a car in Moscow. Many of Ilya's winding drives between his training center and his childhood home were on completely empty roads, watched diligently by nosy pedestrians.

His father, ever since he was a kid, made it clear that the Rozanovs occupied an elite position within the party. Because of what his father sacrificed to ensure the success of Russia, his father said the Rozanovs have secured their position in this country. The supposed riches only expounded on themselves when Ilya started playing hockey, first for Team Russia in the juniors, then the Red Army. As an athlete, a very good one at that, he was afforded privileges many of his citizens would never see in their lifetime.

His father told him he grew up with everything.

And yet, despite everything, it was not enough.

Ilya figures out how to park, because he is awesome. But he cannot help the sigh of relief that comes out when he successfully pulls in without hitting anything.

Ilya is not in Moscow anymore. Everytime it hits him, it fills him with the special kind of fear—the kind that always jumpstarts his heart back to life. Against all odds, when he lets go of the steering wheel, and stops the car, his hands are still shaking.

Hollander eyes him. "Hey," Hollander says, softly. He seems to have forgiven Ilya for upsetting him. "Have you been inside a mall before?"

Ilya would think he is making fun of him, given that he's trembling after just simply parking a car, except Hollander is staring at him, entirely earnest.

"Of course," Ilya says, confidently, nonetheless. "Is not 1960s. Russia embraces modernity."

But the first and only time Ilya had ever been to a Western mall was in some shitty city—maybe Pittsburgh.

Last year, after watching his team cinch three games in a row, Ilya's dickhead coach had fallen dangerously ill. So, while the man begged to go back to Russia (*I will not die in an American hospital*, he demanded), one of the handlers had let the team go as a reward for winning a difficult season. It was a carefully structured experience. They were only allowed to be there for thirty minutes. They were not allowed to talk to anyone. They weren't allowed to buy anything. In a weird way, the experience felt very American: Ilya had no money, yet he had been surrounded by things he wanted to buy. For example, there had been a line that wrapped around the entire mall for the Nintendo NES, and Ilya could only stare longingly as

kid after kid filtered out of the store with a huge smile and box in hand, parents glowing with excitement.

Instead of telling Hollander any of this however, Ilya shoots him a shit-eating grin, mostly because Hollander for some reason still looks a little concerned for him.

"I am very excited for my first time in a mall," Ilya says, slyly, "as a rich person."

And finally, finally. Hollander's face breaks out into a smile. His freckles are especially obvious when he does, which makes Ilya want to do something particularly impulsive, like grab his chin, hard, and hold that expression into place.

"What is something you've always wanted," Hollander says, face downright conspiratorial, "that you could never have?"

Hollander explains, as Ilya checks out a copy of Mega Man to go along with his new NES, that Ottawa fans are usually pretty polite. But given that Ilya's name, face, and defection from the Soviet Union are still front page news in the Ottawa Citizen, they might be a bit more enthusiastic this go around.

"But really, they aren't super aggressive," Hollander says, as he finishes signing a piece of paper a cashier shoved, starstruck, into his hands. "It's one of the things I like a lot better here than in Montreal," Hollander sighs. "Montreal... they are just kind of intense, you know? In a way that never stops with just the ice."

Sure, Ilya can relate. In Russia, Ilya was just about every boy's childhood hero, and every girl's childhood crush. He felt like a god every time he stepped out onto the streets of Moscow. Instead of saying so, however, he continues to admire the new toy he bought, staring at the gaming console in its plastic bag, a little starstruck himself. He cannot believe he owns the NES. When he was a teenager, it was his life goal to play Mega Man once before he died.

The cashier thanks Hollander profusely when he hands him back his autograph. Hollander is lovely, all smiles and kindness. The athlete who punched Ilya's car door when pushed to anger had been completely wiped from Hollander's demeanor. Ilya can't help but admire the act for a brief second. *Canada's golden boy.*

When Hollander's done, he walks over, and with a small smile, he bumps Ilya's shoulder, signaling them to continue moving. The brief touch sears into his right arm like a hot plate, and Ilya clenches that fist tight as he gazes after him.

Shaking his head, he jogs after Hollander, leaving the store. Hollander is charting their next course when, now, a teenager in a multicolored jacket comes running up to them.

"Hey no way!" He says, "You're the Russian!"

Ilya wonders what "super aggressive" would look like, if getting stopped three times in the last twenty minutes is what Hollander considered "not super aggressive."

No matter. Nothing Ilya's not used to. He turns on his thousand-watt, rockstar smile, and meets the teenager head-on.

"Why yes," Ilya says, with his usual swagger. "Is me!" He lowers his voice in an attempt to inspire horror. "The Russian!"

The kid laughs. "Dude, I watched all of Team Russia's Super Series games when I was a kid," he says, even though, to Ilya, he still looks like a kid. "I hated you guys so much, but shit Russia always knew how to play a fucking game," he turns his head, and the excitement continues. "And shit! No way, that's Hollander!"

"It's nice to meet you," Hollander says politely, but he's looking at Ilya, amused. He's clearly hanging back, letting Ilya take the lead on a fan interaction, and Ilya immediately picks up on the challenge in his eyes. *Show me what you can do.*

As the kid said, as a Russian, it's in Ilya's nature to put on a show.

The kid looks like his entire life has been made. A strange Russian and his nation's hockey hero, standing right in front of him, in some random mall. "You guys really are on the same team now huh?" the kid sighs. "That's actually insane."

"Canada was always tough!" Ilya smirks, "Hollander can tell you. Mean motherfuckers!"

"Holy shit, this season is going to be legendary," the kid says, breathlessly.

"The Centaurs will play some goddamn hockey this year, am I right?" Ilya shouts.

"Damn right," the kid shouts back, and the only natural thing for Ilya to do after that inspiring display is offer the kid a fist bump, which he returns with great zeal.

However, as the kid puts his hand down, he suddenly turns serious. "Hey man," he says. "I think what you did was really brave," he says, eyes shining.

"Thank you," Ilya says. "Leaving Russia was very hard. I made right decision however."

An older woman, maybe the kid's mom, starts motioning him to come help her with her shopping bags. The kid groans.

Ilya is about to ask if he would like an autograph for his troubles, when the kid gives Ilya one last look. It's full of emotion, so it's entirely sincere. "My mom always said the USSR never knew how to treat people right," the kid insists, face full of pity. "I'm really happy Canada gets to have you."

Before Ilya can say anything otherwise, the kid turns around and leaves.

Ilya must have a complicated expression on his face when he turns around, because Hollander does it again. He looks at him, with a face full of open concern, and he walks over, giving Ilya's shoulder a careful bump.

"Hey," Hollander says. "You okay?"

This time, the silk from Hollander's shirt brushes up against Ilya's bare forearm, and pleasure, hot and real, shoots up from the point of contact—kickstarting his heart. It distracts him so well from the hard knot in his chest that the only thing to do on Ilya's end is to reach out and grab Hollander's arm, so he stays in place.

Hollander looks startled, but he doesn't move. This close, Ilya can smell him, clean and boyish, and he can see where his neck meets his shoulder from his collar. Ilya wonders if he can get away with burying his face there.

Instead, he steps back, and lets Hollander go.

"He was a sweet kid," Ilya says, mostly to himself at first. But then he turns to Hollander, and the hurt spells itself out, all over his face. Hot and vulnerable. "I..." Ilya swallows. "I do not hate Russia."

Hollander nods, "It's your home," he says, simply.

"But everyone will expect me to," Ilya says, a little resigned. "Right? Is what they want me to feel?"

Any other person would make Ilya feel stupid for asking this. Ilya would make Ilya feel stupid for asking this. *Of course you hate Russia, you are a defector. You left.*

Instead, Hollander thinks for a moment. Ilya watches as his tongue swishes over his teeth, an idle movement. Finally, he answers.

"What you feel will always be more complicated than what people expect," he says, slowly. "Don't let what people's expectations dictate what's actually true."

Ilya nods. He thinks he gets what Hollander is saying. He thinks of Hollander, slamming his fist into the side of his car. He hopes he learns to take his own advice.

But more than anything, he's so relieved he is here with him it's almost overbearing. He can't imagine the loneliness that would awash him, having to battle all this himself—his first real night in his new country.

He sighs, and makes himself feel better by glancing down again at his NES.

"I like this place," Ilya decides. "Is a lot less... intense than American malls."

Hollander laughs, "Hey man, Canada's got some crazy malls too. Like oh my god, Fantasyland? It's this mall in West Edmonton that has an entire rollercoaster inside of it. It's like, actually insane."

Ilya doesn't understand what Hollander is saying. "Rollercoaster?" he asks.

"Oh, um," Hollander thinks. His face scrunches up when he does. "It's like this uh, big ride, usually on tracks, and it goes really high, and it's usually for little kids—" he groans in frustration. "Wow I am realizing I do not know how to describe a rollercoaster without using the word rollercoaster."

Ilya snaps his fingers, "Ah!" he says, "Like Gorky Park."

Hollander wrinkles his nose, "Isn't that where the KGB kills people? Or is that like, just a movie thing?"

Ilya rolls his eyes. *Americans*. "Only sometimes," Ilya says, just to mess with him, "But most of the time they had fun rides."

"Okay, well," Hollander continues, still smiling. Ilya's not sure if he understood Ilya was joking, but Ilya doesn't offer up any further clarification. "We also have fun rides," he's distracted when he says what he says next. "You have to remind me to take you to one someday."

"Another date?" Ilya drawls, just to see how he would react. Hollander, like clockwork, goes red, and Ilya relishes in it this time, letting his eyes wander lazily as the blush creeps up his neck to his freckled cheeks.

"Oh well," Hollander says quickly, "Obviously, we would all go as a team. Could be a good way to bond."

"Could be," Ilya says, eyes not leaving his face.

"Anyway," Hollander coughs, "We got here kind of late, so a lot of stores are going to be closing in about an hour. How are you doing on clothes?"

"I have two pairs of pants. I am wearing one of them." Ilya says. Ilya doesn't understand Western fascination with owning a big wardrobe. Do they not wash their clothes?

But Hollander clicks his teeth, "Okay, so definitely clothes. I'm not going to lie, I buy most of my clothes in bulk from Sears, so I am really the wrong guy to ask. Oh my god, my—"

He suddenly stops, and then there it is again. An unbearably sad expression crossing his face. Ilya almost wonders if he's said something wrong again. But Hollander recovers. "I had this friend," he says, and Ilya lifts his eyebrows in interest. *A friend?* "She was really good at this kind of stuff."

"A friend?" Ilya asks, polite. He wonders what type of girl Hollander would like. A good Canadian girl probably. "She? Was she your girlfriend?"

Hollander's face pales, and Ilya knows he's hit the mark. And yet, Hollander's face quickly closes rank, equalizing back to its careful blankness. "No, friend." he insists. "It doesn't matter, I shouldn't have brought her up. We should still look around. What would you say your style is like?"

Around him, clothing store after clothing store offers the world on glass displays. Jackets, pants, shirts, even women's lingerie, are outfitted on faceless mannequins in facsimiles of human posture. "Brands" beg customers into their store, advertising increasingly colorful, sleek, and inventive styles to draw the consumer into their marketed uniqueness. Some even display pants that have holes in them, a stylistic choice that speaks to Ilya spiritually, but rationally confuses him beyond belief.

"In Moscow we had one giant department store, Gumm's. My style was whatever Gumm's had in supply that day," Ilya says, matter-of-factly.

Hollander notices Ilya eyeing up the store that's displaying ripped jeans. At this, he shoots a teasing smile. "You'd be a pretty hot goth," Hollander says, confidently. Ilya gets a taste of his own medicine, because now, as if emboldened, Hollander drags his eyes very intentionally up and down Ilya's body, which, to Ilya's embarrassment, is actually making him feel a little self-conscious.

Get it together Rozanov.

Ilya one-ups Hollander by grabbing his hand and dragging him into the store.

They ended up buying almost five different pairs of jeans from three different stores. Hollander also insisted that they stop by Macy's so they could raid their Nike section, and when they went to the cashier to pay she started stammering incoherently, staring at Hollander with wide-eyed awe. She shakily proclaimed that everything they bought was free, on the house. Hollander insisted they pay, but the lady, in her hysteria, ended up winning the battle. So Ilya ended up with almost ten different bags balanced precariously on each arm, with triple the closet he had when he lived in Moscow.

Then, with fifteen minutes until the mall closed, Hollander had let out a loud, "Oh shit, no way!" and turned to Ilya, insisting, "We actually can't leave here until you play one of these." He then grabbed Ilya's hand, practically dragging him into what Ilya recognized as an arcade. Ilya could tell by Hollander's excitement that he thought they didn't have arcade games in Russia (they did) and was jumping at the opportunity of providing yet another cultural learning experience for him.

But Ilya had been so drunk on the happiness of running after Hollander, who had been so confident and at ease in his childhood mall, that Ilya didn't have the heart to correct him. Even as Hollander tried to explain to him what Tetris was (which Russians invented) and Battleship (which was pretty much just Sea Battle under a different name).

Ilya at least got the pleasure of absolutely trouncing Hollander in pretty much every game in the arcade, which neither took maturely at all. Hollander, because he was pouting, Ilya, because of course he was gloating.

Hollander's last straw was Ilya beating him at Bubble Hockey, as Ilya twisted, turned, and spun the miniature players like the machine was an extension of his arm. He not only beat Hollander, but he beat him badly, and Ilya got the unique joy of watching as Canada's golden boy, known for his sportsmanship and gentlemanly behavior on the ice, loudly insisting, to a growing audience, that Ilya had been rigging the machines in his favor.

And for a second, Ilya could see it so well again. Hollander, doggedly chasing after him in the juniors with a fire in his eyes—Ilya's one constant, even as his adolescence in Russia slowly but helplessly dissolved around him. And Ilya struggled to understand how his teenage self could be so stupid, to so recklessly take for granted Hollander's presence in his life.

The arcade manager had to physically threaten the two of them to get them to finally leave, angrily jabbing a finger at the clock, which showed that the mall had closed almost forty minutes ago.

So they ran out of the arcade, laughing uproariously. Ilya mercilessly imitated the manager to an audience of one—Shane Hollander actually doubling over in laughter—as his Russian accent only made every jab increasingly cartoonish the longer the bit went on.

As they exited the mall, the icy darkness of the night filling their lungs, dread, like an old friend, dragged like industrial lead in Ilya's stomach. The harsh realization that the night was coming to a close forced the two of them into silence, walking side-by-side until they got to the parking garage.

Then, Hollander had turned to Ilya, expression unreadable, and declared that he was hungry, and that Ilya, if he wasn't too busy, should grab dinner with him. And Ilya was so happy that he could... he could...

He could've kissed him.

The thought lingers with him as the two of them sit on the hood of Ilya's Camaro, parked in some abandoned parking lot of a food chain Hollander called a Harvey's. He didn't get anything for himself, which made Ilya frown, because he was the one who said he was hungry. However, Hollander happily ordered for Ilya what was called a Superburger, telling the employee behind the counter to pile every topping and sauce they had available, along with a side of poutine and a chocolate shake.

"You are a disgusting eater," Hollander says, his nose upturned. Ilya freezes, midway between unhinging his jaw and shoving the second half of his burger into his mouth.

Ilya doesn't even bother to close his mouth to chew his food when he speaks next, "I am starving child from USSR," Ilya proclaims, "Redeemed by Canadian generosity. How dare you insult me!"

Hollander rolls his eyes, except he is doing a really bad job of hiding the fondness in his gaze. "You haven't tried the poutine yet," he insists, pushing the tray toward him.

Ilya laughs. "Yes I have. Is disgusting."

He might as well have called Hollander's mom a whore or something, given the wide-eyed offense Hollander takes at this comment. "Poutine," Hollander says, slowly, "Is not disgusting. It blends the best three food groups together. Curds, gravy, and fried potatoes."

"Does too much," Ilya insists.

Hollander jabs a finger in his direction, "You are eating what is called a Superburger, where Harvey's puts a 200 gram slab of beef in between two pieces of bread."

"With burger, I am getting cow, tomato, cheese, lettuce, onion..." Ilya trails off, because he's actually not sure what the other stuff Hollander ordered for him was called, "Other stuff. Sauce. It does too much, but gives me back just as much. With poutine, I am just..." he waves his hands, struggling to find the words, "making myself upset."

Hollander mumbles, slighted, to himself, and Ilya's eyebrows shoot up. "Hey, Hollander," Ilya says, "If you like it so much, you can have it."

"Like you said," Hollander says, looking away from the food to play with something underneath his fingernail. "It's not healthy."

"No, it is not healthy and it tastes bad," Ilya argues. "But you think it tastes good, so just eat it."

Hollander hums, vaguely, in agreement, but doesn't move to start eating. Ilya stares at the fries, bothered, but drops the issue.

Hollander moves to rest his cheek on his knee, and watches Ilya eat with a fond look on his face. "Are you nervous for tomorrow?"

Ilya scoffs, "No. I am not a bitch."

Hollander doesn't dignify this with a response. He just stares at him, raising an expectant eyebrow.

"Seriously," Ilya insists. "Why would anyone be nervous for practice? Is literally called practice." As he says this, he takes off half of his remaining burger in one bite.

Hollander sits up, and, to Ilya's surprise, caresses the side of his chin with a gentle palm. Ilya's heart actually thunders in his chest, as he watches, helpless, as Hollander then uses his thumb to wipe away a fat glob of sauce that dribbled off the side of his mouth.

And before Ilya can catch his wrist, Hollander draws away.

But not before sticking his thumb into his soft, pink mouth, and sucking the sauce clean off his finger.

Safe to say, Ilya is a little speechless.

Hollander looks at this thumb, back at Ilya, and smiles. "You are in Canada," he says, laughing to himself. "If you eat like that people are going to think you are American."

Ilya stares dumbly back at Hollander, and given no response, Hollander takes it as the cue it is to continue talking.

"Anyway, I'm not asking as your friend, Shane Hollander," he says, wry smile still hanging loose on his lips. *Friend of Shane Hollander*. Is leaving behind everything he knew the price he had to pay to become a friend of Shane Hollander? "I'm asking as your captain."

Ilya finds his voice again. "A little," he admits. "Does our team like Russians?"

Hollander smirks, and his eyes actually twinkle. "Not particularly."

Ilya stuffs the rest of his burger in his mouth, and lies down, milkshake in hand, with his back against the Camaro windshield. "Ugh," Ilya groans, "Have to try very hard to make them like me then," he says, with a sigh.

Lying on his back, he stares up at the sky, and realizes, with a start, that he's looking up at a completely clear night.

"Fuck," he mumbles to himself, a little in awe.

Pollution in Moscow was always terrible. But here, in Ottawa, Canada, where nothing particularly exciting happens, Ilya sees stars twinkle as clearly as lightbulbs, accompanying a moon glowing so brightly it looks like something that Ilya, lying on his new car, can just reach up and grab.

"I don't think," Hollander says, softly, and when Ilya looks up he realizes that Hollander has turned his face away from him, looking at some indeterminate point beyond the parking lot, "you will have to try that hard."

Ilya frowns, and drinks his milkshake in silence, glaring up at the stars. He wishes he was as good at English as he was at Russian. He wishes Hollander can speak Russian, so maybe talking to him would be less confusing.

"I am very likeable," Ilya says, unsure of what else to add. "Anything you can tell me as a captain? To make my tomorrow easy?"

Hollander looks back at him, and that fucking expression. That mask on his face, like he's successfully hidden something away from Ilya, is right there when he returns. "The team," he starts, "A lot of players are much better than they are on paper. I know they aren't..." Hollander waves his hand, "You know. Moscow. But, they deserve to be taken seriously."

"Can I have a list of names? Players worth my while?" Ilya jokes, biting absently at the milkshake's plastic straw.

Hollander shoves him with his foot, and Ilya smiles impishly back at him. "Decide that for yourself, asshole," Hollander says, smiling.

"Have any tips?" Ilya asks again. "How to get them to like me? How to make them forgive my communist crimes?"

Hollander pauses at this. Instead of answering right away, he scoots, nudging Ilya over with his shoe. Ilya tries to appear nonchalant as he moves over, and not like a pretty boy is moving to lie down side by side with him on the hood of his car so they can both stare up at the first clear sky Ilya's ever known.

Hollander squeezes in, and maybe gets in closer than he needs to, the lengths of their arms pressed tight against each other, so much so that Ilya can feel the backs of Hollander's fingers just ghost against his.

"I'm not," Hollander admits, in the dark of night, the moonlight turning his freckled skin almost silver. He, to be quite frank, looks unreal, "Like a super likeable person. So I wouldn't know."

Ilya scoffs. "Don't be a bitch."

Hollander kicks him for this. "Whatever. They're a bunch of guys who play sports and drink beer. They like someone they can have fun and hang out with," he says, derisive. "So just be that."

"I was most fun person in my communist army barrack," Ilya says, seriously, "So should be as your people say, piece of cake."

And for some reason, for the second time tonight, this makes Hollander laugh, way, way harder than he really needs to. It's a sharp, startled cry, like he can't quite be sure what the sound is supposed to be. He's laughing so hard that Ilya feels his entire body shake against his, the silk press of his shirt scratching hotly against Ilya's bare skin, and Ilya wants to wrap his arms around him, flip him and hold him down against the nearest surface so he calms down.

"I'm serious," Ilya says instead, because he is.

"Oh, I'm sure," Hollander says, and he's still laughing when he sits up, to Ilya's disappointment. He feels Hollander's absence like a hot iron to his side. Hollander is wiping tears away from his eyes, and when he finally calms down, he runs a hand through his straight, black hair. Ilya stays where he is, just watching him, like he's been this entire night.

Hollander sighs. "Okay. It's getting late." He slides off the side of the car, landing on his feet. With a lopsided smile, he offers Ilya a hand. "Shall we, teammate?"

Ilya takes his hand, because of course he does. When he slides down, he's suddenly so close to Hollander, he can see the moon reflected in his eyes, can hear the soft pants of breath that escape the small gap between his lips, can see them fog up the short distance between their faces.

Ilya towers over him, and their hands are still linked together.

Hollander looks completely lost. For once tonight, Hollander doesn't say a word. He doesn't look away, or try to change the subject, or try to distract from the intensity of the moment.

For the first time tonight, he looks as helpless as Ilya did, the entire night. They might stay like that forever, if Ilya didn't find it in him to finally drop his hand.

"Hey," Ilya says, voice hoarse. Hollander blinks, as if waking up from a trance. "Let me take you home."

Hollander nods, taking a small step back. The two of them climb into the Camaro.

And just like that, Ilya's first night in Ottawa comes to a close.

The two of them are silent the entire drive back to Hollander's house.

Ilya wishes he bought a CD or something at the mall, so at least they would have something to listen to. He chews, frustrated, at his thumbnail, just so he would have something to focus on that wasn't Hollander, staring, quiet and wordless, out the window, chin and body slumped tiredly on the side of the car door.

Ilya can only see the back of his head, but the tension in the air is too thick to try and provoke Hollander into turning around.

Ilya knows how to make people want him. He had become very good at sex—and the dance that came before it—at a very young age. The problem was, like hockey—another thing he's good at—for someone to hold his interest, they had to be a game harder to conquer than the last.

His worst and most exciting conquest of all time was his coach's son.

The Red Army coach during Ilya's tenure was a fucking bastard. He controlled everything his players did—who they saw, where they went, what their limits were. Day in and day out, Ilya would train until he physically couldn't walk anymore, and sometimes, when he fell onto the ice, unable to move, his coach would only yell louder, not relenting on his abuse until Ilya, on shaky hands and knees, stood back on up on his skates.

Ilya hated him almost as much as he hated his own father, and because of that hatred Ilya smashed every record Russia has ever held, and led his team to play some of the best hockey the world has ever seen.

Ilya didn't care for Sasha as a person, but Ilya's all-consuming hatred towards his father made his attraction to him fucking insatiable. Every time his coach made some rookie burst into tears, every time his coach let his abuse fly, deranged and unchecked, every time his coach broke something in Ilya's body that turned him into his perfect, goal scoring machine, Ilya's desire to fuck his son, to conquer him in retaliation, only grew.

Like so, Ilya's dating history spelled an unfortunate record of conquest. Married women, teachers, dignitaries' wives. Svetlana was a rare exception, because he actually liked her, but she was still coveted in some way—the daughter of his childhood hero, tamed.

Everyone fell into Ilya's bed because he wanted them to, and he knew exactly what to do to get them there.

So, as they get closer to Hollander's home, Ilya finds he has a problem.

He never meant for this to happen.

He can't get Hollander out of his head. How pretty he is. How closed off he gets. How rewarding it is then, to finally say the right thing, and get him to just, suddenly, *be*—whether it be in laughter, or in anger. How warm he feels, how his silk shirt sits so he can see the crook of Hollander's neck, how his shirt feels, pressed against his bare arm.

Hollander was never a game, but if he was, Ilya has met his match, because Ilya feels completely out of his depth.

They pull up to Hollander's home, and Ilya turns the car off. The two of them sit, for a moment, in the dark. Hollander's back is still turned to him, but he makes no attempt to leave.

Ilya needs him to turn around. He needs Hollander to look at him. But Ilya just continues to sit there, letting the silence fester, hand tightly fisting the leather of his steering wheel.

Hollander whips around, and the movement is so sudden Ilya visibly jumps.

"Shit—" Ilya mumbles, trying to recover.

Spending the entire drive, wishing Hollander would turn around so he can see his face, Ilya doesn't know what to do, now that he's gotten what he wanted. He's only left with the simple truth.

Hollander looks at him, smiling. But he looks entirely guarded. Ilya needs to do something to wipe that look off Hollander's face.

"Did you have fun?" Hollander asks.

Ilya kisses him.

Ilya's hand winds in the soft hair near the bottom of Hollander's neck, and his arm is wrapped around his waist, hand caressing the small of his back, yanking him in closer, closer so he can feel his chest press against him, pushing against the console between them.

Hollander gasps, deliriously, into the touch, and Ilya has no choice but to slip his tongue between his mouth, forcing his neck up, up so he can keep kissing him deeper. Ilya fists a handful of his hair, and yanks, so he can move him exactly where he wants him to. And Hollander whines, loud, starved, against his lips.

Fuck. Hollander kisses like he's begging for it. And Ilya needs to know, as much as possible, as soon as possible, all the different ways he can make Shane Hollander, Canada's golden boy, feel good—

But then, out of nowhere, Ilya can feel it against his lips. Hollander's breath, mumbling a curse against his open mouth.

"Shit," Hollander whispers, at first, nudging Ilya away. His hand is gentle on Ilya's chest, and he looks up at Ilya with wide eyes. This close, Ilya sees it all—the desire, quickly, quickly ceding to horror. And before Ilya can ask what's wrong, Hollander shoves him, hard, with his entire strength, far away from him. It forces Ilya back against the car door, and Ilya just goes, confused and lightheaded, as Hollander suddenly at him, lips red, eyes wild, and before Ilya can wonder what the hell did he do wrong now Hollander winds his arm back—

And slaps him as hard as he can.

Hollander is a hockey player, and when hockey players hit you, teeth usually go flying. That thankfully doesn't happen, but Ilya swears, loud and angry in Russian, grabbing the right side of his face. Is this a sex thing? Ilya isn't usually into being on the receiving end, but, you know, if Hollander really wants to. But when he looks up to check he realizes, he realizes—

Hollander is crying.

Hot, angry tears, burning from his eyes, as he shakes, uncontrollably, in the passenger seat. He pants heavily, eyes blazing, the back of his hand pressed against his mouth. He's upset at Ilya, clearly.

But even worse, he looks betrayed.

"Why—" Hollander's voice is shaking, but it's slowly building in volume, "Why the fuck did you do that?"

The anger actually reverberates through the car. Ilya's never had someone get this mad when he's kissed them. They are usually pretty grateful, to be honest.

"I am," Ilya spits, "Confused."

"Don't do that!" Hollander demands. He looks hysterical. "Don't *ever* do that again, do you hear me?"

"I do not know what the fuck I did wrong!" Great, now Ilya's getting angry, and it booms out of him, snarling and uncontrollable.

"You kissed me, you idiot!" Hollander yells, and Ilya can tell that he actually means it—that Ilya is a fucking idiot. That, more than anything, hurts Ilya harder than Hollander rejecting him. "Are you," Hollander laughs, cold and mean, "are you actually fucking suicidal?!"

Fuck. Ilya needs to speak Russian. He's going to have a panic attack if he keeps having to communicate in this infernal language. "You kissed me back," Ilya snaps.

Hollander reels back. "I don't—" he stammers, mouth flailing to find a reasonable retort. "I don't know what—Why?!" Hollander cries again, instead, "Why, why why why oh my god why did you do this?! Oh my god, I fucking liked you! I," he lunges at Ilya now, slamming his fists into his chest, crazed and uncontrolled, in his rage. "I fucking liked you, and *you fucking ruined it!*"

"You said this was a date," Ilya says, cold. He lets Hollander get three more solid hits in before he grabs his wrists, forcing them in place. "Is kissing not what people do after dates?"

"Let go asshole!" Hollander shouts, struggling like a trapped animal. "Let me go!"

"Answer me," Ilya orders.

"*I was obviously joking!*" Hollander shouts, or at least tries to. His breath is now coming hard and uneven, and he has this caged look in his eyes now. Ilya lets him go, and Hollander flinches, all the way back against the car door, refusing to look Ilya in the eye.

"Oh my god, this fucking country," Ilya laughs, incredulous. "My night is like this. A pretty boy takes me to the mall. He gives me fuck me eyes and touches me all the time, and we watch stars together and I drive him home. I may be an *idiot*," Ilya snarls, "But if I take a girl out, obvious thing to do would be to kiss her after. I do not see how this is different."

Something breaks in Hollander's face. The tears well, and now pour uncontrollably from his eyes, clinging to his lashes.

He asks, in a small voice, "Did someone set you up?"

"I do not understand." Ilya snaps.

"Did someone pay you? To do this?" he says, and he can actually barely get the words out. His breaths are coming in so hard and quick, like he's having a heart attack.

Ilya stills, his anger temporarily abated by the cold realization of what he thinks Hollander is saying.

Hollander looks very, very scared.

"I kissed you," Ilya says, voice hard, just to make everything very clear. "Because I want to."

A horrible noise rips out of Hollander at this, and he buries his face in his hands, grabbing so hard at his hair that Ilya's worried he's going to tear it out. He stays there, completely still, struggling to get his breath under control. Ilya can only stare at him, frustrated and helpless, wondering where this night went wrong.

Probably when you kissed him, his brain tells him, mocking and cruel, *You. Idiot.*

Ilya knows he shouldn't open his mouth, but he needs to say something, "I know is hard," Ilya says, in a sorry attempt to be comforting, "Being..." he doesn't know the word for gay in English, so he just trails off. "In Russia... they do bad stuff to you if you are like that, you know?" This visibly does not make Hollander feel better, as his shoulders tense up terribly,

like he's preparing to take a hit. But he doesn't say anything, so Ilya just continues. "But who I like, is my business yes? My government does not have to know," he pauses. "Other people do not have to know."

Hollander finally sits up. When he turns back around to Ilya, his face is calm.

"This night never happened," Hollander says, quietly. Definitely. "Do you understand me?"

The rage, just barely, manages to overpower his hurt. "Fuck you," Ilya spits.

"Say it," Hollander says, voice even.

"This night," Ilya snarls, "was the most fun I ever had."

Hollander looks so sad. Ilya wants him to stop to be so fucking sad all the time. "Me too," he says, and his voice breaks. But before Ilya can say anything else, Hollander rips the car door open. Not even turning to look back at him, Hollander runs, and disappears into his home.

Ilya punches the steering wheel as hard as he possibly can, and then takes off.

Shane fights the doom by working out.

He barely slept, alternating between being sexually frustrated and crying hysterically. So when he wakes up, blinking away the paltry amount of rest he got, he decides, with a sunny, almost manic verve, to overload his brain so hard it can never think a thought ever again.

He shoves a Metallica CD into his Walkman. He thinks the band sounds fucking awful, but Rose was obsessed with them. She would gift him music in an attempt to "educate" him, despite his many protests that she was just throwing out old CDs under the guise of giving him presents.

Shane can agree with her on one thing, though: he actually cannot hear a single thing in his head when the lead singer starts screeching into his headphones.

Anytime Rozanov even attempts to creep into his thoughts, Shane would add another set as punishment. The physical punishment successfully wards off any thoughts of Rozanov's lips, his hand cradling the back of his neck, his fist, yanking his hair—

Fucking christ Hollander. Shane groans, and forces himself to do another set of leg presses, even though he can feel his muscles burn in protest.

Unfortunately though, letting his mind wander to how good Rozanov was at kissing is much more preferable than the other option.

Which is Shane, in the dark, looking over his mind's edge, tears streaming down his face, as he faces the yawning cavern of his brain.

Am I going to be this lonely forever?

Shane jacks the Walkman up to its highest possible volume, and it leaves his ears actually ringing.

He finishes his workout like that, and after he showers he decides to keep the Walkman in as he blends his smoothie, dumping a healthy dollop of protein mix in. He drinks the smoothie as he changes out of his workout clothes, changes into the athletic gear he wears underneath his hockey uniform.

This leaves him with about ten minutes to kill, and half a smoothie finish, so unfortunately, that means he stares, morosely, out his backyard, Metallica shrieking in his ear, as he downs his breakfast in one gulp.

He gets in his car, a sensible Toyota Camry. He doesn't want to disturb his neighbors, so he keeps his earphones in and pops in another CD, another metal band called Iron Maiden.

When he reaches to take out the CD, he sees a note with Rose's loopy handwriting, with a list of all the track names on the disc. Then, under each track, is a small, written commentary from Rose.

Which means this wasn't a random tape she got at a bargain bin. She picked these songs specifically because she thought Shane would like them.

Suddenly, Shane misses her so much that tears spring to eyes, completely against his will.

He gives himself exactly one, good, honest sob, before he throws the CD back into the deck. He absolutely cannot be having that. He needs to go to practice the picture of mental stability. So he decides to listen to the exact same Metallica CD again, since it worked so well in the morning.

Even though he arrives at the training center at his usual time—an hour before practice is officially supposed to start, the locker room is already half full.

Maybe people are excited to begin their first day of training camp.

Or maybe everyone, despite their angry protests, are excited to see the new Russian defector in action.

When Shane bursts into the locker room, he sees two things that send him flying into immediate instability.

Rozanov, shirtless.

Surrounded, against all odds, by a circle of adoring fans.

Rookies Barrett and Haas, predictably, are right next to him, eyes shining in deference. What's even worse however, is all the guys, who's respect Shane always struggled to get, are also circled around him, nodding appreciatively as Rozanov gestures wildly, seeming to regale them with some crazy story that has absolutely captured everyone's attention. Even Wyatt and Dykstra are on the fringes, smiling, listening so intently that they don't even notice Shane walk in.

Only his teammate Zane Boodram, who had been in the middle of changing into his gear, greets him when he gets in. "Yooo, Mr. C!" he says, waving. "How's it hanging?"

Shane likes Boodram the best out of all his teammates, as, like with a lot of the team, he was a much stronger player than his stats on paper would suggest. He works hard, listens to Shane, even giving him good feedback or improvements on his plays that Shane really values.

It also helps—not that Shane tries to be the type of person who cares too much about this type of thing—that he's the only other person who isn't white on this team.

"Our saviour has arrived," Shane says, dryly.

"Bro, have you said hi to him yet?" Bood asks, and before Shane can stop him, Boodram shouts. "Yo! Everybody fucking back up!"

Nevermind. On second thought, Shane actually hates Bood with a passion of a thousand suns.

"Stop being fucking animals! Let C meet the Russian!" Bood continues.

The Everetts of the team turn to look at him, with a flat, unimpressed look. But they do make way for him. The rookies, Wyatt, and Dykstra give him space immediately of course, leaving a parted sea of hockey players—

And Rozanov, whose face falls when he sees Shane.

Suddenly, the showboaty, loudmouthed superstar that commanded the attention of the locker room falls straight off his face. Instead, Rozanov's eyes harden, body tensed, as Shane walks up to him.

Shane takes a deep breath. "It's nice to officially meet you," Shane says, eyes steeled, tongue heavy in his mouth. "Mr. Rozanov."

He sticks his hand out, for Rozanov to shake.

Rozanov scoffs, disbelieving. Shane prepares himself for the possibility that Rozanov will leave him hanging. He prepares himself that Rozanov will call him out on his bluff, right here, in front of half of their team. Maybe that's why Rozanov kissed him last night. So he can use it against him today—twist what happened, make it seem like Shane threw himself at him. Shane prepares for it all, and understands that, like with anything, he will just have to accept the consequences.

But Rozanov takes his hand, shakes it, "Hollander," Rozanov smiles now, one that sets his eyes alight, "Or should I say captain?"

Shane smiles back, polite, "Captain works for me."

"Bring it in then, Captain," Rozanov orders. Shane lets himself be dragged into a manly, platonic hug, both of them a respectable distance from each other as Rozanov claps him hard, twice on the back. His stomach still lurches uncomfortably, as Rozanov smells exactly as he did last night—warm and masculine, and his arm is still a hard weight against his shoulders as they separate.

"You know this guy and I," Rozanov says, to the room. He still keeps his arm slung around Shane's shoulder, "The press called us Team Canada versus Russia. Rivals," he smirks at him, "Childhood rivals. Political enemies," he shoots Shane a loaded look. "Now we play for the same team!"

If he was trying to be a dick and imply something, Shane happily ignores it, "You made the right decision," Shane says, diplomatically, "Coming here."

The locker room starts buzzing, loudly, as people start firing off questions about the two of them, about their junior days.

"You know, when I was in Russia, they never let me talk to any of you guys," Rozanov says, "Right back to sleep after we competed!"

"So even though we've been playing against each other for ten years," Hollander explains to the room, "this has to be the first time we've ever had a real conversation, isn't it?"

Rozanov tenses.

"Well," Rozanov says, eyes unreadable. Shane's stomach lurches nervously, unsure of what Rozanov's about to say, "Other than that one time."

"Yeah?" Shane asks, refusing to give himself away. He doesn't back down from the challenge in Rozanov's eyes.

Rozanov nudges him, aggressive, with the side of his hip. "Helsinki Hellhole, motherfucker!"

"Helsinki Hellhole?!" Three different players in the locker room gasp.

"That's fucking crazy," Dykstra says, "You guys are actually such fucking legends." Now, people start shouting, not even attempting to be heard—questions about Helsinki Hellhole, Rozanov's defection, questions about how Rozanov dodged the KGB. Questions about if Russia was going to kill him, if he tried to go back.

The entire time, Rozanov fields whatever questions he can, with a patient smile on his face. But the arm slung around his shoulder keeps Shane in place, just close enough that he can feel the heat radiating from Rozanov's naked chest. Then, when no one could hear,

interrogative shouts drowning everything out, Rozanov leans in to whisper into Shane's ear, sending a hot, shiver down Shane's spine.

"This is how you want things to be?" Rozanov hisses. He looks at Shane, with an intensity that takes Shane aback.

Shane meets Rozanov's eyes.

"This is," Shane says, ducking out from Rozanov's grasp, "Exactly how things should be."

Chapter End Notes

i have a tumblr now! :) [come say hi](#)

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

there is a lot of hockey in the hockey fanfic, word of warning
also i am not a hockey player so if i get anything technically wrong, uh, no i didn't

thanks everyone for all the kind words these past few days :) love yall

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

"No, is insane. I do not agree."

This is now the third time Rozanov has said this today, to the chagrin of both Shane and Coach Wiebe.

"What don't you agree with Rozanov?" Wiebe asks, patiently.

"You want to move me to defense, fine," Rozanov snaps. "In Russia I was center. I was Red Army star shooter, but no matter. Because of generosity Canada has showed me I will accept downgrade to big defense brute, for the good of the team."

"Hey!" Dykstra shouts, further down the ice, "Fuck you man! We aren't brutes!"

"All love my friend!" Rozanov shouts back. But when he returns to Shane and Wiebe, he looks pissed. "But if I am to play defense, I am playing on defense that makes fucking sense."

Wiebe pinches the top of his nose, breathes slowly out through his mouth. When he looks up, he's the picture of serenity. "What about this play doesn't make sense?" Wiebe asks, calmly.

"So, if I have this right," Rozanov says, and the sarcasm is dripping from his every word, "The genius plan of this play is we have Hollander," Rozanov glances up at Shane, who meets his gaze with the professional diplomacy of a captain, listening to a combative teammate, "shoot the puck as hard as he possibly can—fingers crossed, as you people say in this country, he wins face-off—"

"You should know, more than anyone, I usually win those," Shane says, smoothly.

"Tch!" Rozanov snaps. "Whatever. He wins face-off, then what? The plan is to have him fight five guys off, with the puck shot halfway across the rink from him, and pray he is able to do it?"

Wiebe opens his mouth to respond, but Shane cuts him off. "*He*," Shane says, shortly, "will be able to do it, if his defensemen do their jobs and forecheck the opposing line out."

"Your defensemen will take no one out," Rozanov responds, angrily, "If they are stuck sitting in front of their own fucking goal."

Shane sucks in a hard breath. "You are not sitting in front of the goal."

"We are frozen in place, while the entire play happens halfway down the ice. Literally makes no sense."

"Hey," Shane says, trying to keep his voice level, "I know you are used to a different style of play. But the hard truth is our defense is not at the level where the Soviet system makes sense."

Rozanov scoffs, "And you are not in Montreal anymore," he says, nasty, "so I am telling you this play is not going to work for this team. I am flattered you think I am so big and strong, and can also be two places at once," Shane rolls his eyes, "But even if I, Dykstra, and Chouinard are all on the ice at the same time, we are little boys compared to Montreal D-men," he gestures wildly, "Compared to D-men in this league, so if we sit in front of the goal like this we will fucking die—"

"Oh come on," Shane snaps, starting to lose his patience, "Enough of that. With this play, we disrupt the opposing team's defense, we completely clear center ice, and we keep all the forwards in the offensive zone. This feels solid to me." He glares at Rozanov, "Is it because you aren't center? Please just tell me if it is, and we can work *that* out instead of arguing about this."

Rozanov glares back at him. "I would appreciate if I was center," Rozanov says snidely, "But is not the point."

"The what is the point—"

"The point is," Rozanov says, firm, "Way I was trained, you do not give away the puck this easily,"

Shane sighs. "This play also is also the most accommodating for the skill levels we have on the team."

Rozanov laughs. "Skills? Very hard skills in hockey like passing? And skating?"

"Yeah," Shane says, calmly, trying to not let Rozanov bait him into anger. "Like passing. Where our team is in assists, your play will fall apart in seconds."

"You are treating the team like babies," Rozanov snaps. "Do not sacrifice the smarter play so everyone gets to participate."

Shane pinches the bridge of his nose in frustration. "Rozanov," Shane says, slowly. "You were the fastest skater in Russia, and you are now the fastest skater in the league. To do a Soviet style of play, with you as center, you would need four other equivalent players at all times who move as fast as you do in order to make sure the opposing team doesn't pick you guys off one by one."

Rozanov snorts, "The NHL moves so much slower than the average Russian team. I go half my speed, slowpokes on our team can pass, and I can guarantee we still outplay our opponents."

Shane tries again, "Let me be clearer then. Last season, the Centaurs won less than half their games. And that manages to at least be more than the 30 wins, and the over 50 losses we had last year. So you can understand then why I hate the idea of pulling defense from our side of the ice, and not only that, but making them pass into the offensive zone, when we are already being outscored by a majority of the entire league."

Rozanov doesn't back down. "You do not have to worry about them outscoring you," he says, slowly, "if the other team never gets a chance to touch the puck."

Wiebe clears his throat. Both of them start, as if surprised he's still there.

"Look, Rozanov," Wiebe says, "I understand defense is a big jump. Maybe we move Dillon to the bench, just for the first game, and you can be on the same line as Hollander—"

"Absolutely not," the two of them say at the exact same time. Wiebe sighs.

"Well, either way, I do not have time to watch you guys keep arguing," he says, firmly. "Go back out and drill this play, or come up with something else I can use."

Rozanov looks out at the ice, quiet for a moment. It's long enough that Wiebe looks a little uncomfortable, like he doesn't know whether or not he's dismissed. Shane waits, with his arms crossed expectantly. When Rozanov turns back to Shane, a slow smile spreads across his face.

"We should play it out."

"Jesus," Wiebe mutters.

But Rozanov just keeps looking at Shane, eyebrows raised in challenge.

Begging him to take him up on it.

Shane already feels his blood boiling in exhilaration.

"No," Shane says, almost reluctantly. The excitement hums low in his chest, and it's too wild for Shane to want to encourage further. "It'll prove nothing."

Rozanov smirks. "You think you are correct, I think I am correct. No more talking. Let us just play."

The silent, heated look Shane gives him as a result only further encourages Rozanov. Shane needs to look away from him.

"You aren't going to be playing against your team in the game," Shane reminds him, just because he can.

Rozanov's eyes flash, this time, with genuine hostility. "I am not an idiot," Rozanov snaps. Shane doesn't react, or at least doesn't let his reaction show on his face.

"How about you follow the play I told you to follow, because I am your captain?" Shane says, wryly.

Rozanov's good humor returns at this. "Not a chance," he says, smiling. He gestures to the team, out on the ice, with his stick, cutting the rink perfectly down the middle. "I take half, you take half. I am center for one side, you are center for the other. Like a game, you decide who to put on the ice."

Shane raises his eyebrows, "Oh yeah? Which one of us gets Hayes?"

Rozanov clicks his teeth. "Come on, no goalies. Obviously."

Shane bites his lip. Rozanov does a practiced, casual glance down when he does, that Shane pretends not to notice.

"Come on Hollander," Rozanov says, confident. "Is fairest way."

"Most points in one period wins?" Shane's mouth says for him. Well. He might as well give into the madness.

Rozanov spits on the ice, "Works for me."

Shane feels a dark smile spread across his face. "Checking?"

"No." Shane starts in surprise, for the second time that conversation, as both of them whip back around to Coach Wiebe, who had been listening to the two of them with his arms crossed.

"Coach," Rozanov whines. "Come on."

"I'm not having you two injuring half my players two weeks before the season starts," Coach says, frowning. "Do this with no checking or don't do it at all."

Rozanov actually pouts. It makes Shane want to do something ridiculous to wipe that look off his face.

Like force him into submission.

... On the ice of course.

"No checking," Shane nods. He takes his right glove off, and extends his hand out to Rozanov. Rozanov stares at this gesture for a beat. When he does the same, and closes his bare palm against his, Shane's heart, like the muscle it is, starts pounding desperately like it's recalling an old memory.

"Game on," Rozanov says, with a smile.

The lineup is this.

Shane, in the center, with Bood and Dillon on the wings.

Chouinard in the back, with another defenseman Morin.

Then, on the other side of the ice:

Rozanov, supported by rookies Barrett and Hass.

With Dykstra backed by another D-man, Roy.

Their other teammates try not to look too bitter on the sidelines, but their resentment is visibly overpowered by any reasonable hockey fans' excitement at getting front row seats to a Hollander vs. Rozanov showdown.

The rowdier players on the sidelines have started shouting—trying to take bets. The two rookies by Rozanov are visibly shaking, unsure why they are on the ice and instead of spectating on the sidelines. Rozanov is talking to them in low tones, while Dykstra props his arms up on his stick, in the back, listening while looking a little bored.

Bood bumps Shane's shoulder. "As we discussed, C?"

Shane smiles and pops in his mouthguard. "As we discussed."

Coach Wiebe stands in the middle now, preparing to drop the puck. Shane bends at the circle, facing Rozanov, and shit.

This close to Rozanov, Shane realizes he hasn't felt this excited before a drop in years. His adrenaline is pumping harder than any actual game he's played since the draft.

He didn't know he could still feel this way before a hockey game.

Through the cage of their helmets, Shane can't help but give Rozanov a real, genuine smile.

So many times they've done this, wordless, unable to communicate with anything but their eyes. Now, Shane turns to look at him. The movement nudges him even closer to Rozanov, the cage of their helmets almost glancing off each other.

"Hey," Shane says, earnest, "I'm really glad you are here."

He sees Rozanov's eyes widen in surprise.

The puck drops.

And in an easy sweep, Shane wins the face-off.

Shane has played versions of this exact formation over hundreds of times. His wrist shot winds and sends the puck flying down the ice, and before Rozanov even has a second to realize he's lost the face-off, Shane's already skating, at full speed, down the rink, chasing after the puck in a well-controlled burst, easily swinging past the rookies and Dykstra as he rushes to recollect the puck as it hits the boards. Bood is close behind him, tying up Haas and Barrett while Dillon trails a little ways away, being just enough of a nuisance to mess up Roy.

Quickly Shane glances at Dykstra—concludes he's too far, too slow to be a threat. That means the only person he needs to worry about—

—Is Rozanov, launching out like a shot from behind him, slamming right into the boards only a millisecond too late after Shane, just as he turns to yank the puck off the corner. He sees Rozanov try to steal the puck before he even reaches for it, so in one tight, protective circle Shane sweeps the puck away from him, and the move gives him just enough space to backhand the puck right into the goal.

Shane's heart sings.

"That's fucking right!" Bood shouts, as the two rookies, pant, defeated next to him, with their hands clutched to their knees.

When Shane turns around, his teammates on the bench are completely silent, watching him with open awe. In the mix, he sees some jealousy, simmering hot, from a good amount of players, their faces clenching in displeasure, and Shane can't help but smirk.

That's fucking right.

And when Shane finally turns to Rozanov, his breath catches in his throat.

Maybe it's because Shane made him chase after him. Maybe it's because Shane managed to score on him.

Maybe it's because Rozanov kissed him, and Shane won't let him do it again.

Rozanov is staring at him, eyes hooded, panting hard—

And behind the cage of his helmet, his mouth is parted, very obviously, in desire.

Shane's heart lurches, and he knows he needs to look away and start moving, because Wiebe is shouting now that they need to reset. But he feels frozen, pinned in place. Rozanov shoots him one last, heated look, before he spits on the ice, and skates back to the face-off circle.

They get back into position.

"Nice shot," Rozanov says. His tone is light, but he's not smiling.

Shane smirks. "I know."

"Will be last one you make."

Shane laughs. "Okay, sure."

Shane wins the face-off again.

But this time, Rozanov's ready for it, so Shane does not have enough space to line up a powerful enough shot to launch the puck into the offensive zone. So he has to skid hard to the right, shielding his puck with his body as he chases it down the side of the rink.

He's nearing Dykstra's lane, and if he gets trapped between him and the boards, Shane might as well just hand the puck over. So Shane quickly looks, without turning his head, left, right, and sees Bood—

Who Rozanov, in a blur, covers—

Leaving Dillon, open.

Shane shoots, kicks it over to Dillon, and the puck lands perfectly into the neck of his club. As Dillon tries to skate forward with the puck, Shane quickly starts moving toward free ice, hoping that he or Bood can take the puck off Dillon's hands soon.

Unfortunately, with one look from Rozanov, his team descends on Dillon like a pack of bloodthirsty sharks.

Rozanov stays on Bood, trapping him into uselessness. While Shane quickly outskates Dykstra and squeaks out enough space for Dillon to attempt a pass, Dillon, as he tries to pass to Shane, winds up too slow and gets intercepted immediately by Haas, who, with his tiny body, speedily swipes the puck out from under him.

To the sounds of loud celebration from Rozanov.

"Fucking let's go Haas!" Rozanov shouts. And this invigorates the rookie, just like that, he whips around and changes the direction of the game.

Haas barely has the puck for a second before Rozanov is shouting, "No one has Barrett! Pass the puck!"

Shane whips his head around, and he's right—Barrett is wide open. Shane's heart sinks.

Even though Rozanov is shouting, out loud, what the play is, if Shane's team keeps reacting to him, they'll be way too slow. Shane tries to think ahead of Rozanov, but as he does, Bood charges toward Barrett, and as Shane suspects, it's too late.

The second Barrett gets the puck, he skates with it for no longer than a couple milliseconds before Rozanov shouts again. "Beautiful Barrett! Back to me now!"

Barrett confidently shoots it over to Rozanov, and before anyone on Hollander's team has a chance to chase Rozanov down for the puck, Rozanov is yelling—"Dykstra! Roy! Catch the fuck up!"

That motivates Dykstra, usually the slowest skater on the roster, to hoof it over to Rozanov, and even though this means Rozanov has the puck for just long enough for Shane to skid in front of him, blocking his pass, Rozanov readies a backhand—

Shane's brain moves too slow for his body, which already reflexively moves to block him. Because his brain helpfully recalls a distant memory at this point, of what it was like to play head to head against Rozanov.

In a maneuver that can only be described as superhuman, Rozanov tricks Shane out by suddenly switching to his forehand, and passes the puck right by Shane's right foot.

Shane can only watch in disbelief as the puck then skids backwards down the court, landing right into Dykstra's club.

Setting Dykstra up perfectly to then immediately shoot it over to Haas—

Who lands a slapshot right into the net, right past Shane's defensemen.

Noise explodes from Rozanov's team. It's only one point, but it's a point scored off a style of play they've never experienced before. Luca Haas bursts into gleeful laughter, as Rozanov charges down the ice to pick him up and throw him over his shoulder.

"My fucking boy!" Rozanov shouts.

Dykstra, Roy, and Barrett pile in soon after, leaving Shane, Bood, and Dillon panting in the back.

Shane's team has just chased Rozanov across the ice, for almost forty seconds, without even getting to touch the puck once.

Bood skates up to Shane, clapping him on the back. "That," he says, breathing hard, "Was fucking insane."

Shane nods in solidarity. Rozanov just gave The Centaurs their first taste of Team Russia. When Shane catches his breath, he shouts, "Chouinard! Morin! Get over here!"

They skate obediently up to him. Dillon hangs his head. "Sorry C," he says.

"It's okay," Shane says, earnestly. "You're unfamiliar with Soviet style of play, and I underestimated the rookies' ability to keep up with Rozanov," he huddles them closer. "But now you know—in Moscow, it's all passing. So it's useless to chase after the guy who has the puck, the way we usually play here in Canada."

Shane points at different areas of the rink. "You need to think instead about the structure Rozanov is trying to make around the puck. Don't just look at the guy who has the puck. You'll make his play collapse in on itself if you can tie the right people up. And then they'll be forced to play us one on one," Shane levels a serious stare at his team, "Is this clear?"

The four of them nod, eyes blazing. Shane lets out a deep breath, "Okay. Come on. Let's wipe the smile off their faces."

Take three. Shane and Rozanov are back at the face-off circle. Shane's panting a little, out of breath, and he feels sweat bead profusely at the start of his brow. Rozanov watches him, smug.

"I tire you out?" he drawls.

"Yes," Shane says, honest. "Those rookies are damn fast."

Rozanov preens, "How about me?"

Shane huffs. "Hm."

"Ready to admit I am right?" Rozanov asks.

Shane looks up at Rozanov, and once again, he gives him his brightest smile. "Never," Shane says, definitive.

Shane wins the face-off again.

But Shane's team loses the game. It's a fairly even toss-up, with neither team ceding ground in the middle game. Shane and Rozanov are tightly locked against each other, as one team wins, only to get immediately smacked down in retaliation.

But Shane should've remembered from his junior days—it's all over once the Soviets get a taste of the puck. Once Rozanov's team got a feel for the motion of the play, they didn't even need him to shout out instructions anymore. Shane saw their intuition sharpen with every point they scored.

His team didn't do a bad job by any means. Shane made it his mission to make Rozanov's team never had the puck, and when they did, to make them feel fucking sorry they had it. Without even realizing it, he had been pushed to emulate Soviet-style play of living and dying by puck possession.

But in the last ten seconds, Barrett literally skids past the smallest gap Chouinard leaves in the defense, and slams the puck back to Rozanov. And with a powerful backhand, Rozanov sends the puck in—beating Shane's team by two points.

It didn't matter how tight the middle game was. It's an obvious loss.

Half the players on the bleachers are stunned—probably the half that bet that Shane would win. The rest are whooping and applauding, loud, chanting Rozanov's name. Some stand up, saluting Rozanov as he does an unnecessarily showy skate-by of the box for a scrimmage, blowing kisses to adoring teammates who yell "Glory to Russia! Glory to Russia!"

Rozanov pulls the rookies into the celebration, as Barrett and Haas, against all odds, more than proved their worth on the ice.

They remind Shane of his rookie year. By the proud look on Rozanov's face, probably his too.

Shane, Bood, Chouinard, Dillon, and Morin skate up to the bench. Shane rips his helmet off, and pushes his sweaty bangs out of his forehead.

It's pretty embarrassing how badly Shane lost.

But it's also hard not to notice how completely, with just this one scrimmage, Rozanov invigorated The Centaurs, in a way that Shane admittedly had never been able to. No matter what his personal feelings were, Shane finds it difficult to fault someone for making a team better.

When everyone's gathered around the bleachers, Coach Wiebe claps his hands together. It takes a second for him to get everyone's attention, given how excited everyone is. But when he does, he grabs Rozanov by the shoulder, whose face is flushed with exertion and victory.

"For our first game against Boston," Wiebe tells Rozanov, "You'll be our center, along with Shane. We'll switch the two of you out between periods."

Rozanov is smug, "No defense brute?"

Wiebe shoots him a rueful smile, and shakes his head. "As long as you do exactly that," he says, "with this exact lineup, in two weeks. The Bears won't know what hit them."

Shane finds Rozanov smoking outside the building after practice. Rozanov has changed into one of the jeans they bought at the mall, and Shane does not think about how good his legs look in them.

"Hey," Shane says. He stands a ways away, so he doesn't have to subject himself to any cigarette smoke.

Rozanov glances at him, but doesn't respond. Takes another long drag.

Ever since the night Shane freaked out at Rozanov for kissing him, Rozanov has gone out of his way not to be alone with Shane. Shane, of course, can reasonably understand.

"So," Shane says, "I was wrong. Or. Wrong about certain things. Those rookies are really impressive," Shane huffs, "Looks like we aren't the only stars on The Centaurs after all."

Rozanov still doesn't say anything. He just stands there, and keeps smoking.

Shane sighs.

"I was very confident about that play, but I mean," Shane laughs, "You saw me skating at the rink, the first day you got here."

Rozanov visibly tenses at the mention of that night. Shane decides to fix this social faux pas by looking at his shoes.

"I was really struggling, trying to figure out ways to make it work as efficiently as I saw it in my head. What I," Shane smiles now, a little wistful, "What I always liked about the Soviet-style of play is how... complete you looked together, you know?"

Shane scuffs his sneaker against the pavement. "Here it's all about you know. The star. The best players. The numbers," Shane glances back at Rozanov now, whose cigarette is paused halfway to his lips now. "I think you bring a really good energy to the team, and I hope we can work together to use that for good during the season."

Rozanov brings the cigarette back to his lips, sucks in a hard breath. "Game was unfair. I had better players."

Shane frowns. "You had two rookies on your starting line. You didn't know. We were as evenly matched as we can be."

"If I had to play with Dillon on my line I would lose every game too,"

"Rozanov," Shane snaps, warningly.

"Whatever. Is truth. Guy sucks."

"He tries very hard," Shane insists. "That squeaks him above average."

Rozanov huffs derisively, muttering something to himself in Russian. He looks up, and stabs his cigarette in Shane's direction. "You are a good captain."

"Thank you," Shane says, pleased.

"But you are not team mom," Rozanov says, hard. Shane blinks, a little taken aback.

"Are you like," Shane says, a little testier, "Allergic to giving me a normal compliment or something?"

"If players suck they need to be shown the boot," Rozanov says, "Or they need to toughen up. You don't try to figure out how to play around them. You have too much to do already. You do not need to be mom."

"I know how to be a captain, thanks," Shane snaps now.

"Was embarrassing how Dillon let that pass go to waste," Rozanov insists. "Wiebe better not put that guy on our final lineup."

Shane wants to talk about something else. He's already being very mature, he thinks, about Rozanov beating him so hard at their scrimmage, and undermining his authority. He doesn't need to rub it in his face by shittalking another teammate. "There's going to be a press conference tomorrow, before our first game," Shane cuts him a look. "Because it's going to be your first game," Shane says, clarifying the obvious. "Do you feel ready?"

Rozanov sighs. Smoke goes flying everywhere when he does. He looks at Shane, honest. "No."

Shane nods. "Do you want me to help you?"

Rozanov looks at Shane, and his eyes are guarded. "No."

Shane tries not to look too hurt. "That's okay." Shane says, trying to keep it light. "Was PR helpful at least?"

Rozanov looks particularly despondent now, "No."

"I really don't mind helping you," he insists. "When I got traded off Montreal, it was a media circus," he explains, even though everyone knows how much of a circus it was. He sighs. "So, you know, it's safe to say I know how to deal with press."

"She said a bunch of English words at me I did not understand. I was tired from training so I just pretended like I knew what she was talking about so I could go home." Rozanov says, blunt.

Shane snorts. "PR always makes PR overly complicated," he says. "It's actually the easiest thing in the world."

He looks at Rozanov, "Look, I'm not gonna... I know you don't need my help. But, just remember this for the day. For these conferences, it's about just picking the one thing you want to say, and repeating it."

"I want to say," Rozanov says, flatly, and he's left the cigarette in his mouth, letting it ash on the floor, "I think free press are money-hungry vultures, and my country was correct to censor. Is what I want to say."

"Do not say that," Shane says, immediately. Rozanov smirks. "Pick a different thing you want to say."

"They will ask me dumb questions about my defection. About my family. I want my message to be to fuck off."

"I love my country, but I had to leave," Shane says. "What do you think?"

Rozanov considers this for a minute. "But then they ask why I want to leave?" he says. The back-and-forth resembles, to Shane at least, a bizarro, mirror conversation about Russia that Rozanov did not want to have in the car, about a month ago now.

But this time, Rozanov's asking all the questions, and Shane's feeding him the answers.

"Why did you want to leave?" Shane shrugs. "Well, you had to."

Rozanov huffs, and there's a blink-and-you-miss-it smile crossing his face, an impressed one he hides with his cigarette. "Okay."

"Okay," Shane says. He blows on his hands, hard, and sticks them in his hoodie pockets to warm them up. Rozanov's eyes follow them with a quiet expression.

"They insist, and ask why I had to?" Rozanov says, softly. His eyes are still fixed on where Shane has his hands tucked into his hoodie.

"Do you want to tell them?"

"No," Rozanov says. Immediate.

"I love my country, but I had to leave. I am thankful for The Centaurs for having me," Shane says. "They try to press you for more, don't give them more. You don't owe them more than that."

Rozanov takes another drag, looks away from Shane. "Thank you." Rozanov says.

"Yeah, dude. No worries. I know the press is hard," Shane says. "You'll probably also have a question about how you are fitting in with the team too, if you want to talk through that."

"Is easy question," Rozanov says, not meeting Shane's eyes. "My captain has been very welcoming."

Shane smiles. "Has he now?"

"Yes. Even though he thinks my plays is stupid. And is angry I kicked his ass in a practice game."

Shane kicks over loose gravel on the ground in his direction in retaliation. "Don't be a liar. You know I don't think your plays were stupid, and if it was a real game with three periods my team would've wiped you clean." He nudges the sidewalk with his shoe. "Come on. Try again. How are you fitting in with the team?"

Rozanov smiles. It's his rockstar smile. The one he gives for the team, and one Shane's sure, once he gives to the press, will make everyone swoon. "My captain Shane Hollander has been very welcoming."

"Really?" Shane asks, teasing. He pretends to hold a mic up to his face, and mimes the voice he thinks every annoying reporter has, "Even though my sources say you are still sore he kicked your butt so hard in the juniors?"

Rozanov's smile only grows. "As I said, my captain Shane Hollander has been very welcoming."

Shane laughs, and he feels all warm inside when he notices that Rozanov glances down at his lips again when he does. "See," Shane still manages to say, back in his normal voice. "You are getting the hang of it. The press conference will be a piece of cake."

Rozanov tosses the cigarette butt on the ground, stomping it out. Shane notices he kicks it a few extra times to make sure the soot from the ground is wiped away. He then picks the butt up, and flicks it into the trash can. Shane watches the proceedings with approval.

"You are a good captain," Rozanov says, when he's done.

Shane waits, expectantly. Then he puts a hand to his ear.

"I am a very good captain, and what? That's it?" Shane says, smiling. "I am a good captain, for second best in the league? I am a good captain, except for when I am a total mom?"

Rozanov looks at him, still inscrutable. "No," Rozanov mumbles. "That's it. You are a good captain."

"Thanks," Shane says. He should probably head back home soon. "You are a good teammate."

Even though Shane should be getting ready for the game, he can't help but watch, from the wings with one of their PR heads, Rozanov's press conference.

Shane does not envy the position he is in. The second Ilya steps out, cameras, not just from regular sports journalists, but from mainstream news outlets, start flashing wildly. Shane watches as Rozanov, who had entered the locker room with the easy swagger of a hockey player at the top of his game, now uses his right hand to shield his eyes from the light.

And maybe Shane is just good at noticing these things, or maybe Shane just knows Rozanov, but he actually looks, for the first time he's seen him—

Nervous.

He sits down at the long table, in a very expensive suit, with a translator on his right, the general manager on his left, and the director of PR at the far end, a death grip on her notepad.

The PR director starts by introducing Rozanov. She talks about his Team Russia origins, his rise to superstardom on CSKA Moscow.

She talks about his defection, which, because Rozanov never shared much about it with Shane, leaves Shane in a lurch. She talks about the general manager, first propositioning Rozanov in Montreal. Shane notes how that this was at the last Super Series game he played with Rozanov, over three years ago now. She talks about how, even after using a third draft pick to try and get Rozanov on the team, they were not able to seal the deal until this year, when the general manager, at last, tracked him down in Stockholm. And that, because of that fateful decision, Rozanov finally had the opportunity to shake the KGB for just long enough to get in a car with The Centaurs' team, and leave behind everything he ever knew.

There were more details that made it really hit Shane then that Rozanov gave up a lot, and went through a lot, to finally get to Canada. Rozanov was always very dismissive of his defection, as if he just decided, one day, to board a bus or something. But the director shared how the plane had to circle North Africa for two straight days, because of a political conflict out of Belarus that prevented them from flying directly out of Stockholm. Then, if that wasn't enough, to dodge USSR airspace, they had to then go back and land in Belgium, so they could get on another charter flight to the UK...

Then, blissfully, Ottawa, Canada.

When she finally cedes the floor to Rozanov for questions, the session starts with thundering applause. One of the first hockey players to defect from the USSR. Everyone is quite impressed with Rozanov's story.

As everyone predicted, after uproarious shouting, the first question that gets asked is why Rozanov decided to defect from the Soviet Union.

Rozanov looks frozen in place.

"I love my country," Shane mumbles to himself, "But I had to leave." Rozanov is still struggling to formulate any words. "I love my country, but I had to leave."

Rozanov finally looks up. In the harshness of the conference lights, his eyes look, for lack of better words, beautiful. But it makes Shane's heart ache, because he wishes he'd stop looking so scared. He wonders if Rozanov knows that you can read everything he feels, right on his face.

"I love my country," Rozanov says. Confused murmmuring breaks from the crowd of press, and the director of PR looks very nervous, like she's going to cut in at any second, "But I had to leave."

The crowd lets out a collective sigh of relief.

The next question is immediately why he felt needed to leave. From the back, Shane can hear questions that range from off topic to invasive, asking if it's because of his crazy, communist general father, or if it's because of the abusive tactics inflicted by his dictatorial Red Army coach (Arkady Petrov, a legendary but controversial figure that his mom and dad have called Hockey Stalin more than a few times back when he was a kid.

"I don't care what country you're from. You don't give your kid up to someone like that," his mom had said, righteously).

The director of PR at least does her job, rephrasing everything reporters are shouting at them into a fairly innocuous question.

What would make someone want to leave their home?

Rozanov thinks for a second. A long second.

Shane mumbles to himself again. *Come on Rozanov. I love my country, but I had to leave. I love my country, but I had to leave.*

The translator leans in, as if about to speak, but Rozanov holds up a hand.

"I love my country, but I had to leave," Rozanov repeats. Shane smiles to himself, in relief.

And then Rozanov takes a deep breath, and goes off script.

"Is a feeling," he says, voice getting more confident as he talks, "everyone in this room, feels once in their life. You are born, and you are a day old, but you know you do not belong already. You are in your home, but you are unwanted. That feeling stays with you, and you think it will be with you the rest of your life."

The room goes quiet. Shane stares intently at Rozanov, fingers digging crescents into his palm, almost as if in second-hand anxiety.

"People live that way until they cannot. Is a pain that hurts you until you are empty. So you realize, is feeling that is not with you, but around you. So when you are given the opportunity to find a place where that feeling does not haunt you, of course you take it."

When Rozanov finishes, Shane looks down, and sees that somewhere between when he was talking, his right hand had started clenching, like a valve, over his chest.

Shane still hears the invasive questions—"You don't feel like you belong? Because of your father? Your coach? Your government?" But the director of PR once again, picks the most innocuous question for Rozanov to answer.

How about now? Do you feel like you belong?

Rozanov laughs. "I am a defector," Rozanov says, this time on instinct, without having to think about his answer. "Point is I belong nowhere."

But the team. Have they helped you feel at home in Canada?

It is an insane thing to believe, because as far as Rozanov knows, Shane's in the locker room, gearing up for their game. But Shane thinks Rozanov makes almost direct eye contact with him when he says what he says next.

"My captain," he says, with a practiced smile, "Shane Hollander, has been very welcoming."

The smile Shane gives back, small and secretive, is anything but practiced.

An hour later, Shane's line starts in Boston, and it's brutal.

Shane would not be surprised if they lost the game. They don't usually win against Boston. Their defense is vicious, and their players check to maim. Shane gets the added benefit of being absolutely humiliated every time he plays here. Before, he was Shane Hollander, center of one of their greatest rivals, and the reason why The Bears lost every home game against The Voyageurs in the last few years.

But now, the score's 3-2. Shane is just about to slapshot a goal to tie the game, when Cliff Marlow bodies him against the glass.

The crowd lets out a thundering jeer, as Shane falls hard on the ice. His helmet and his right arm take at least the brunt of the impact, but his head is still ringing when he shakily stands up.

Bood skates up to him, offers him a hand. "You good to play C?" In the distance, Dillon starts yelling at one of the Bears, with Chouinard backing him up.

Shane still needs a minute or three, but of course he's good to play. "Yeah, thanks. Let's tie this fucking game, wipe the smile off their faces."

Bood helps him up, and claps him on the back. "My wish is your command, captain," he says, with a wry smile.

Face-off.

Shane tries to lock back in, but his head is still ringing. He at least wins the puck, but he's exhausted. It's thirty seconds left of the second period, and he's been skating nonstop, all while being thrown, checked, and throttled on the ice. He kicks the puck over to Bood, who skates it down and passes it flawlessly back to Shane, but when he tries to score again—

Cliff fucking Marlow.

This time, when he checks Shane, he doesn't go into the boards. He flips, and lands practically head first onto the ice.

Shane feels himself actually crumple into the rink.

Shit.

The game stops. The crowd is going crazy, but the noise sounds far, far away. While there is some concern, there is mostly thunderous applause, amplifying the pounding in Shane's head, for their beast of a d-man, Cliff Marlow.

Shane knows his teammates are getting worried. Other than his entire body feeling like it's been beaten into the ground, he doesn't feel that bad, given everything.

So why can't he fucking move?

He hears Bood call his name. Dillon and Chouinard follow suit, skating up the ice, even as the ref tells them to back up. The Bears already get back in position, not looking in his direction.

Shane feels himself slipping, nausea and darkness creeping into his vision. As he hears what he thinks might be medics, skating up to the ice, Shane picks up no a distant voice that immediately cuts above the rest.

"Rozanov! Back in the fucking box!"

"Eat me!" Rozanov yells. He sounds like he's underwater. "Hollander?! Hollander!"

And suddenly, Shane's staring up at Rozanov, and under the arena lights, his dirty blonde curls are alight, his lovely, expressive eyes—scared?

Why would Rozanov be scared? For Shane? Why would Rozanov care about Shane getting injured? Shane's seen some of the games the Red Army played. Teammates get injured all the time.

They don't run out onto the ice, *scared*, when one of them goes down.

Don't be stupid, his brain tells him. *You know why.*

"What the fuck is wrong with him?!" Rozanov shouts, furious. "Why the fuck is he not moving?!"

"Rozanov, I'm not going to ask again!"

"Shane!" Rozanov shouts this time, and it's so raw, honest, and fuck, way too transparent. Fear shoots through Shane's heart like an EKG at the sound of his name, his actual name.

Don't call me that. Everyone can hear you.

"Shane!"

"Rozanov back in the fucking box or I'm slapping your team with a goddamn penalty!"

Rozanov, repeating his name, again and again, in that fucking voice, like it's being ripped out of him, forces Shane to stand up, as if in a panic.

Shane goes from horizontal to vertical in a matter of seconds. He jumps up, his head ringing. The ref startles. The medics stop, unsure, looking at him strangely.

"Hollander, Jesus, we need to get you on the spinal board—"

"Nope! I'm good," Shane says sunnily, He desperately avoids eye contact with Rozanov, and trains his focus hard on the ref. "I'm just going to scoot on back to the box if that's good with everybody—"

"No way," Both Rozanov and the ref say at the same time.

Shane whips around to Rozanov, finally. *Why the fuck is he here?* "Hey," Shane snaps. "Can you go back to the fucking box?"

Rozanov's face crumples at Shane's tone. But before Shane can apologize, he quickly recovers.

"Coach is switching out," Rozanov says, voice hard. "So I have to be here soon anyway."

Shane's stomach sinks. In his state, injured, losing, and mad at Roanov, he finally succumbs to the baser emotions he's been suppressing for the past month. Jealousy, corrosive but sure, bubbles hot in his throat. Jealous that Rozanov had to be brought into The Centaurs, because Shane wasn't enough. Jealous that the second he was brought in, he was immediately able to command the respect and adoration of the entire team, whereas Shane never started with anyone's respect.

He always, *always* had to earn it.

Now Rozanov's going to swoop in, take Shane's fucking position, and fix his fucking mess.

"Hollander," the ref says, gentle. The crowd is starting to get antsy. *Get this guy off the fucking ice.* they are probably all thinking. *I want to watch the fucking game.* "We don't need to carry you off, but you should go to physical before you go back to the box.

Without even looking in Rozanov's direction, Shane skates off, and does exactly that.

As Shane gets checked out by the team's physician, Shane calms down, and makes a promise to himself to be nicer to Rozanov. He's been playing hockey for too long to be jealous of good players. He's been a part of too many teams and pissed off too many people, just because he had the audacity to take this game seriously and play to the best of his ability.

The physician says, miraculously, that he hadn't been hurt too bad. Didn't even have a concussion, which is nice. He's kind of banged up though, so he should just try and take it easy the next week or so. Shane's never taken anything easy in his life, but for his health, sure.

He walks out back into the rink, changed out of his skates.

When he sees the scoreboard, with just a minute left on the clock, Shane actually cannot believe his eyes.

3-6.

In just one period, Rozanov not only beat The Bears.

He completely fucking crushed them.

It's the exact style of play Shane saw during that one scrimmage, a few weeks ago now. Except it had now been perfected. Rozanov drilled his entire line to be almost an extension of his own arm. The big, lumbering bears do not stand a chance—it's almost embarrassing to watch. Five players stand there, heads whipping around, as at least the faster Boston skater desperately started chasing after the puck. But just as they would reach one player, the puck would fly like a shot halfway down the court to Barrett, then Haas, then Dykstra, then finally, finally—

The king of the rink himself, Ilya Rozanov.

His backhand is fast, controlled, and lethal. It slams into the net, just as the buzzer sounds.

3-7.

The crowd can boo all they want. Rozanov skates across the rink, arms wide open with that stupid fucking smirk begging to be punched as Boston fans cried all around him.

The Ottawa Centaurs have never won a game like this.

The booing is loud, sure, but not as explosive as the wild cheering from the box, as all members of the Ottawa Centaurs, minus one, run out onto the ice to hoist Rozanov onto their shoulders. Rozanov throws his helmet far, far out onto the ice, and Shane watches, far, far away in the wings, Rozanov's cheeks, pink with exertion, eyes alight in victory, as the Ottawa Centaurs rush back to carry Rozanov back to the box.

Leaving Shane, all alone, in the mouth of the other end of the arena.

Shane sits there, at that empty rink, for ten minutes longer than he should. Once he decides he's calmed down enough to be a supportive teammate, he walks, with his head high, into the locker room.

Which is just as loud, frenzied, and chaotic as he suspected it would be.

Someone's managed to shove a stereo in there, and they are blaring a rap song Shane doesn't recognize. Everyone's shirtless, and screeching along, so it's definitely a popular song that once again, everyone seems to know but him. Shane wishes Rose were here, so she could at least tell him what everyone's listening to.

In the middle of all the chaos, of course, is Rozanov.

Shirtless, hair freshly washed. Not wearing anything but a pair of boxers.

He looks like an Olympian god, surrounded by a dutiful crowd of worshippers.

"Hey! You're okay." Wyatt says, happily. His face is flushed, like everyone else, with happiness, with effort, and, of course, with victory. "Another thing to celebrate!"

"Bro," Bood temporarily detaches himself from Rozanov's orbit. "Tell me you caught the last period. That was actually fucking legendary."

Shane looks at Rozanov. Rozanov stares back, still smiling, but the expression is now frozen, stilted on his face. "I did."

"That last goal? Like," Bood laughs, "Way to kick a guy when he's fucking down, you know?"

Shane turns to Haas and Barrett, who hold court next to Rozanov like obedient advisors. "You guys did a really good job out there," Shane says, trying to sound more upbeat.

"Thanks C!" They both sing back at him. Shane kind of wants to pack up, go back to the hotel and fall asleep. Maybe he can find a pay phone, and call his parents, since they're probably pretty worried about that hit he took out on the ice. Rozanov is still staring at him, and now a frown is starting to mar his pretty face.

But then Rozanov shakes his head. A gigantic smile breaks across his face. He claps his hands, loud, together, and the team instantly falls silent.

"Men!" he shouts. "Time has come!"

"What time is it?!" Dykstra shouts. A couple of teammates next to him start drumming, hard, on the locker room bench, and Shane actually feels the vibration in his teeth. While he might not have a concussion, his head still pounds angrily in protest.

"PARTY TIME!" All his teammates shout at the exact same time.

Rozanov jumps off his perch on the locker room bench. "Come on!" he announces, and everyone snaps to attention. "Winners need to be celebrated!"

He slaps Dykstra hard on the back. "You fuckers need to show me good time in America! I buy everyone drinks all night if everyone finds me something worth doing in Boston in the next five minutes!"

"AYE AYE BOSS!"

The promise of drink speeds up the planning process exponentially. First, they'll hit up the local bar that Wyatt is familiar with, as it has a cheap but a heavy pour. Then, Dykstra jumps in with a nightclub where the music is good, "the chicks are hot," and drink is not cheap, but the pour is heavy.

Rozanov does some complex handshake with Dykstra that ends with him high-fiving him. "Drink, hot women, and a victory," Rozanov smirks. "What a beautiful night."

Bood turns to Shane, who is still just standing there, stiff and fully clothed, not saying a word.

"You coming?" Bood asks. Bood always asks, maybe to make Shane feel more included. Because he knows what Shane's answer is.

He gives Bood a small smile. "Not tonight, sorry guys." Teammates around Bood look at Shane hesitantly. They then exchange a glance with Bood, like *is this guy serious?* as once again Shane's declined to come drink with them. But to skip out on celebrating a win like that, against a team like Boston? Shane's aversion seems almost criminal to them now.

"Oh, come on Hollander!" Dykstra shouts across the room. "I've been on this team eight years now, and we've never won the way we won tonight." Shane's heart sinks. "Come out for one drink. One."

Shane slings his backpack on his shoulder. He valiantly avoids eye contact with Rozanov, which is very hard because Rozanov will not stop staring at him. He gives the room a little wave, and shoots everyone a kind smile.

"Have a nice night guys," Shane says. He's done here. He wants to call his parents and go to sleep. "I am really proud of you guys," he says, and he finds that he means it.

Then he turns on his heels, and starts stalking out the locker room.

He makes it to the arena backlot before he hears Rozanov behind him.

"Hollander, wait!"

Shane whips around. Rozanov's shoes are half on, and his jeans are barely buttoned. He also has no shirt on, which, Jesus Christ, fine, it's not like Shane's day can get any worse. Rozanov's teeth are chattering from cold when he manages to catch up to him, and Shane wants to punch him for looking so ridiculous.

The backlot is pretty much empty, and so with that condition met, Shane feels completely emboldened to just finally let the shittiness of his day completely overtake him.

The brave captain face he put on in the locker room melts off him like a bad costume.

"You look ridiculous," Shane snaps. "Go back to the locker room and put a shirt on."

"Are you really not coming?" Rozanov blurts out.

Shane scoffs, "Marlow rocked my shit today. The last thing I want to do is go to a club with loud music."

"Then come to the bar with normal music. Come for thirty minutes," Rozanov insists. "No, even less. Twenty minutes. Grab beers with the guys. Everyone would be very happy."

"Congrats on the win," Shane says. "I'm leaving." He turns his back to Rozanov, and starts walking further down the lot.

Rozanov quickly follows him, walking backwards so he can catch up with Shane while talking to him face-to-face.

"If you do stuff like this," Rozanov says, "especially when spirits are so high, your teammates will think you do not like them."

Shane stops. He turns around. *How dare he.* "They know who I am," Shane snarls. "They know what I'm like. They won't care that I'm there." He doesn't appreciate Rozanov pointing out the obvious, or lecturing him how to be a real person, so he goes on the offensive. "It seems you seem to really care though," he says, mocking.

Rozanov frowns. "I do. We had a really good win today. I want to celebrate it with you."

Shane closes his eyes, and counts to ten. It actually helps abate his anger from saying something deranged that he'll regret tomorrow. Like throw the fact that Rozanov kissed him back in his face. Or point out that Rozanov jumped over the box today to check on him.

Why does Rozanov like him so much?

He needs to stop letting Rozanov provoke such emotional reactions out of him. Just now, he almost lost his temper again. So when Shane opens his eyes again, he's just Shane Hollander, talking to his teammate, Ilya Rozanov, who happens to be shirtless but that's okay.

"Have fun tonight okay?" Shane says, honestly. "I'm sorry I can't be there. Maybe next time."

Rozanov stares at him with an unreadable expression. "Did I do something wrong?"

Will this guy give it a rest? "You've done nothing wrong," Shane says, insistent. "Please just go back inside. I'll see you on the bus tomorrow okay?"

Rozanov just keeps looking at him. Shane's heart thunders in his chest, wondering he's going to go do something insane again.

Instead, Rozanov, for once, listens to him.

"Fine. Good night," Rozanov says, shortly. He looks hurt. Shane's upset him.

It's for the best.

"Good night," Shane says. He swallows the lump in his throat, and even manages a smile. "Have fun. Don't drink too much."

Rozanov doesn't say anything, just shoots him another look that Shane can't decipher. He runs a hand through his hair, frustrated, and his short curls spring up, loose, messy and uncontrolled, around his face.

Shane's heart clenches desperately as he watches him.

Rozanov turns around, and leaves without another word.

When Shane picks up a newspaper from his front door the next morning, a headline reads:

Soviet defector to Ottawa saviour?

With an action photo of Rozanov, a wild smile on his face, slinging a pass to a player off camera.

Barrett goes down hard in a game against the New York Cardinals, completely busting his knee. They lose 2-0, and the team doctor tells Barrett to sit out the next three games.

Which means Shane has to start on a line with Rozanov against their next game with Toronto.

"Is there," Shane says, politely, to Wiebe, "No other option?"

There is not. So after a few days of practice, with Shane and Rozanov passing between each other in tense, uncomfortable silence, Shane takes center, with Rozanov and Bood on the wings, and Dykstra and Chouinard taking the back.

To say that it goes badly is an understatement.

Shane wishes he did any of it maliciously. Then at least there would be some kind of intentionality in how terribly they played.

The fact of the matter was just that he and Rozanov were completely and totally out of sync.

Rozanov misses another pass from Shane, and then the buzzer rings.

Second period down, and Toronto is up 3-0.

Rozanov charges up to Shane, who's hanging by the boards, trying to catch his breath. In a burst of motion, Rozanov slams his hand right next to the glass by Shane's head.

Shane doesn't even jump. He knows Rozanov is pissed at him. He's been pissed at him all game.

"You take off with the puck one more fucking time without telling anyone—" Rozanov growls. He's towering over Shane, whose head had been bent as he gathered his bearings.

"Yeah?" Shane says, lightly. "What are you going to do?" He stands up to his full height now, so he's face-to-face with Rozanov. His lip is curled in challenge, and he dares Rozanov to come closer. He tilts his head, "Hit me?"

Rozanov doesn't say anything, just stares at him, breathing hard. Shane smiles coldly. "How about you focus on hitting a goal with any of the assists I've been feeding you all game instead?"

"Guys," Bood snaps. Bood is a pretty easygoing guy, but for once, watching Shane and Rozanov argue, he looks really angry. "Knock that shit off right now."

"Listen to him, guys," Dykstra skates over, leisurely. But his expression is also tight. "You guys are embarrassing yourselves."

Shane glares up at Rozanov, raising his eyebrows. "Well? Are you going to let me go back to the circle?"

Rozanov glares back at him for another ten seconds before pushing off the boards and skating off, calling Shane something probably pretty heinous in Russian as he goes.

They lose that game too.

It's dead quiet in the locker room when they pile in. Rozanov immediately grabs his helmet and launches it as hard as possible against his locker, which is a childish display that makes Shane roll his eyes. Usually when they lose, which, for The Centaurs, is a lot, Shane is usually pretty good about at least giving a pretty thorough debrief to a sea of morose faces, talking about what people did well, and what they could do better next time, so they can play a better game.

But after this game, Shane just walks to his locker, and changes wordlessly, not making eye contact with any of his teammates.

Yeah, Dykstra was right. They did embarrass themselves.

Shane leaves first, moving a little ahead of everyone else. The rest of his team are not that far behind however, leaving the locker room and heading for the bus with the pep of a death march.

Unfortunately, there's a crowd of reporters waiting nearby when they exit into the backlot.

"You cannot," Wyatt says, flatly, "Be fucking serious."

Rozanov looks homicidal.

It's not like their director of PR is necessarily bad at her job. She is doing her best.

It's just, well. The press can't get enough of Rozanov.

The unfortunate reality is that he's a journalists' wet dream. He's a Red Army superstar that defected to Canada, that managed to then turn around what felt like a fifty-year losing streak for a dead end team like The Centaurs by bringing over the best of Soviet style play. To make things even worse, he's pretty good looking, and on top of it has a foul, quick-witted mouth, which, especially with the Russian accent, makes him a quote magnet.

So even though their director of PR tries to keep a tight lid on what press gets to ask what questions, the absolute fervor of interest has been, to be quite blunt, impossible to contain. Game after game, as Rozanov leads The Centaurs' hot streak, a gaggle of press has begun to form wherever they can find space, which, today, unfortunately happens to be right where they parked the bus.

As the huddle of journalists start to swarm, the security with the team tries to fight them off, to no avail. Shane turns on his heels, quickly shoving his teammates back through the door they came from, so there's at least a locked barrier between them and the press. He yells instructions to poor Haas, who looks petrified, to get Coach Wiebe, or use the landline to get their PR, their general manager, anyone on the phone, so they can deal with the mess outside.

He almost has Rozanov pushed through the door when, finally, one particularly persistent journalist shoves through, with a microphone in one hand and camera in another.

"Mr. Rozanov!" the journalist shouts. Rozanov looks like he's about to snap. Shane's worried he's going to punch him. "Mr. Rozanov, I'm with The Gazette—"

Shane can't help but laugh. *The fucking Gazette*, "Talk to our press office," Shane snaps, immediately.

Unfortunately, the journalist is able to get off his one question, loud enough so everyone can hear.

"Reports are saying your father, USSR's Defense Minister, Grigori Rozanov, has passed away. Can you confirm?"

Shane's heart breaks.

The look that crosses Rozanov's face is nothing short of horrible.

It starts with how the anger just falls, right off his face. Rozanov's been burning with rage this entire game—mostly directed at Shane—and his thunderous mood has only followed him out of the arena.

But when the journalist manages to successfully fire the question off, wide-eyed shock, followed by just the deepest, possible despair a person can feel, spells itself out all over his face. His shoulders, like a marionette, just suddenly cut loose, and he just stands, completely helpless and despondent, as the camera gets shoved a millimeter close to his face to get his reaction.

Shane immediately jumps into action.

With one powerful shove, he forces Rozanov through the door. The reporters manage to overpower their security, so Shane cannot get through in time without letting them into the locker room. So, thinking quickly, he slams the door shut, so at least they can't get to Rozanov.

Leaving just Shane outside with security and a swarm of hungry journalists.

Even though he knows he shouldn't, he lunges at The Gazette journalist, and the man actually flinches, which makes Shane smile. Instead of hitting him, he plucks the reporter's press badge right off his chest. Shane laughs even harder when he realizes he recognizes the name.

"Mr. Hollander—

"Hey, make sure you take a good look at this," Shane yells to the two useless security guards. "The piece of shit's name."

He turns back to The Gazette journalist. Shane has a horrible smile plastered across his face, one of barely contained rage.

"We've told you a million times to go through our PR, and you didn't listen," Shane says, voice booming out of him. "Well guess what? This was your last chance. The second I turn around, and go back in through those doors, I'm going to make sure the team have a restraining order against you specifically, and I'm going to make sure our general manager puts in a call in to your boss and tell him that The Gazette will have no access to any of our athletes unless he," at this, Shane flings the press badge back into the guy's face, "Fires you."

The reporter's face pales, and Shane continues. "If what you are saying is true, then the way you went about this is nothing short of heinous, and we will sue you to the ground. If what you said is false, then well," Shane smiles, cruel. "We cannot wait until we sue you into the ground."

The rest of the press, upon hearing this, are at least cowed. The ones who aren't, are at least so desperate to get a good shot of Shane losing it at this reporter, that they are keeping mostly still. So Shane, having made his point, turns his back to the gaggle, slams his fist twice on the door, to be let into the locker room—

Only for the door to lurch—

Forcing Shane to topple face-first into Rozanov, who has just stood by the door for Shane's entire spiel.

Rozanov still looks nothing short of grief-stricken, but he stares at Shane with what can only be described as awe.

The door closes behind them, shutting out the commotion of the press.

Shane rights himself and looks up at Rozanov. Shane's combative expression softens into concern. "Hey," Shane says, his voice gentle.

He wonders if he should ask if Rozanov's okay, but obviously he's not.

So instead, he wordlessly yanks Rozanov into a hug.

Rozanov chokes out a wounded noise and sinks into it helplessly, wrapping his arms tight around Shane's back. He has to duck his head to fit into the crook of Shane's shoulder,

nuzzling his face into the safety of his neck. To Shane's horror, then, he hears, softly at first, but then loud enough for it to be unmistakable—

Rozanov, crying.

His teammates all choose fifteen different points in the locker room that aren't Rozanov and Shane to look at politely, as Rozanov tries to cry as quietly as possible. Rozanov's hands are fisted tightly into Shane's jacket, leaning into Shane, as if he's the only thing keeping him standing. The entire time, Shane strokes the back of Rozanov's neck, using his other hand to comb his fingers softly through his curls, shushing him softly as Rozanov keeps letting out these choked off sounds in an attempt to break off any louder sobs.

Rozanov stops crying after thirty minutes, but even then he doesn't let go of Shane, keeping his face buried in his neck. Shane also doesn't stop comforting him. He keeps touching him—petting his curls, stroking the small of his back.

Out of respect, all of their teammates don't say a word, even though what they are doing is objectively pretty unmasculine.

But like, a guy's dad might or might not have died, so the dictatorial regime of the patriarchy can maybe give them this.

They stay like that for over an hour. The press might've already left, but everyone silently agrees that they are too scared to check. After a very long while, of Shane holding Rozanov in his arms, lulling Rozanov into stillness, the general manager and the director of PR finally come skidding into the locker room through a different entrance. It's only then that Rozanov jumps away from Shane, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Jesus Christ," the general manager says, loudly. Considering the room had been silent except for the choked sobs of a fully grown man, everyone jumps at the sound. "Yeah, yeah. I know we fucked up," the general manager sighs. He looks at Rozanov, and Shane sees for the first time something other than dollar signs flash in the guy's eyes. "Hey kid, let's talk in private."

Rozanov nods, eyes far away. The general manager, the director of PR, and Rozanov shuffle off somewhere in the corner and start talking quickly in hushed tones. The rest of the room starts making idle conversation, so they can give Rozanov some privacy.

Wyatt nudges Shane's shoulder. Shane keeps looking at Rozanov in the corner, checking if he's okay, so he startles a little.

"Hey," Wyatt says, softly. "That was pretty badass of you. Telling off the reporter."

Shane shrugs. "I would've done the same for any of you guys," he says, as honestly as he could. Maybe a little less hair stroking, but they didn't need to know that.

Wyatt claps him on the back. "Thanks C."

After a while, the team heads back to the bus. When they open the door, they step onto a completely empty lot.

Shane looks at the general manager, "Spend more money on security," he snaps. He turns to the director of PR, "And do your job."

The two of them look uneasy, but nod. Shane rolls his eyes. He sometimes feels like he's running a solo operation as captain of this bizarre team.

The Ottawa Centaurs head back home.

They have been on the road for three hours when Shane notices that pretty much everyone on the bus is asleep. The general manager bums a ride back with them, and is snoring so loud it almost shakes the entire vehicle. Shane's sitting next to Wyatt, but he keeps turning around to look at Rozanov, who has his own seat in the back, which the team wordlessly gave him out of respect for what he's going through. Shane decides that leaving someone who's just gotten horrible news alone is a pretty stupid idea, so he stands up, and slides into the empty seat next to Rozanov.

Rozanov is staring, completely blank, out the window. His head is lolled, listlessly, against the headrest, and his eyes look fresh with new tears.

"Hey," Shane asks, quietly. He takes a peek at their surroundings, and sees, in the row in front of Rozanov, is Dykstra, Bood, and Haas. Wyatt, who was next to Shane's, sits diagonal ways away from them. They are all asleep, but Shane has a sudden realization, which is that he doesn't really care too much if they overhear anything personal Shane discusses with Rozanov... because... well...

He trusts his teammates.

It's a pretty alien realization that fills him with a flood of fondness.

He looks back at Rozanov, "Is it okay if I sit here?"

Instead of responding, Rozanov lolls around, and wordlessly lays his head on Shane's shoulder. He buries his face in Shane's hoodie.

Shane sighs, and he reaches over to pet Rozanov's hair.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Shane says. They are so close that Shane just barely whispers it into Rozanov's ear.

"No," Rozanov mumbles.

"Do you want to talk at all?" Shane asks, softly.

"No," Rozanov pauses. "You can talk though."

Shane thinks about what he can talk about. He thinks about what he'd want to say to Rozanov right now.

He thinks about how he's treated him over the past couple of months.

"I'm sorry," Shane says, softly. If they were any farther apart, Rozanov might not have heard him.

"Do not be sorry for anything," Rozanov mumbles. "I am sorry."

Shane huffs a laugh. He gives Rozanov's curls a soft, but playful scratch. "I haven't..." Shane sighs, "I haven't been very nice to you. These last couple of months."

Rozanov glances up at him, "Me neither."

"I like you so much," Shane says, smiling ruefully at him. Rozanov's eyes don't leave his, so their faces stay close together. "So I don't know why it's been so hard for me to show it."

"You push people away you like," Rozanov says. Normally, a statement like this, from Rozanov of all people, would've made Shane tense up, but Shane just accepts it as the hard truth that it is. Accepts it as another hard truth Rozanov never shied away from saying to people.

"Well, if you are so perfect," Shane teases, "What are you sorry for?"

Rozanov stays quiet, and Shane lets him. He doesn't expect to get an answer, so he keeps absentmindedly stroking Rozanov's hair. He thinks he's about to fall asleep when finally Rozanov says something, softly into Shane's chest.

"For liking you too much," Rozanov mumbles.

The two of them stay like that the entire bus ride. Neither of them mentions the kiss, or Rozanov's father. Yet, Shane feels that something that's been holding them back these past two months is now finally out in the open, said.

What it is, Shane's not entirely sure. But as Rozanov drifts away in his arms, Shane can't help but think that everything between them feels a lot lighter now.

Chapter End Notes

i have a tumblr now! :) [come say hi](#)

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

happy new years everybody !!!

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

The reporter is right, in the end.

USSR general Grigori Rozanov has passed away. Heart attack.

Russian press does not mention his Alzheimer's. They also do not mention how, the week before Ilya defected from the USSR, Grigori Rozanov, with love in his eyes, had mistaken him for his mother.

Ilya does not get to attend the funeral. It is a quiet affair that gets no international coverage, so he doesn't get to see the casket either.

Instead, he plays hockey.

Hockey goes unbelievably well.

Playing with Shane gets much better. While Barrett recovers, he and Hollander tear through the Eastern Conference. It starts with the first game they win, with Hollander nudging him on the shoulder and shooting him a shy smile, telling Ilya "nice shot," before skating off.

When they win their third game in a row, Hollander jumps into his arms, face flush with happiness. He wraps his thighs around Ilya's waist, and links his arms around his neck. Ilya smiles and spins him around, to thunderous applause and adoring cameras, and Hollander doesn't even push him away.

Which only makes the unbearable sadness in his heart all the more worrying.

The last time it was this bad was the week before he left Russia. Watching his father deteriorate, letting Andrei hurl abuse at him, knowing he was going to try to leave them behind—Rozanov thought he would be exhilarated. These would be the last few days he would ever have to spend with these horrible people he hates.

But instead, it just made him so sad. He remembered when Andrei liked him. Sure, he was a child, but it still meant he was capable of it. His father was always a piece of shit, but as Ilya started having to stop by Moscow every weekend to take care of the general, Ilya wondered, as his father's condition deteriorated, why he couldn't have a family worth staying for. He didn't know why he had to have a dad that hated him, and now a dad who was on the way to the grave.

When he gets sad, he dreams about his mom.

He jerks awake now, in his beautiful Western apartment, completely alone. He wakes up crying, like he always does, when he dreams about mom. In the dream, his mom had walked out of the scenic canal that splits Ottawa in two, wearing a flower print dress with her crucifix chain glittering in the afternoon sun. Ilya would be sitting on a park bench, waiting for her, and just as she would open her mouth to greet him, he'd wake up.

When his mom got sad, she ended up killing herself.

God. He just wants to stay in bed.

He lies there, completely numb, and wonders if he could get away skipping practice.

In Russia, he would never consider it. But in Canada, a country of pushovers, he could stay here, in the black, for at least a week before higher-ups even think to try and punish him.

But then a week would go by, and then the punishment would be that he would lose his visa, be forced to go back to Russia, and tried as an enemy of the state.

Also, Hollander would kill him if he missed practice.

The threat of being sent to Siberia and the pleasure of seeing Hollander again pushes him out of bed.

He gets ready, slow and plodding. He thought his home in Moscow was claustrophobic and suffocating, but here, amongst all the luxury, the loneliness has so much room to breathe it takes on an audible quality. While the building is not as high up as his family's home in Moscow, the quiet, mixing with the space, makes it so that the wind literally moans throughout his home, imbuing it with a frigidness not even a Russian winter was capable of replicating.

He checks his mail. He checks the time on a Rolex watch he bought recently, because it's what he was told rich people wear. Even if he leaves right now, he will get to practice thirty minutes late.

He stands, frozen in place, staring at his front door, willing himself to go through it for another ten minutes.

When he gets to practice, Hollander is already on a war path.

They are playing Montreal in one week.

Hollander is running the team through lines, leading the pack as he tears up and down the rink in a burst of speed. The team is struggling to follow, which means they've probably been at this drill since practice started.

"Keep up!" Hollander yells, without even turning back. Eighteen grown men moan in pain, as Hollander skids down to the end line, and starts lapping the slowest skater by turning around and dashing back down where he came.

Ilya saunters onto the ice, just as their last teammate crosses over to the other end of the rink.

Hollander's head snaps up when he approaches. Ilya can tell he's pissed he's late. But Ilya watches as the anger rises, and then, just like that, goes. Instead, Hollander's expression is replaced with something soft and unreadable when Ilya skates up to the line.

Ilya wants to kiss him so fucking bad.

"Nice of you to finally join us Rozanov," Hollander says, voice still stern, in a half-hearted attempt to not show favoritism. He's also clearly withholding his anger because he feels sorry for Ilya that his dad died, but Ilya respects the devotion to making it seem like he isn't.

Ilya huffs, but doesn't say anything in response.

"Montreal has won every game they've played this season," Hollander says, turning back to face the team, "But this season, we have more than enough momentum to really fuck them over. Coach and I are not just pushing you just to push you, we are pushing you because we know we have it in us to finally fucking win against one of the best teams in the league."

It's an inspirational speech, and his teammates look appropriately moved, if it weren't for the fact they are too busy coughing their lungs up on the ice. Hollander smiles, pleased with himself, and continues.

"We've played Montreal before, so we know what they are like. Their defense is brutal, and their offense is nimble. So we need to be meaner, and we need to move quicker."

Hollander then walks them through the lineup.

Ilya frowns when he hears he's back on a line with Haas and Barrett, while Hollander will follow second with Bood and Dillon.

Hollander hates it when a teammate talks trash about another teammate. Ilya finds however that he doesn't give a shit, and immediately opens his mouth.

"We need fast skaters, so your solution is to put yourself on a line with Dillon?" Ilya snarks.

Dillon flushes, looking embarrassed and upset, "Hey," he says weakly, "Don't be an asshole."

But Ilya's dad died, so he doesn't give a fuck if he's an asshole.

Hollander however, cares very much. His eyes flash with anger, and this time it doesn't get washed away from some fond feeling or pity. He starts to retort, but Coach Wiebe quickly cuts in.

"You, Barrett, and Haas can easily outskate Montreal's current forwards," Wiebe says, firm. "We need you guys to set the tempo for the first half of the game so Hollander's line can come in and clean up."

This only makes Ilya's irritation with the play even worse. Why is Hollander letting Coach take him off starting center? "You will be leaving Hollander to die in the second half of the

game," Ilya snaps. "He has no support on the wings—"

"What am I?" Bood says, but he doesn't look too offended, "Chopped liver?"

"I love you man," Ilya says, honestly. "But Montreal will see, the second they cover you, that Hollander is alone," Ilya says. He tilts his head up, defiant, "Wouldn't it make more sense to keep me on a line with Hollander?"

Hollander's eyes flash, warningly. But again, before he can say anything, Wiebe cuts in.

"Yeah?" Wiebe snaps, "And then when both of you get taken out, and I am left with no backup or centers in the second half of the game?"

Ilya spits on the ice, "Have Haas be center."

Hollander and Wiebe wear matching expressions of disbelief. Haas' face pales.

"Rozanov," Haas squeaks, "I don't know if I—"

"Do not be a bitch Haas," Ilya snarls. Haas flinches, hard, at Ilya's tone.

The reaction reminds Ilya of how rookies would react to his old coach, back in Moscow.

This, out of everything, finally makes Ilya reign his horrible mood back. He takes a deep breath. "I've played with you all season. You are more than ready for it. You have good instincts on the ice, you can fucking skate, and you know how to shoot. Plus," Ilya smiles, "You are just borrowing position for now, yes?"

Haas steadies his breathing, looks Ilya in the eyes, steely. He nods.

"Who will be on the wings with him?" Hollander asks. He still seems angry, but he now looks willing to hear Ilya out.

"Barrett's got him on right. Let's throw Dillon on their left," Ilya smiles at Dillon, sharply.

"Do the rookies a favor and keep up."

"Fuck you Rozanov," Dillon mumbles, but he seems to take his words to heart.

Hollander sighs. "So it's me in the center, and then you and Bood on the wings."

"Dream team!" Bood sings.

"That work for you?" Ilya says, meeting Hollander's eyes for the first time this entire exchange. He shoots Hollander a smirk. "Captain?"

Hollander looks off to the side, thinking. Ilya can see it immediately, the gears that turn behind his eyes, as he starts working through the play, each teammate but a doll, a tool, he can repeatedly move around in his brain until—

He meets Ilya's eyes, and he nods. "Let's do it."

Things with Hollander are getting, safe to say, kind of confusing.

Since Ilya's dad died, may he rest in hell, Hollander has gotten a lot, *lot*, more touchy with him. For the past three away games, he and Hollander have wordlessly ridden in the back of the bus together, with Ilya's face buried in the crook of his neck. They don't talk about Ilya's father, or why Shane—shit, *Hollander*—keeps stroking his hair, the shell of his ear, the soft line of his neck, like *that*, like he knows exactly where to touch to make Ilya feel better.

That first bus ride back, after the reporter assaulted Ilya with the news of his father's death, Hollander even asked, when they returned to Ottawa—did Ilya want to be alone?

"I have a lot of space," Hollander had said, immediately offering his home. "My couch is really comfortable, and—" he must have seen Ilya's face, because he then had backtracked, "Or... or! I take the couch, and you can take my bed. Just so you have someone with you—"

"I want us to sleep in the same bed together," Ilya had said, flatly. Bluntly. Hollander's face immediately had gone a hot, tomato red, as he went ahead and looked everywhere but Ilya's eyes to shakily explain oh no, wouldn't you want your own space? You can take the bed or the couch, I really don't mind either way—

Ilya had sighed. Of course, he didn't want to be alone. But there was no way he was going to be able to follow Hollander's arbitrary rules if they spent the night alone together under the same roof.

He really wanted to kiss him again. He wanted to make him helpless with pleasure.

But Hollander wasn't ready. Ilya couldn't be sure he would ever be ready. So, instead, Ilya had put him out of his misery, and told him not to worry about it. That he just wanted to go sleep in his own bed and be alone.

"Okay," Hollander had said, shakily. He looked visibly relieved, which made Ilya's heart sink. The relief had overpowered Shane's concern for him. "I'll see you tomorrow though?" he asked, in a soft voice.

Of course. Ilya had said. And he had watched as Hollander climbed into his car, and drove off.

When Ilya had crossed into the threshold of his apartment, he closed his door behind him. He leaned on it, testing its weight.

And then he burst into tears.

Ilya's smoking in the backlot after practice when Hollander comes to find him.

When Ilya hears him approach, he stomps his cigarette out, and tosses the butt away. He's kind of pissed at Hollander, and he doesn't want him to complain about the smell of smoke when he confronts him.

"Why did you let coach take you off my line?" Ilya snaps. Hollander blinks, surprised at the hostility.

"The way he explained it to me made sense," Hollander says, evenly. "I figured too, our lineup was just until Barrett's knee got better, so—"

Ilya has had an unbelievably shitty morning, followed by an unbelievably shitty few weeks.

So he has little patience for Hollander's little dance he insists on doing anytime he is reminded that Ilya makes him feel good in the way no one else in his life ever has. "What," Ilya says, laughing incredulously, "do you want with me man?"

Hollander blinks. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes you do," Ilya glares at him. "You do and I need you to cut shit and just tell me what you want from me."

"I just wanted to check in on you—"

"Hot and cold. Maybe is English phrase for it. I make one wrong move and you push me away with both hands," Ilya snaps. "Except I never know what the wrong move is. Or what the rules are. So I keep losing the stupid game."

Hollander looks cornered. "I..." he looks off to the side, avoiding eye contact, "I don't know what you're talking about—"

Ilya takes one, two, three steps forward, until he's right in Hollander's space. He grabs Hollander's chin, firm, and holds him in place, forcing him to look at him.

Hollander gasps. His lips part. His breath comes out in short, hot pants, fogging the icy cold air. Ilya glares at him, forcing his head up.

"Look at me," Ilya says, lowly, "when I'm talking to you."

Hollander tries to get his breathing under control. He's unsuccessful. "Let go of me first," he says, breathily. Ilya holds him there, for another few seconds, before he growls, and does exactly as Hollander says.

Hollander touches the side of his face, as if in a trance. He licks his lips, and his eyes, when he stares back at Ilya, are hooded. Now Ilya has to look away from him, gritting his teeth, so he doesn't do something he regrets, like, and it bears repeating, kiss him.

"I'm sorry," Hollander says, panting. "I just..." he blinks, trying to clear his head. "I wanted to stay on the same line as you too," he admits, softly.

Ilya needs another cigarette. "Then why did you let coach kick you to the second half?" he says, frustrated.

"I..." Shane sighs. His fists are clenched tightly at his sides. "It's stupid."

Hollander's favorite word. Stupid. "Then think harder so it does not come out stupid," Ilya retorts.

"I don't have what it takes to win against Montreal," he says, quietly.

Ilya pauses. Doesn't respond for a few seconds. "Yeah," Ilya snaps. "That is stupid."

Hollander rolls his eyes. "Great talk. Thanks Rozanov."

"You are very clear," Ilya accuses.

Hollander frowns, "Huh?" he says. Ilya sighs in frustration. He said the wrong English word again.

"Clear. Like, you think no one knows what you are feeling, but I know. I can see it. Clear. Easy to predict, maybe, better word."

Hollander huffs, crossing his arms over his chest. "I'm not predictable!"

Ilya laughs, humorless. "You are so predictable. He diplomatically doesn't bring up the kiss, but all the other stuff is fair game. "Montreal is another thing you want, that you tell yourself you can't have."

Hollander flails defensively. His mouth flaps open, then closed, then—"No, you're wrong."

"You want to beat Montreal so bad, and you are scared of it."

"It's not like I've never played against them since I left," Hollander insists.

Ilya snorts. "Yeah, but this time you have me. You have rookies. Is different because you think you can actually win. You want it so bad it scares you."

Ilya might as well have taken the words right out of Hollander's mouth.

He stares at him, mouth flapping uselessly for another thirty seconds, before he holds his chin up indignantly.

As if he realized that Ilya has a point. "Yeah!" Hollander fires back. "And so what?"

Ilya shrugs. "I am just saying."

Shane's eyes are on fire. "Yeah. I want to fucking win. I want to fucking kill them."

Ilya knows this is dangerous, but he can't help the smile that finally spreads across his face.

When he gets "sad", there is a pressure in his head, driving him to unspeakable sadness, or uncontrollable rage, but never to happiness. But, at the sight of Hollander, red-cheeked and eyes blazing, wanting something with his whole chest, the heaviness lifts like a hot air balloon, soaring up into the sky until it all but disappears.

He has to remember—Hollander always makes him feel better, but Hollander's affection is fickle and conditional, full of rules Ilya can never understand. It leaves Ilya, completely helpless, chasing after whatever scraps Hollander finds in him to give.

"So you better play like your life fucking counts on it next week, got it?!" Hollander orders, hands crossed over his hips, straight black hair made messy by the winter wind. Ilya's heart beats longingly as he watches him.

"Anything for you, Captain," Ilya says, far away from himself.

The Voyageurs meet them on their home ice.

They have a little boy as their center. Only a little older than the rookies. His name is something ridiculously French, that Ilya doesn't bother remembering.

On their defense, they have a dark-skinned man that Ilya thinks he actually recognizes from the juniors—J.J. maybe is his name. On the little boy's left wing, there's some guy who, respectfully, looks like a bumbling idiot from an American sitcom.

To make matters even worse for the bumbling idiot, when he sees Hollander on the ice, his big idiot face breaks out into a huge smile, and he waves excitedly at him. Ilya frowns. He thought everyone on the Voyageurs hated Hollander. But Hollander even returns his smile with equal verve, his eyes fond, like he was looking at an old friend.

Yeah, this guy has to die. As they line up at the face-off circle, Ilya immediately cuts a glance at Bood, nudging his head at the bumbling idiot, signaling a clear weakness on the ice.

We are going to pummel this guy. Ilya's eyes communicate.

Don't you fucking know it. Bood's eyes answer back. Ilya smirks.

The puck drops.

The one time Ilya played with The Voyageurs in the Super Series, he noticed that they were strangely cohesive for a North American team. Down to their forwards, their purpose was clear: protect the center.

Even though Moscow beat them that day, Ilya saw how the team coalesced around Hollander. Play after play relied on Hollander, skating and dodging obstacles as fast as possible, as the team tackled, slashed, and slammed his path clear. Of course, any team with eyes would know that then that leaves them vulnerable—stop Hollander, you stop the game.

Of course, the problem was that Hollander, especially on Montreal, was unstoppable.

As they line up now, it looks like they are trying to rip off the exact style of play like a cheap costume. Except, they've replaced Hollander with an even faster, younger, and French-er center. The puck drops, and the kid immediately reaches for it. To give him some credit, he almost beats Hollander for the puck, but Hollander's the steelier player—he wrenches the puck back at the last second, and takes off into their zone with it.

Other than the bumbling idiot, Ilya can see that there is truly no love lost between Hollander and his old team.

As Hollander takes off, his old teammates, with obvious animosity in their eyes, close in on him like a shot. J.J., especially, looks at Hollander with hatred that burns hotter than the others, because he's not only angry at him, he looks...

He looks at Hollander like he's been betrayed.

More importantly, he's going to kill Hollander if Ilya doesn't act fast.

It only takes one look. He glances at Bood, and without having to do much more, Bood skates off, and in a second takes out both the defense and their bumbling idiot left wing with one nasty check. They collapse in on each other onto the boards, and then that leaves J.J., the center, and the right wing, chasing after Hollander.

The right wing is behind Ilya, charging after him, so Ilya glances at Dykstra, and is happy to see that he doesn't even have to ask—Dykstra slams the idiot out of Hollander's chase. This then just leaves the center, and J.J.

The play comes together in a second. Ilya skates as fast as he can, and before the center can move in on Hollander, Ilya checks him as hard as he can against the boards, and since the boy is so much smaller than him he actually goes flying. Ilya doesn't even look to see where the center ends up, because J.J. is now closing in on Hollander. Luckily for everyone, checking Montreal's center out of the way prepares Ilya perfectly for the free piece of ice he'd fought so hard for.

He locks eyes with Hollander, and taps his club, once, twice. against the ice.

Calling for the puck.

Hollander looks at J.J., then back at Ilya. It takes him less than a second to wind up his club, and he passes the puck cleanly into Ilya's possession.

Perfect, but they still have a ways away from the net.

Like zombies, the opponents that they've successfully checked out of the way recover, and fast. They get up, and seeing Ilya, so far out by himself on the ice, they start circling like they smell blood in the water.

Like the idiots they are, they chase after the puck, taking their eyes off Hollander.

Which, anyone with a brain would know, is the gravest mistake a hockey player can make.

In probably the first time in NHL history, Hollander is completely unguarded, skating as fast as he can toward the goal. He looks at Ilya, challenging him—

And taps his club. Once, twice, against the ice.

Ilya has almost five guys on him. But the look Hollander sends him sets him on fire. Hollander wants to see what he's made of.

Hollander wants to see if he can fight five guys off if it means Hollander gets to win.

Challenge accepted. Ilya preps a backhand, and like the total chumps they are, he tricks them with his signature fake-out. The squeak of distance they give him is just enough for Ilya to switch, quicker than anyone can really see, his forehand. He hits the puck, sending it spinning —

Right into the neck of Hollander's club.

Hollander then slapshots it right into the goal. Too fast for any goalie really, to stop.

1-0.

Ottawa goes wild.

The Montreal center looks at the proceedings with disbelief. He's only ever played with Hollander as captain of The Centaurs. This is the first time he's played with Hollander. MVP, record scorer, and two-time Stanley Cup Champion.

Ilya hears their teammates cheer widely from the box. He opens his mouth to deliver a devastating chirp to J.J., but instead, Montreal shoots him a glare, silent, and skates off into the face-off circle.

Ilya is willing to admit. It's a little disconcerting how quiet they are. They just keep glaring, daggers, at Hollander, but they aren't saying a single word to him. Dykstra even tries to provoke them, telling them to suck his club and whatnot, but they wordlessly ignore him.

Even in Russia they were allowed to chirp Canada during the juniors. It was the only time they were allowed to talk to the opposing team.

He looks over at Hollander, wondering if maybe he would be willing to offer some answers, just something to indicate why Montreal is being so fucking weird.

Instead, when he turns, Hollander is only staring at him.

His hands are wrapped, tightly, around his club, and he is biting his lip, hard. His eyes are low and hooded through the cage of his helmet, and Ilya feels pleasure shoot, like nicotine, through his blood.

Why?

Because Hollander is looking at him like he wants to jump him on the ice.

If Hollander does what he did last game—leap into his arms in victory, and wrap his strong thighs around Ilya's waist—Ilya won't be able to stop himself from committing multiple acts of public indecency in front of their Ottawa fanbase.

Instead, Hollander flashes him a smile. To Ilya's horror, it's a flirty one. And he skates off to the center.

Okay. Understood.

If he wants Hollander, flushed, in his arms, he'll have to win first.

The incentive leaves his heart thundering in his ears.

The Voyageurs didn't stand a chance.

The Centaurs dominate that game. Ilya's only goal was to take as many people out as possible, so Hollander could shoot as fast as possible. He spent two periods brute forcing Hollander's former teammates right into the boards. If he thought they were coming up too quickly, he'd just hit them harder, leaving them shaking in disbelief on the ice, as Hollander delivered shot after shot into their goal.

And in the rare instance Hollander would get cornered, Ilya would skate out, exactly where he knew Hollander would need him to be. Hollander wouldn't even have to waste time looking up, he would line up his shot and pass, and it would land perfectly into Ilya's club. And Ilya, no matter how many people were on him, would see where Hollander was, and pass to the exact position Hollander needed to be to wind his stick back—

And shoot the puck right into the goal.

By the time Haas and his lineup came in the last period, the game was pretty much finished. 7-2. The Voyageurs were so demoralized, after taking check after punishing check from Ilya for daring to be in Hollander's way, that then they didn't stand a chance against the whip-quick Barrett and Haas combo. Now that Ilya and Hollander slowed them down so much, the classic Soviet-style of play that Ilya drilled into their young rookie heads cut through their defense like a shiv.

The game ends.

10-2.

The arena physically shakes with how loudly Ottawa's fans start cheering.

He'd watched the last period with Hollander's arm pressed up against his, burning hot through his gear. But now, he gets up, leaping over the box, to grab both Haas and Barrett into his arms, swinging them around in an obnoxious hug. Barrett keeps yelling at Ilya to put him down, but Rozanov's heart is practically exploding with pride, so he doesn't listen to him. Once he's finally done hugging them, Dykstra shouts, "Alright team, we ready?" And their teammates yell in the affirmative.

They first pick up Ilya, to his absolute glee.

And then they grab Hollander.

Hollander likes to pretend to be all tough, but everyone on the team knows how much he needed to beat Montreal. So they pick him up, more easily than Ilya, and hoist him up into the air, chanting.

Ilya and Hollander soar above the rink, boosted by their teammates.

Hollander catches Ilya's eyes, up in the air. He looks overcome with happiness. He shoots him such a big, helpless smile, that the only thing Ilya can do is give him one, equally happy, in return.

Ilya has the cold realization that he doesn't want to be anywhere else, but by Hollander's side, making him shine.

Their teammates carry them back to the box, back to the locker room. Reporters try to stop them, but Wyatt shouts, "The only thing we have to say is The Centaurs are the fucking best! Take that to your damn editor!"

This makes Shane laugh, hard, in glee, and atop his throne of hockey players he adds, "And we have the best damn players in the league!" And before the director of PR, who had been anxiously corralling the reporters into an orderly circle, can even demand they sit down for an actual interview, they all pile into the locker room, and slam the door in the press's faces.

And now, the celebration begins.

The Centaurs haven't beaten The Voyageurs in over forty years. So it's safe to say that the energy in the locker room was borderline Dionysian.

Music is blaring, loud and triumphant. Guys are leading chants every other minute. Teammates are excitedly recounting moments in the game, recreating every shot in their towels with great verve.

Hollander is laughing on the sidelines, just hanging out on the bench with his shirt off. Ilya tries to do what he had gotten good at over the season, which is to stare somewhere else on the very rare chance Hollander lets his team catch him shirtless.

But after playing a game that good, Ilya doesn't feel like skittering away from his attraction to Hollander like a scared animal. He stares at Hollander, full of desire, as his captain leans on the bench, stretching his long legs out, chest rising and falling, completely at ease.

People are still shouting, absolutely beside themselves with joy. Ilya stands up.

The energy must go somewhere.

He cups his hands to his mouth, to shout over the music, "HEY!" Ilya shouts, "We take this fucking party over to my place, yes?!"

A loud, riotous cheer explodes out of the locker room at this. Hollander even joins in, cupping his hands politely over his face to let out an equally loud howl. Ilya's heart sings with hope.

"Rozanov, my man," Dykstra says, gravely. "I have five giant kegs of beer rotting in my basement, just waiting for a moment like this."

To normal people this would sound deeply unappetizing.

But to hockey players, this statement deserves another round of raucous applause.

"I want you fuckers, in one hour, to fill my nice fucking house with as many people as possible, as many hot girls as possible, and with as much alcohol as possible, or you are off the damn team!" he orders.

"You got it boss!" his teammates shout, and Ilya can't help but smirk, standing on top of this locker room bench.

Feeling something like a king.

He just needs to make sure of one last thing, and then his night will be made.

He steps off his perch, and walks straight to Hollander. Hollander still has a lazy, relaxed smile, his face flushed with victory, his limbs loose leaning against the lockers.

The part of his brain that keeps staring at Hollander's naked chest wonders if he would look this good after Ilya fucked his brains out.

"Are you coming?" Ilya asks, and his voice catches. A chip in his armor, giving him away. Revealing how much he wants this.

Hollander's smile widens. His eyes sparkle, teasing. Ilya wants to bang his head against the locker. *Hollander is still flirting with him.*

Ilya hopes that Hollander knows what he's doing, because if he keeps this up Ilya won't be able to stop himself.

"Well," Hollander says, lightly. His chest keeps rising and falling, and Ilya has no choice but to stare, hungrily, at the movement. "Only because you took such good care of me today," he says, maintaining eye contact with Ilya the entire time, rolling the words slowly on his tongue.

All his teammates are right there, next to him, and they don't even notice how hard Hollander is coming onto him right now.

What the fuck is happening? Do North Americans just talk like this?

"Is—" Ilya's actually blushing, this is so embarrassing. "Is that a yes or a no?"

Hollander winks at him, and then rejoins the conversation with Bood. Leaving Ilya standing there, desperately trying not to get hard, in front of his teammates.

The answer ends up being yes.

Hollander gets there hilariously on time. He at least arrives with another keg, because he is a good guest, along with a vegetable tray, which Ilya laughs at.

"This is a nice place," Hollander says, politely. "You have a beautiful home."

He's wearing another loose button-down, this time dark blue. Like the silk shirt he wore to the mall, it hangs stylishly on his muscular frame, and of course Ilya gets a peek at everything he wants—the crook of Shane's neck, where Ilya loves to bury his face. A hint of chest.

Similarly to the shirt he wore at the mall however, it looks like something Shane Hollander, the person, would never consider wearing, unless someone bought it for him.

Ilya desperately hopes it's his mom, and not a girlfriend.

Hollander arrives pretty early, but luckily for Ilya, a swarm of people start piling soon after him.

If Ilya is left alone with Hollander, he's going to do something that will make him cry.

Ilya does not want to spoil such an amazing night by making Hollander cry.

As more and more partygoers file in, Ilya introduces these North Americans to a healthy dose of synthpop he bought at a specialty store, which everyone takes to with the fervor of a convert introduced to something exotic and alien. People very quickly are getting drunk, and there is a nonzero amount of people wearing horses' heads and flailing wildly around his home, even though Ilya feels the need to point out that centaurs are human from the top up, and horses from the bottom down.

Teammates start pressuring Hollander to do a keg stand, which Ilya swans in, to either encourage or discourage, in case Hollander's face shows any genuine discomfort. However,

when Ilya sees Hollander, laughing as he's being hoisted and then flipped backwards into the air, he knows that Hollander is having fun. So Ilya starts chanting loudly, with these Canadians, "Chug! Chug! Chug!" even though he doesn't know what a keg stand even is, and by god, Hollander does it.

He chugs for what is considered an embarrassingly short amount of time, if the laughter by his teammates around him are any indication. But it has the added benefit of completely soaking Hollander in beer, his black hair sweeping in curled, wet strands in front of his eyes, as well as soaking the front of his dark button-down, making it so Ilya can see a hint of Hollander's nipples.

Ilya decides because of this turn of events, he likes keg stands, and wants to try to do one. But when he does, he realizes that what his Russian forefathers told him is true—that the West was a godless place, full of heathens. Because what he's entirely unprepared for is having beer actually shot, from what looks like a pressure cooker, straight into his open mouth.

It's so fucking foul, that Ilya jerks his head away, and spits half the beer out onto his new apartment floor, to the hysterical laughter of everyone around him. The rest gets soaked all over the front of his shirt, his face, his hair.

"No fucking way! That was awesome!" Dykstra shouts, "Big tough Russian, you can't chug a little beer?!"

"Is godless behavior!" Ilya shouts. He grabs his entire shirt out in front of him, exposing his chest and stomach, and wrings the rest of the beer out onto the floor. He doesn't miss Hollander staring at him appreciatively when he does. "I will be drinking shots of vodka upright, like our fathers intended!"

He does exactly that, and he gets the privilege of giving Haas and Barrett their first real taste of real alcohol. Haas tries to get him to try something called "cranberry Svedka," and Ilya almost punches the cup out of his hand. Barrett takes to the real stuff like a Russian, while Haas spends a solid five minutes coughing his lungs out, with tears in his eyes.

"How can you drink this stuff?!" Haas exclaims. But ten minutes later he, Barrett, and another boy are in a circle, chugging more shots.

Bood has brought his wife, who is beautiful, and later when Ilya ends up somehow in the living room, he sees Bood, his wife, and Hollander dancing in one group together, in one big good-looking sandwich. Hollander's shirt has almost entirely unbuttoned itself throughout the course of the party, and with the low, pink lights effusing Ilya's apartment, Hollander actually looks unreal. So the only reasonable reaction is to walk over, grab Hollander by the wrist.

"Ilya!" Hollander shouts.

Ilya flushes, hot, almost in shock, when Hollander calls him by his first name.

The shock is quickly replaced with the most overpowering desire he's ever known, seeing Hollander stare up at him, with his shirt half open, smiling, with his name around his lips.

Hollander isn't sober. Neither is Ilya, sure. But he doesn't look drunk. In fact, he mostly just looks happy, dancing with his friends after winning such a big game. "Shane," Ilya tests.

Shane smiles, huge at him. He doesn't flinch, like that other time in Boston they also don't talk about. "Where have you been? I've been looking for you."

Ilya smiles back, "Have you now?"

"Everyone and their wife wants to dance with me!" he shouts over the music. Ilya can't blame them. Shane's so beautiful it hurts to look at him sometimes. "Everyone but you!"

"Well, I'm here now!" Ilya shouts back.

"Sorry guys!" Shane yells at Bood and his wife, "I gotta go!" They both wave him off, Bood's wife blowing him kisses as he does, and Shane happily pretends to catch them as he walks away with Ilya.

"So many guys on our team have wives!" Ilya shouts, as Shane pulls him over to the kitchen to get water. Two strangers he does not know are making out on his kitchen island. Ilya thinks the guy might be Wyatt's brother or something, "Is crazy because they are so ugly!"

"Not everyone can look like you!" Shane shouts, dutifully checking every cup on the island until he smiles when he sees one with his name, scrawled neatly on the side. He fills it with water from the sink and downs the entire thing in one gulp. Ilya watches his throat work, up and down, and looks up way too late, because Shane is now smiling, knowingly, at him.

"Yet I have no wife!" Ilya shouts, pitifully. Just to be annoying.

Shane grabs his wrist. "You still owe me a dance!" he yells, and yanks him toward the living room.

A low, bass-heavy number is playing through Ilya's stereo, and Shane drags him into the middle of the impromptu dance floor in Ilya's living room.

Shane whirls around, and he wraps his arms around Ilya's neck.

Ilya has tried very hard to understand Shane's rules. Kissing isn't okay. Touching seems to be very okay, as long as Ilya wins Shane a game. Or, alternatively, as long as Ilya's dad died.

Victory or comfort. Shane's definitely not comforting Ilya right now, with his arms looped lazily around his neck, thumbs stroking his neck, as synthpop thrums electric between the two of them.

Shane reaches up, brushes Ilya's curls, unfortunately sticky with beer, out of his face. He laughs a little at the feeling, wrinkling his nose, which makes the disco lights splashing in Ilya's apartment catch on the freckles dotting across Shane's face. As Shane's hand falls, retreating, Ilya catches it fast, and he holds it in place against his chest.

Shane blinks curiously up at him. He doesn't try to move his hand away, so he must know how hard Ilya's heart is beating. How beautiful he thinks he is. Everything he feels must be

right there on Ilya's face, because he has no idea where in him, this close to Shane, he can hide it.

He leans in.

Shane does not back away.

"IIIII PAAAAIIIDD MY DUESSS—"

"TIMMEEE AFTER TIMMEEE—"

Ilya would never dare call Freddie Mercury's voice ear-splitting, but there's no better word for how loud this infernal song bursts through his speakers.

"BUT COMMMITTED NOOO CRIMMEEEE—"

Ilya jumps away from Shane. "Hey!" Ilya shouts. Like a drunken siren call to any athlete, subject to the fickle whims of victory and loss, everyone in the room starts belting the Queen song at the top of their lungs.

"What did I fucking say about touching my fucking music?!"

"Sorry Rozanov!" Haas says.

"Sorry!" Barrett yells back, face flush, with another boy Ilya doesn't recognize hanging from his neck. Maybe he works for the press office? "I mean, I know it's corny, but we fucking gotta right?!"

"WEEEE AREEE THE CHAMPIONNNSS MY FRIIEENNDSSSS—"

If it were anyone but his rookies, Ilya would have them castrated for not only touching his music, but completely ruining the moment with him and Shane. But Shane is once again laughing his head off, and somewhere along the way he's spun away from Ilya and has found Dykstra, Wyatt, and their wives. They all have their arms looped together, and they are belting the lyrics to the song at the top of their lungs.

"WE'LLLLLL KEEEEEPP ON FIGHTIIINNNGGGG," Shane sings, particularly badly and particularly loud, "TILLLL THE ENDDDDD!!!"

Goddamn it. Ilya joins the circle in the middle. More of his teammates start to link arms, from Bood, to Wyatt, to Dykstra, to Barrett, to Haas, to even Dillon. They all gather together, and they all sing, prostrate to the altar of Queen's worst song.

"WEEEE ARRRREEEE THE CHAMPIOONNNSSS, WEEEE ARRRREEE THEE CHAMPPPIOONNNSSS.... OF THE WOOOORRLLLLDDDDDD!!!!!!"

People finally clear out at 4 am.

Well, everyone except Shane.

"Hey," he says, casual, "I drove here, and I drank. Mind if I stay over?"

"Yeah," Ilya says, equally casual.

They are completely alone in Ilya's house. Shane is just sitting on his couch, with beer drying in his shirt, and clumping in his hair. He twiddles his thumbs, looking idly around Ilya's living room.

"Did you buy all your wall decorations from Zellers?"

"I'm taking a shower."

"Oh. Okay." Shane blinks.

Ilya takes a very deep breath. He crosses his arms very casually over his chest, so that Shane knows he is offering this very, very casually.

"Do you want to come with me?"

Shane doesn't respond. For a very long time.

Ilya sighs. Whatever, it's fine. Ilya waves his hand back at Shane, hopes it communicates "sleep wherever you want, do whatever you want, just figure it out" and heads toward his shower.

Ilya steps into his very nice bathroom. It's his favorite part of the house, mostly because the idea of having a nice bathroom is insane. It's a bathroom, for crying out loud. It's such an insane idea that of course, Ilya must have the nicest one.

He flings his shirt off in disgust, as it, like Shane, is covered in beer. He's about to unbutton his jeans when his bathroom door opens.

Ilya stares, wordless, as Shane Hollander walks into the middle of his bathroom, chewing on his bottom lip. His arms are crossed over his chest, and he's staring very contemplatively at Ilya's topless body.

"Shane," Ilya swallows, needing to say something. "I—"

Shane walks forward, very slowly. He walks until he gets very close to Ilya, and when he does he very carefully puts his hands on Ilya's hips. Before Ilya can snark if they were going to slow dance or something, Shane squeezes his hips hard, eyes not leaving his when he does, and Ilya hisses, like he's being branded.

Shane walks Ilya until Ilya bumps into his bathroom wall. Ilya gasps a little when his head hits the tile, as Shane then leans in, and slowly trails his hand up Ilya's side.

His thumb brushes up against his nipple when he does, and Ilya moans.

"Shane, come on," Ilya says, voice hoarse. But then Shane's right hand winds up, up into Ilya's neck, and they comb through the hair behind his head.

And then he yanks.

"Fuck," Ilya mumbles. His head jerks up, so he's looking at Shane down his nose, and Shane just keeps watching him, as if under a spell.

"You did this to me, remember? That time we kissed?" Shane says, wondrously. "You pulled my hair."

Ilya swallows. With his head yanked up, the entire line of his throat is exposed to Shane. "Yeah," he mutters, "I remember."

"Fuck," Shane says to himself, and laughs. "Fuck. That was so hot."

Shane kisses him.

It's like a switch activates. The second Shane kisses him, it's like he's given Ilya permission to move. So Ilya immediately wraps one arm around Shane's waist, and grips one possessive hand under one of his strong fucking thighs, and he lifts Shane into the air.

Shane moans, desperately, into Ilya's mouth. Ilya smirks against his lips. So Shane Hollander likes being picked up, and thrown around. Shane grinds his crotch against Ilya's, and Ilya can feel his thighs clench around his waist when he does.

Fuck, Ilya needs to use his hands to take Shane's clothes off, but he's using both his hands to carry him. Of course, since Ilya is very smart, he decides that he wouldn't need to use his hands if he pins Shane to the wall with his body. So he turns them around and does exactly that, which forces Shane's thighs to close even tighter for purchase, rocking his crotch tighter against Ilya's hips.

Fuck, Ilya's so hard he can barely think.

He fumbles around Shane's ridiculous shirt, and he tries very hard because it's a nice shirt, but he fucks up and accidentally rips the last two buttons off, and they go pinging on the bathroom floor. "Come on," Shane says, breathily. He leans his head against the wall, and his cheeks are all red, the way they get when he's won a game. It's Ilya's favorite look in the world. "That's a nice shirt."

"I want to fuck you in the shower," Ilya says, bluntly. Shane whimpers, and buries his head into Ilya's shoulder when he says this.

"Just," Shane whispers, softly against his neck. Ilya barely hears him. "Be careful, okay?" he says. He lifts his head a little, so Ilya can look him in the eyes. There are so many nice things

to look at on Shane's face. His blush. His red lips, all bitten and used. His eyes, usually so closed-off and managed, looking overcome.

"I've... never done anything with a guy," he mumbles.

The confession splits Ilya apart. "I am the first?" he asks, delirious. Shane goes back to hiding his face, so Ilya grips his thigh tight, in warning. Shane yelps, whining against his skin.

"Look at me," Ilya says, hotly, "When I talk to you."

There's only Ilya in Shane's eyes when he looks up. His shirt is hanging off his body, there's an obvious bulge in his pants, and Ilya's the center of his universe. "Yes, you are," Shane whispers.

Ilya sets Shane down at this. Shane looks confused, eyes guarding up against Ilya at this, like he's wondering if he said something wrong. Instead, Ilya kisses him, pressing him up against the wall. While Shane moans happily into his mouth, hands wrapping tightly around Ilya's back, like he's trying to keep him there, Ilya unbuttons his jeans, kicks them away. Then he starts unbuttoning Shane's, but he can't resist palming him, hard, against the bulge forming in his pants.

"Fuck!" Shane yelps, his back arching desperately into the touch. Ilya smirks. Definitely his first time with a man. Ilya starts massaging the front of his crotch slowly, watching as Shane tips his head back helplessly in pleasure, and with the line of his neck exposed Ilya takes his time kissing the skin there, freckles fading in color that Ilya follows with his tongue until he gets to Shane's nipples. They are small and perky, like a girl's.

Ilya does what he has to do, which is wrap one tightly in his mouth, and suck.

Shane cries so loud Ilya's surprised the entire block doesn't hear them. Ilya sucks his nipples, rubbing the front of his crotch, still trapped in Shane's pants, and Ilya realizes that he wants to take his time to wring every last drop of pleasure from Shane he possibly can.

"Ilya," Shane begs, "I'm—fuck—really hard, you have to do something," he blushes even deeper, which Ilya didn't know was possible, "Or I'm going to..."

Ilya detaches himself from Shane's chest, and replaces his mouth with his fingers, thumb slowly circling and digging into Shane's perfect little nipples, "Going to what?" Ilya insists, to be an asshole.

"I'm serious," Shane pleads, "I'm... getting really close..."

Ilya stops, and Shane gasps in displeasure. He looks lost without Ilya making him feel good, and the expression makes Ilya so hard, he finally decides to take it easy on Shane and unbutton his pants, and even pull them down for him, because he's so nice. This motion puts him practically on his knees, in front of a completely naked Shane Hollander.

Shane's eyes widen, like he can't believe what he's seeing. Ilya Rozanov, on his knees for him.

Shane reaches out, almost hesitantly. He cups the side of Ilya's face, and Ilya turns obediently into the touch. He strokes Ilya's cheek, softly, almost maternal, which, inappropriately, makes Ilya's dick harden even more. Definitely no psychological issues there.

Then, Shane's thumb ghosts lightly against his lips, gently at first, then a little firmer. Then he slips his finger into Ilya's mouth, which Ilya takes without breaking eye contact with Shane once, swirling his tongue around Shane's thumb, and watching his eyes darken helplessly.

"You are so beautiful," Shane whispers, "it hurts to look at you sometimes."

Ilya stops, and for the first time, glances up at Shane, mouth full, sucking on Shane's thumb, wide-eyed and desperate. Shane seems to like this look on him, because he sticks another finger past Ilya's lips, stretching his mouth open.

It turns from Ilya, sucking Shane's fingers because he wants to give him a show, to Ilya, on his knees, sucking Shane's fingers because he wants Shane to fill him up, to fuck his mouth with his hands, and treat him like the prize Shane's looking at him like he is. He does this for a while before Shane then pulls his fingers out, a string of spit falling out of his mouth and onto the floor.

Ilya has an image to maintain, so he glares up at Shane, who just keeps looking at him with that wide-eyed pleasure, completely in a trance. He's not exactly in the position to be giving orders, considering he just sucked Shane Hollander's fingers while on his knees, but he does it anyway. "Get in the shower so I can fuck you."

Shane kicks his pants off, obediently. "Wait," Shane says. Ilya stands up.

"Where are your condoms?"

Ilya blinks.

"Not in the shower."

Shane points out the door. "Go get them," he orders. Brat.

Ilya tries not to look too put out. "What if I give you hand job in the shower? No condom needed."

Shane puts his hands on his hips. "Go get the condom or I'm not letting you fuck me, and I'm not going to suck your dick."

Ilya takes off for the bedroom like he's chasing a puck halfway down the ice.

He finds the condoms, grabs the lube too, because it's Shane's first time with a man after all. He tries to very casually enter the bathroom again, hopefully hiding the fact that he ran both ways. When he opens the door, Shane has started the shower, and—

Jesus. Fucking. Christ.

Shane has his back facing to him, and his left palm is pressed against the shower wall. It gives Ilya a front row seat to Shane's right-hand scissoring, two fingers deep, up his ass.

Opening his hole up for Ilya.

Ilya has to actually grab his dick and squeeze to stop himself from coming on the spot.

"I thought," Ilya says, barely able to get the words out. His English is starting to rapidly fail him, "I thought you have never been with a man before." Ilya thought he would have to slowly open him up, stretch him ready, but Shane obviously seems to have that covered.

Shane whines desperately, and reaches further in himself. He looks over his shoulder, and his eyes are wide and pleading. "I..." he swallows, "I..." he's blushing so hard, holy shit.

"After you kissed me," Shane gasps, "I... *fuck!* I would touch myself like this—*fuck*—every night, thinking about you."

Ilya marches over to the shower. He grabs Shane's wrist, stilling his movements, to Shane's displeasure. He pulls his hand out, so he can completely cover Shane's body with his own. Ilya keeps him pinned there, Shane's face pressed against the shower wall, as he leans in to whisper.

"You open yourself up?" Ilya mumbles. He grabs Shane's hard dick, and starts to jerk him off, rough. Shane moans helplessly, loudly, "You lie in your bed every night, fucking yourself on your fingers, wishing for the real thing?"

"Yes," Shane begs, "Yes."

Ilya curses, hard, in Russian. He's actually going insane.

"Ilya," Shane pleads, and his name shoots through Ilya like a hot bolt of pleasure. "Ilya if you don't stop I'm going to come—"

Ilya lets go of his dick, and Shane moans, empty. "You think two fingers is enough?" Ilya growls. His hands grip Shane's perfect butt, and he yanks, so Shane's bending over for him. "You think that is enough to open your hole for the real thing?"

"Ilya—" Shane whines again, blushing at his exposure.

Ilya reaches in, and shoves two fingers into his hole. Shane moans, overcome, and Ilya gets to watch his thighs tremble, struggling to hold him up. He fucks him with his fingers like that, rough, because maybe he doesn't have to be as gentle with Shane as he thought he did. He works him open, hooking his fingers, and then finds what he was looking for—

"Ilya!" Shane cries, "Fuck!"

Ilya looks over Shane's shoulder, and sees that his dick is twitching, leaking. Ilya doesn't have very long, but he also has all the time in the world.

Ilya gets to his knees, and finds he is face-first in Shane's ass. He leans in, gives it an experimental lick.

Shane jerks forward.

"What—" Shane asks, trembling, "What are you doing?"

Ilya smirks. "Never tried this one, hm?" And he leans in again.

And eats Shane Hollander's perfect ass.

Shane's screaming so loud that Ilya has to go deeper, wring all those noises out of him until he's completely spent. Shane is doing something a lot of girls do, when he eats them out—they try to close their legs, try to wriggle away from the pleasure—so Ilya grabs hard onto his hips, so Shane can't escape, so all he can feel is Ilya's tongue, opening him up.

"You—oh my god," Shane moans, "You have to stop, I can't—I'm so sensitive, I can't come like this—"

Ilya wants him opened wider, and wetter, so he keeps working him open, and Shane keeps falling apart on top of him, cute little whimpers falling intelligibly out of his mouth. He wishes he could stay here forever, especially since Shane says he can't come, so Ilya has all the time in the world to just spread him the way he wants him to, get him to exactly where he needs to be so Ilya can finally fuck all the tension out of him.

But when Shane shoots him a look at him, over his shoulder, Ilya's heart seizes.

Shane's crying.

Tears roll down his freckled cheeks, quickly being washed away from the spray of the shower head. They are perfect and still, as Shane looks back at Ilya in awe.

Ilya jumps up, as if shocked. His mouth is covered with his own spit and Shane's wetness, and his heart sinks, because maybe it was too much, and he should've been softer with him when—

"I'm okay," Shane gasps, "It feels really good."

"You are crying," Ilya accuses.

"It's just never felt this good before," Shane gasps.

Ilya kisses him.

Shane licks into his mouth hungrily, like he's trying to chase the taste of Ilya on his knees, spreading Shane's hole open with his mouth. Ilya flips him over, so Shane's face is pressed against the shower wall. He fits his hands, like they were made for him, over the divot of Shane's hips, lines himself up.

And he fucks him.

He goes gently at first, but Shane's so open that very quickly, Ilya can grip at Shane's neck, forcing his chin up so he can still face Ilya as he fucks into him, hard. His tight little hole clenches around Ilya's dick, and Shane's mouth is being forced open, as he pants loudly every time Ilya thrusts into him, harder and harder until Shane's practically bouncing into the shower wall. Ilya holds him close, holding him upright, as he fucks Shane's prostate until Shane's dick is leaking all over the shower, with Shane moaning louder and louder into his ear.

Ilya grabs Shane's dick, and he jerks him once, twice, and that's all it takes for Shane to come, screaming Ilya's name. He lies there, pliant, against the shower wall, as Ilya pounds into him deliriously, pounding into him until finally—

He comes so hard he almost blacks out.

Shane turns around, to kiss him messily, as he shakes apart. The two of them kiss lazily under the showerhead, letting the water wash over them.

They end up cleaning each other off. Ilya washes Shane's back, peppering kisses down the line of his spine. His mouth nears Shane's butt again and Shane snaps his fingers, in warning. "No way," Shane says, miffed, "I'm not superhuman."

Shane is. Superhuman that is. But Ilya grumbles to himself, and helps him shower off. Shane does the same to him, but this time he shampoos Ilya's hair, digging his fingers into his scalp, and Ilya has no choice but to lean his head against Shane's shoulder, hands wrapped around Shane's waist, as Shane massages the product out of his hair.

When Ilya looks back up at him, he can't even try to hide the emotion in his face.

Shane strokes his cheek gently in response, unbelievably fond when he does. Ilya's heart clenches like a vice in his chest. He tries to tell himself he's being delusional to think that Shane feels as much as Ilya does for him. But it's hard to believe, when Shane keeps touching him so sweetly, looking at him like he's been gifted to him for him to enjoy.

"We should go to sleep," Shane whispers.

So they towel off. Shane leans in, and kisses Ilya when he does, slow and exploratory. Ilya lets him, entirely helpless to the affections that Shane has been showering him with tonight.

By the time they get to the bedroom, the sun's already rising.

"Shit," Shane mumbles.

"Is Sunday," Ilya says, dismissively. "I will sleep until evening." But then he looks at Shane, and he gets scared, suddenly. Maybe Shane will say he's sober. That he's ready to drive home. That he has something to do.

Shane looks evasive, and Ilya feels himself close up, in preparation against the hurt. Ilya's used to casual sex. Maybe that's all Shane wants it to be. A way to let off a little steam after winning a game he's always wanted to win.

Another conquest.

Instead, the softness returns to Shane's face. He walks over to the window, rolls the blinds down. Ilya's heart pounds in excitement in his chest.

"Let's go to bed," Shane says. He looks really happy, and Ilya cannot believe he's put that look there.

Shane crawls under his covers, and Ilya tries to keep his distance at first, in case that's something Shane wants. But Shane immediately wraps him tight, pulling him in close to his chest.

Ilya buries his face there, letting Shane stroke his hair, humming quietly in Ilya's ear, as he drifts to sleep.

Ilya doesn't dream of his mom.

Instead, he dreams of him, and Shane, and they are in Moscow.

Moscow was a source of so much pain, so much sadness in Ilya's life, but with Shane by his side, the beauty he always knew the city had in it, from its bustling streets, its awesome buildings, its people, it all unveils themselves to him, as Ilya, in Russian, explains his entire life's story to Shane—everything that's happened to him, every hurt, every joy, that he experienced before he met him.

It's a beautiful dream. It lulls him into the best night's sleep he's had in weeks.

Shane wakes up four hours later, and he's shaking Ilya, insistently awake.

"Fuck off," Ilya mumbles in Russian, and rolls back over, enveloping Shane into stillness with a strong arm around his waist.

"I need to work out, and I need to eat breakfast," Shane insists. He's starting to wriggle, fighting out of Ilya's grip, like a particularly stubborn fish.

"Go back to sleep," Ilya growls. "I order you."

"I am hungry and I need to work out."

"Is rest day. Rest now."

Shane stills, and Ilya smiles in victory. He hugs Shane close to his chest, burying his head into his hair, which smells like his shampoo, and nudging his nose against the back of his neck. He starts to drift back to sleep, when he feels a sharp sensation against his ribs.

Laughter forces itself out of his lungs, as he realizes in horror Shane's tickling him. Shane's face twists in devious pleasure, as Ilya crumbles under his hands, shrieking against his will. With that, Shane's able to finally get the leverage he needs to push up and flip them over, so he's straddling Ilya, pinning Ilya's hands on either side of his head. His hair falls messily into his eyes, and his body looks particularly golden in the late morning light streaming in through the window.

Shane smiles at him. Ilya stares at him, with eyes hooded.

But then Shane's face falls.

"I..." Shane looks really sorry. "Ilya. I have to go."

No.

"You are hungry, yes?" Ilya says. He tries not to sound too desperate. "Let us eat something together. There is Tim Horton's nearby."

Shane looks sad. *This cannot be happening.* Ilya thinks. His chest is starting to cave in on itself, like Shane is going to leave and take all the happiness away from him, "I need a very specific diet in the morning." Shane says, regretfully. "Do you have a blender?"

Ilya frowns in confusion. One minute ago, he was cuddling with Shane, and now Shane's yelling about nonsensical North American contraptions at him after just four hours of sleep. "Blend, her?"

"Like, it's a machine that cuts stuff really small. It turns like vegetables into juice."

Ilya thinks he's going to barf. "Disgusting, the fuck?"

Shane tilts his head, frowning now too. "Well. It's a diet I need to follow to play at the level I play at."

Ilya thinks back to Harvey's, Shane not taking a single bite of anything he ordered for Ilya. He thinks about how he had let go of his concern so he didn't disturb the peace of the night. But he has no such qualms now. "You are weird about food?" Ilya accuses.

Shane rolls his eyes. "It's a diet set by a nutritionist. We aren't teenagers anymore, you know. If you want to maintain your body you need to treat it right."

Ilya's frustration with the situation deepens. "I play with athletes all my life. Nobody drinks vegetable juice."

Shane's hands tighten around Ilya's wrists in warning. Its meaning is very clearly communicated. *Back the fuck off.*

Instead, it makes Ilya kind of horny, and kind of angry. Shane's got his thighs straddled around his naked body, and he's holding him down and frowning disapprovingly at him. "I had sex with a ballerina once," Ilya says, because he needs Shane to stop bullshitting him. "She was weird about food too," he accuses, again.

"Fuck you," Shane snarls. Not only has Ilya crossed a line with the comment, Shane actually looks really upset at the reminder that Ilya has, once upon a time, slept with someone who wasn't him. Shane moves to get up. "I'm leaving."

Ilya quickly grabs Shane, hands wrapping around his hips, so he can hold him still. Shane must not be that mad, because he easily falls back into Ilya's grasp. "I do not have blender," Ilya says, "But I have vegetables. And egg."

Shane hmphs at him. He crosses his arms, looking miffed. "What vegetables specifically?"

"Broccoli," Ilya says, feeling like he's back in grade school, drilling English vocab for his language class's grocery unit. "Tomato. Carrot. Spinach. Peppers. Sprouts. Potatoes."

Shane thinks for a little bit. Ilya watches him literally put all the ingredients together into their own neat little mental box. "What oil do you use?" he asks.

"Cheap one."

Shane groans. "Whatever. Fine. Fine. No egg yolks though."

It's the best part of the egg, but Ilya doesn't say anything. He doesn't say something that will make Shane feel very bad, which is that some people in his country don't see the amount of food Shane has access to on a daily basis in their lifetime. Ilya doesn't say anything because it's not Shane's fault there are starving people in the world, but it still makes Ilya frustrated. He just lays there, stewing a little in his anger and worry, when Shane bites his lip, contemplatively.

Shane peels Ilya's hands off his hips. He pins them back to either side of Ilya's head on the bed.

"Thank you," Shane says, softly. "For... I know it's weird." Shane blushes, looks away. "It's not you. I want to eat breakfast with you."

Ilya blinks. Shane has started to grind down on Ilya's dick, and it's rising in interest. "Okay." Ilya says, dumbly. Shane's grip on his wrists tightens.

"You're always so nice to me," Shane says, sweetly. He's starting to flush now, from pleasure, as he slowly starts to rock against Ilya, breath panting softly between his cute little lips.

"You—fuck—love taking care of me..." he gasps, as Ilya's dick starts rubbing up the cleft of his ass.

"You love making me feel—so fucking good—" he moans, grinding his hips down on Ilya's lap.

Ilya flips Shane over.

They roll the condom on Ilya's dick, and then he pins Shane's head against the mattress, his ass pulled up in the air as Ilya fucks him. Ilya grips his hair, pulling on it so Shane's head is

forced up, his mouth forced open and tongue lolling out of his lips as he moans, desperate and loud, with every thrust Ilya shoves into him.

Ilya fucks him hard so he can hopefully feel it the next day, so he won't forget Ilya so easily. He fucks him so he can knock all those thoughts out of Shane's head, force Shane to give up all that control he feels like he needs to have over every aspect of his life—everything down to his food. This need to make Shane submit to him, to give everything he's ever worried about and let Ilya just fuck it out of him, it's overpowering.

Shane comes again, without Ilya needing to even touch him, as his dick is trapped between his body and the bed sheets. Ilya's prepared to fuck him like that until he's done, face down and using his hole like it's his fucktoy until he comes, but then Shane taps against his leg, so Ilya, even though he really, really doesn't want to, pulls out.

Then, Shane flips them over, so Ilya's flat on his back, and Shane's looming over him, straddling him again, face flushed in post-orgasmic bliss.

"I want to try this," Shane whispers, and Ilya has no choice, with someone so beautiful just towering over him, to just nod and agree.

Shane has one hand pinning Ilya's wrist down. The other one reaches behind him, and starts jerking Ilya's dick back to hardness. Ilya closes his eyes, as pleasure starts to crest through him again, when Shane stops.

"Hey," Shane says, teasing, "Look at me."

Ilya blearily opens his eyes.

Shane lifts onto his strong thighs. He has his hand still wrapped around Ilya's dick.

Ilya's eyes widen in disbelief when Shane lines himself up, and then sinks down.

"Holy. fucking. shit," Ilya curses, in Russian.

Shane's still smiling at him, "Look at me when I ride your dick, Rozanov."

Ilya's obsessed with Shane's thighs. How strong they felt when they were wrapped around him. How fast they shoot him down the ice, how steady they are when Shane levels check after check against players twice his size.

Now, like he's the luckiest man in the universe, Shane is working those thighs up, and down, using that textbook control he has over his body to squeeze and ride Ilya's dick. He even lovingly trails his free hand on Ilya's nipples, and starts rolling them in his hand, as Ilya tilts his head back, moaning desperately.

He's usually got pretty good stamina, but on top of getting to fuck Shane into the mattress, Shane is now riding him like it's an Olympic sport, and he's playing with Ilya's nipples, so he only gets to bounce on his dick a few more times before Ilya comes, for the second time in a twelve hour period, harder than he's ever had in his entire life.

Shane collapses next to him, looking quite pleased with himself. Ilya on the other hand can't string a single sentence together, in either Russian or English. Shane cuddles in sweetly against Ilya's chest, and he starts idly playing with Ilya's crucifix.

"You talk," Shane says, softly, "In your sleep. In Russian."

The last thing Ilya wants to do is answer any questions about what he thinks he said in his sleep, or the chain Shane's playing with around his neck, and Shane seems to sense it, when Ilya tenses against him, imperceptibly. So he doesn't say another word, just strokes lovingly at Ilya's chest, his nipples, his jaw.

Please don't leave me. I am so sad without you.

"Come on," Shane says, finally, when Ilya feels he's about to drift off into sleep again. "Let's eat breakfast."

Shane does eventually leave. Ilya lets him, mostly because they have practice the next day, and Shane says his body will collapse in on itself if he doesn't get his morning workout in. Except by the time he leaves it's more of a late afternoon workout.

Ilya knows he has a certain reputation that follows him. Sure, he likes sex, and he's had sex with a lot of people. But when it came to men, his only real experience was the times he fooled around with his coach's son, and the sex had always been angry, frustrated, and mean.

That was definitely not what happened with Shane. Ilya feels split open. He feels undone. He feels like if he can't see Shane his heart is going to disintegrate into his chest.

Shane might think he's this uncaring, experienced womanizer, but really, Ilya's just as confused as Shane is, especially when it comes to relationships. Ilya has no idea if their bedside tumble means they are what? Boyfriends now? The idea is so ridiculous that Ilya immediately dismisses it.

But the idea that their hookup was just a one-time thing fills Ilya with an unprecedented level of doom that he refuses to consider that option either.

At first, when they show up to practice, Shane treats him exactly the same—like he is his captain, and Ilya's his teammate. He doesn't seek Ilya out, and Ilya, unsure of how to proceed, doesn't push the issue. Ilya wonders, with his stomach sinking, that maybe a one-time thing was exactly what it was. Shane was excited they won, and he wanted to work off some of that extra energy by sleeping with him.

Ilya spends that week masturbating furiously, thinking about Shane, riding his dick in his bed, letting Ilya fuck him into the mattress. He thinks about eating Shane's ass in the shower, and

he comes, hard, confused and unsatisfied.

But then, they go to their next game. Shane sits next to him on the bus, and this time he rests his head against Ilya's chest. Ilya wonders if he can get away with jerking Shane off in the back of this bus, but Shane then falls asleep, snoring softly against Ilya's neck. It's such a sweet image that Ilya pets his head, gently, and stares out the window until they arrive.

They win that game, just as explosive of a victory as Montreal. And when Shane runs up to him, leaping into his arms, he leans in, and whispers, hot in his ear.

"What are you doing tonight?"

Just like that, they are back on. They crash through Ilya's hotel room, Shane's thighs still wrapped around his waist, as Ilya fucks him against the wall until he screams.

The pattern continues itself. They win the next game. This time Ilya approaches Shane, grabbing him by the waist and hissing in his ear to get up to his hotel room so he can fuck him, and Shane agrees obediently. That night, Ilya watches Shane work himself open, begging for Ilya's dick, putting on a show for an Ilya who's trying very hard not to come.

They win the game after that too. They fuck again. Shane gets to his knees, and sucks Ilya off. Ilya tries to be gentle at first, but when Shane insistently moans that he can handle more, Ilya facefucks Shane Hollander's perfect lips and virgin throat until he comes.

They win the next game, they fuck. They win another, they fuck again.

They haven't lost a single game since Montreal. Ilya is starting to get an unfortunate pavlovian response to the sound of the puck, hitting the net, the buzzer, ringing throughout the arena. Ilya can't even look at numbers anymore without getting hard, thinking about their scores, 10-2, 11-3, 7-1, 6-0, explosive and decisive wins that ends with Shane, helpless with desire, moaning in his hotel room.

They clear the Eastern conference, then their team starts traveling across North America to the west, and they beat those teams as well.

It's safe to say that Haas isn't just borrowing center position anymore. Ilya takes his place dutifully by Shane's right-wing every game, and he makes anyone who dares try to fuck Shane up really, really sorry, checking them into the ice as Shane hits puck after puck after puck into the goal.

Shane's closing in fast on his old Montreal record for most goals scored in a season.

The Centaurs are on fire—it's undeniable. As Ilya and Shane fuck across North America, the press, league, and the industry notice, to great fanfare. The Centaurs are on a legendary run, potentially record-breaking, as they barrel in, fast, on playoffs. Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, childhood rivals turned unstoppable duo, have not only saved The Centaurs from extinction, but have dragged a dead-end team into the spotlight.

Shane is smiling smugly to himself, naked in Ilya's hotel bed, watching the coverage on TV, when Ilya points to a billboard outside their window.

Ilya had seen the movie poster on one of his early morning walks. It looked like a film Svetlana would've enjoyed—cold, existential, and romantic. A blonde actress was dressed like a waitress, and she was staring longingly at an older adult man, with boxing gloves pouring out of his duffel bag, as he prepared to leave her restaurant.

Ilya had flipped through the newspaper to find the synopsis, only to find it left him with more questions than answers, intriguing him further. *A boxer, on the run from his past. A waitress, looking for the perfect escape.*

He thought about how often Svetlana put herself in danger, just for the off chance a country she wasn't familiar with might teach her something new.

He thought about how it had now been six months since he defected from the Soviet Union.

He thought about how he had accidentally called Chouinard the wrong name, the other day, in the middle of a game. Without even thinking, in an attempt to get his attention, Ilya yelled the name of his old defenseman, from back in the Red Army.

He thought about how, without even realizing it, he had gotten quite homesick.

"Do you want to watch a movie together?"

Shane doesn't even tear his eyes off the TV. He has hotel sheets wrapped loosely around his legs, and he keeps smiling to himself, as they play a montage of his best hits over the season over glowing commentary. "Um, depends," Shane says, distracted.

"The one right outside our room." Ilya says, getting a little irritated. Shane isn't paying attention to him.

Shane looks up from the TV, and turns around to look at what Ilya's talking about.

For a lack of better words, horror dawns on Shane's face.

He stares at the billboard, jaw working anxiously, lips parted in terror. His eyes zero in on the actress in particular.

Shane must think he's an idiot if he thinks Ilya believes the feigned nonchalance Shane meets him with, when he turns around.

"Nah," Shane says, quickly. "It's kinda girly."

"What's wrong?" Ilya snaps. He hates it when Shane tries to bullshit him. He hates it even worse when Shane tries to dismiss him. Both of those tendencies are his least attractive qualities.

"Nothing's wrong. I don't want to watch that movie," Shane says easily.

"You are transparent," Ilya snarls. "I saw your face. What is wrong with seeing a movie with me?"

Shane looks almost offended that Ilya's getting mad at him for this. "I—I just feel like— isn't that something boys and girls do?" Shane says, rushing to explain himself, "Like on dates? I don't know. It's just kind of girly. Like, Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, watching some romantic movie, alone," Shane laughs, half-heartedly, and Ilya's anger toward him is starting to build dangerously, threatening to overtake his common sense. "It's just kind of weird."

"You are right," Ilya snaps, "Is not a hotel room, so why would Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov be there together?"

Shane throws his hands up, "Oh come on."

"This is just sex to you," Ilya says. It's a statement he spits out, like a grenade, in between them. Shane's eyes widen, and they start darting wildly around the room, like maybe something on the floor will give him the right answer to diffuse this social situation he doesn't understand. "You do not want to be seen with me."

"Ilya," Shane begs. "I—"

"Good thing I am amazing player," Ilya snarls. *Why can't Shane just tell him the truth? Why is Shane lying to him? All he knows is how to keep things a secret, from Ilya, from himself, from his family,* "and I do not lose any games, otherwise you would not want to fuck me either."

This is starting to devolve very quickly. Shane jumps up, "Ilya, you know that's not true," he yells, eyes wild. "I—I—"

"You do not think I notice?" Ilya spits, "You only want to fuck me when we win, and you only want to fuck me in hotel rooms. So this must be another one of Shane Hollander's rules. No sex unless I am a winner. No kissing unless I am a winner. No touching unless my dad dies—"

"Come on, that's so unfair," Shane cries. "Okay, I'm sorry I don't want to watch the stupid, girly movie with you. We can pick something else. I don't know. There's a new Indiana Jones movie out, I think? Let's watch that together!"

"Indiana Jones came out months before the season started," Ilya snaps. Shane throws his hands up, as if Ilya is being the unreasonable one.

"You know what," Shane says, now seething. "I was trying to be nice, but I clearly need to spell this out for you. We are two, very high profile, male athletes, on the same team, no less. If this," he motions between them, derisively, like what they have is something dirty and embarrassing. This makes Ilya feel like he's been punched, hard, in the stomach, "gets out, our careers are over, do you understand? I have to start from scratch," Shane laughs, disbelieving, *again*, I might add. I may be good, but even I can't come back from the dead two times in a row. And you," Shane snarls, "You will lose everything, do you hear me? You will lose your contract with the team, you will lose your visa, and you—you—"

Tears are starting to bubble, dangerously in Shane's eyes. They only make Ilya angrier.

"You'll have to go back to Russia," Shane finishes, scared.

Fuck this guy. Ilya thinks. *He doesn't know what the fuck he's talking about.* "You let me worry about Russia," Ilya says, coldly. "You do not know jack shit about where I am from."

"Fuck you!" Shane shouts, and he grabs a pillow by their bed and launches it as hard as he can at Ilya's head, "Fine! You want to go watch your girly fucking movie, and get deported to fucking Russia, and never see me again, be my fucking guest! I don't give a shit!" he yells, "Do not take me down with you!" he spits.

Ilya dodges the pillow easily. He shrugs his hoodie on, grabs his cap, his sunglasses, and starts stalking out the door.

"Where are you going?!" Shane asks, shakily. He has their bedsheet, wrapped around his waist, and he looks upset, like he's realizing that Ilya is actually leaving.

"Get myself deported to Russia," Ilya snaps, just to be an asshole, "I hope guards let me write to you from Siberia!" Shane squeaks out a wounded sound behind him, before he recovers and volleys back something meaner.

"Great! I hope I never see you again!" Shane yells, because everything's always a contest with Shane. He always has to have the last word, the final say, and if you don't give it to him he will do everything in his power to finally get it.

Ilya wrenches the hotel door open, and slams it shut, behind him.

He doesn't watch the movie. He wanted to watch it with Shane, so it'll just make him sad if he watches it alone. Instead, he stalks to one of those fancy wine places that have a lot of women and not a lot of sports fans, and orders himself an entire bottle.

He's sitting by himself, in the back, morose, downing an expensive bottle of white wine without even using the glass. He has a smoke in his other hand, which makes it so everyone gives him a pretty wide berth, not wanting the sour stench of smoke to ruin their fancy little dinners of cheese and meats.

Everyone except one girl, apparently.

She has sunglasses on too, and she's chainsmoking harder than Ilya is. She's drinking a bottle of Merlot, also forgoing the glass.

Ilya looks over to her again. She's very beautiful. If Ilya didn't have his hands full with the most infuriating fucking hockey player sending him more mixed signals than a North American metro, he would've definitely tried to pick her up.

Instead, he sneaks another glance at her. Takes another glug of his white.

"Do you want an autograph, Ilya Rozanov?"

Ilya starts. He thought he was being discreet, but he's also smashed, so maybe not.

Ilya straightens up. "I choose this place because no one watches hockey here."

The woman laughs, and it's a twinkling, glamorous sound, even though she's making fun of him. "Women watch hockey, too, dude."

Ilya frowns. He doesn't like being accused of being a woman-hater. He loves women. "Not these women," Ilya says, "No."

She scoffs. "What? Wine women?"

Ilya raises his eyebrows at the Merlot she is also chugging from the bottle. "Are you not wine women?"

"I'm multidimensional. I'm a hockey fan and a wino," she says, and swirls her bottle mysteriously.

Ilya narrows his eyes. He looks at the woman again. Her glossy, strawberry blonde hair, falling in waves over her shoulder. He jabs an accusing finger. "You are familiar."

This just makes her laugh harder, "Okay, sure," she says. She still hasn't taken her sunglasses off, but he sees surprisingly strong eyebrows rise up over her designer lenses. "Where do you think you recognize me from?"

"I don't know," Ilya says. He narrows his eyes. "Did we have sex?"

Wine actually snorts out her nose, she laughs so hard. She starts coughing so hard that Ilya actually starts to get worried for her. He wordlessly offers her a cloth napkin. "Thank you," she says, smoothly, and then hacks up some purple-tinged spit into it, in full view of Ilya. Ilya's nose wrinkles in disgust.

"No," she says, "We did not have sex," she starts egging him on, "Come on man, I believe in you. You know where I'm from."

Ilya looks at her for another thirty seconds, before she sighs, and she lifts her sunglasses up.

Immediately, the pieces slot together.

"No way," Ilya says, absolutely baffled. "You are Rose Landry. You're on every billboard in North America."

She gives him a round of polite applause for guessing correctly. "This movie is my magnum opus. You better bring your friends to watch it," Rose says, taking another glug out of her wine bottle. "If this doesn't do well, I'm going to be back to doing action hero slop until I die."

"Is crazy," Ilya says, laughing to himself. "My uh..." he fishes around for the correct lie, "My girlfriend and I, we just had a huge fight, because of your movie."

The movie star's eyebrows rise. "Oh, really? What did it? The movie itself, or did she get jealous of how you looked at my body in a specific scene?"

Now it's Ilya's turn to laugh. "God no. I uh," Ilya frowns, "No. She just..." he trails off sadly, "really did not want to watch it with me."

The woman tsks, sympathetically. "The movie is very," she waves her hands around, "You know. Yearning. Forbidden love. Sometimes stuff like that is too real for couples to want to watch together."

Ilya has drunk half a bottle of white wine, and he's very sad because he fought with Shane. So Ilya decides to take the free pass to rant to this famous movie star.

"She is type of person who," he thinks for a second, how he wants to phrase what he's going to say, "She must understand everything she feels. If the emotion is not a feeling she understands, is not emotion worth feeling to her."

Whereas every emotion Ilya feels is one he doesn't understand. He and Hollander are really a match made in heaven.

"Do you know people like that?" Ilya asks.

"Yes," she says, and takes a long swig of her wine. She doesn't elaborate. Ilya looks at her, and he raises his bottle, as if asking her to cheer him. She smiles, and bops her bottle with his.

"You are also drinking like you got in a fight," Ilya smiles. "Boyfriend troubles?"

Rose laughs, ruefully. This woman laughs a lot. "Yeah. You could say that," she sighs, and drags a hand through her hair. "You ever fuck up so bad, you think it's going to haunt you for the rest of your life?"

Ilya shoots her a look, "You kill someone?"

The woman wiggles her eyebrows. "Don't tell."

Ilya snorts. The woman sighs, and stands up.

"Okay, I need to use the girl's room. Don't let anyone take my spot. I like it here. It's quiet and people leave me alone." She stands up, and saunters to the bathroom.

Ilya loses his conversation partner, so he spends the time he would've spent talking downing more of his wine. He's starting to get properly drunk, so much so that he thinks he's imagining Shane Hollander charging through the door.

Except, suddenly, he realizes he isn't.

Shane's panting, like he had been running for the past two hours. But when he walks over, he slides in next to Ilya, trying to play it cool. He also has a ridiculous get up of sunglasses and a windbreaker, pulled up to his face. Ilya turns to him, surprised, his stupid heart betraying him by singing like a thrush when he sees him, because he's still so mad at him.

But then Shane turns, fire in his eyes, and he reaches over and pinches Ilya as hard as he can on his bicep.

"What the fuck!" Ilya yelps.

"You asshole," Shane hisses, as loud as he can without attracting an audience. "Do you know how long I've been looking for you?"

"I thought you want me deported to Siberia," Ilya says, petulantly.

"I literally went down every store, bar, and restaurant, within a kilometer's radius of the hotel," Shane snaps, "Looking for where you went. You haven't been back for almost three hours," he pinches him again, angry, and Ilya flinches away. "I was worried about you, you dickhead."

Ilya shrugs, unrepentant. "Sorry."

Two things happen at once. Rose Landry comes back from the bathroom. She opens her mouth to thank Ilya for making sure no one took her seat, when she sees Shane, and her face goes white.

At the same time, Shane opens his mouth to probably yell at Ilya some more, maybe about how he's a horrible person even though Shane was the one who told him to go die in Siberia. Then, he also sees Rose, and his body startles in shock. He grabs Ilya's hand, and clenches tightly.

"Rose," Shane breathes.

"Shane," the movie star gasps. The jovial nonchalance she had with Ilya completely melts off her face.

The two of them stare at each other, wordlessly.

"Um," Ilya looks between the two of them. "Do you two know each other?"

"What," Shane says, ignoring him, voice rising in pitch, "The fuck, are you doing here?!"

Rose stares at Shane for a minute longer, before she takes the purse she has in her hand, and she stalks over to Shane, and hits him as hard as possible with it.

"OW! What the actual fuck?!"

"Me what the fuck?" she yells. She hits him again, for good measure, and Shane yelps indignantly. Ilya starts looking nervously around. The nation's biggest movie star along with two of the nation's biggest hockey players shouting at each other in a bar could easily lead to disaster. "You what the fuck! Why are you pissed at me?! I'm pissed at you!"

"What reason," Shane laughs, "would you have to be pissed at me?!"

"Oh! How about the fact you haven't tried to talk to me for over two years?! How about let's start there, you big fucking blockhead?!"

"Yeah?! When would I have called you?! When you were in Iceland? Making your big important movie?!"

"Holy shit!" she laughs incredulously, "Fuck you Shane Hollander. Fuck. you."

"Hey, what is going on—" Ilya tries to interrupt, but Shane whirls around at Ilya, and he jabs an accusatory finger at him, without even looking away from Rose.

"Also, why the fuck were you talking to him?!" he snaps. Ilya is about to open his mouth to be helpful, and explain their bond only goes as far as two chainsmokers making idle conversation in a fancy wine bar goes. But Rose immediately talks over him—the two of them have forgotten Ilya's there entirely.

"Oh please," Rose rolls her eyes. "You know he's not my type."

"I am everyone's type," Ilya mumbles, to himself, but Ilya's going ignored.

"Were you," Shane's eyes go wide behind his sunglasses. He looks back at Ilya, a little horrified. "Did you two know each other before this?!"

Rose's indignation and anger falls off her face at this. Instead, her eyes widen, and she actually lurches forward toward Shane, clasping her hands together, "No, Shane," she says, "Please, I—I actually swear to you it's nothing like that," she pleads, suddenly very desperate, like she's actually begging him to understand.

Ilya jabs a finger at the movie star, happy to be given the opportunity to explain himself, "I swear on my life," Ilya says solemnly, "I have never seen her before."

Shane laughs. His eyes are narrowed, like he's going to pick Ilya's liver clean. "Were you trying to pick her up?"

What the actual fuck is happening right now? "Dude, no," both Ilya and Rose say at the exact same time.

Ilya's had enough of this. Shane's accusing him of something he didn't do, people were starting to turn around, and the three of them had exactly five minutes before they put the pieces together on who they were. "Hey," Ilya interrupts, loudly. "Can someone please tell me," he says, loudly, "What the fuck is going on?!"

Shane lets go of Ilya's hand. He pinches the bridge of his nose. He lets out a loud, loud sigh.

"Ilya," he says, slowly, "This is my ex-girlfriend, Rose. Rose Landry."

Ilya falls silent, due to shock.

"Your..." Ilya's mouth flaps open, then closed, "your ex-girlfriend, is the biggest movie star in America?"

Chapter End Notes

i have a tumblr now! :) [come say hi](#)

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Hey all! Some programming notes:

So, I did update the chapter count. I was writing this beast and I realized I do actually need another chapter to wrap everything up. So six chapters it is! Six! the same number of episodes as that hockey show we all like.

Also, I updated the tags. Disordered eating will be discussed at length in this chapter. take care of yourselves!

Also also, I get a little creative with how the legal system works HAHA. This is my story and I make the rules.

I love you all :) hope you had a restful holiday!

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

Shane's not heartless. At the end of the day, of course, it wasn't Rose's fault.

Any normal girl would've broken up with him way earlier.

But they both agreed it was harmless. Shane just wanted the dating issue squared away so he could just focus on hockey. Rose said she needed to date a good boy, preferably one famous enough to broaden her marketability as a rising actress. So why not Shane?

Sure, it was a bit transactional, but if it worked for them, why couldn't they just date?

Rose came upon this genius proposal, the night she met Shane at the 1985 Met Gala.

Shane was seventeen, about to turn eighteen. He was the number one draft pick for the upcoming NHL season. His face was plastered on advertisements for big, sports brands. His half-naked body, hairless, the right amount of fit, was splayed across billboards in cities like New York and LA, as he lounged, careless and seductive, in an expensive underwear brand he would usually never wear. Even Americans, who usually didn't give a shit about Canadian hockey players, recognized him in the streets.

Rose also just had a terrific year. After spending most of her teen years slogging as a child actress, as her first year as a legal adult, she made waves, slamming blockbuster after blockbuster into the mainstream. Her strong eyebrows, her strawberry blonde hair, her daring eyes, immediately made her a bona fide sex symbol.

In any magazine, you could find Shane, lounging in his underwear, with a coy smile on what an agent once called an "exotic" face, and then Rose would follow a couple of pages after, biting her lip in lingerie with her finger hanging loosely out of her mouth.

Despite their explosive year, the two were the only ones, completely alone, without anyone to talk to, that night at the Met Gala.

Shane glanced at Rose, recognizing the actress from her lingerie ad. Rose glanced back at Shane, recognizing the hockey player from *his* lingerie ad.

The two, in their haste to greet each other, met, awkwardly, in the middle. Shane was tripping over his words, nerves of the night completely derailing his ability to speak, and Rose, overly talkative to compensate.

But when they finally calmed down, their polite small talk quickly devolved into mutual rant sessions, far away from any of the celebrities they were supposed to network with.

For both Rose and Shane, work was, slowly but surely, robbing them of their passion.

Yeah, hockey was work. It sucked to Shane that he had to come to an event like this, just because it was an honor he was invited. It sucked that everyone in the hockey world, especially his teammates, always thought he was a pansy after too, because of how much photographers liked him. *It's hockey, not a modeling shoot.*

"Dude," Rose had said, "Sports, Hollywood, it's all the same. Our industries run on jealousy, competition, and hate."

"I just wanted to play hockey," Shane had said, frustrated.

"Literally, I just wanted to act." Rose finished.

They had begged off the gala and started wandering the streets of New York. Rose told Shane every actress in that room hated her, which was why she was sitting alone. Shane told her about his teammates, who would always cut out centerfolds of Shane from his modeling shoots and paste them on his locker the next day.

She told him about how men in Hollywood fall under two camps. Creeps that will ruin your life, or dark horses who will never love you back.

Shane told her about the pressure he felt to pick up women, especially as a rising hockey star. How weirdly people—from his teammates, to the girls themselves—would look at him when he couldn't summon the correct amount of enthusiasm needed to take someone home.

"Wait." They had stopped at the front door of her hotel. Rose stood outside, and polished the bottle of champagne she stole from the gala. Shane had realized, standing there, waiting for her to finish, that he had felt none of the dread he usually did, when he walked a girl to her door. Rose had grabbed his hand, and Shane had let her drag him into her hotel room.

Her room looked like a mall exploded in it, so Shane had relaxed further—she definitely didn't seem like she was going to try to sleep with him.

Instead, the two of them had sat, cross-legged on her hotel bed, with Shane, feeling the tag of a Prada dress digging into his thigh.

After only knowing each other for only a night, they had come up with a proposal.

"People do it in our industry all the time," Rose had explained. She gave him a meaningful look that Shane did not understand, but she did not press the matter further, "A mutually beneficial partnership."

Shane blinked, slowly, working out the logistics of the plan in his head. "People leave me alone, people leave you alone. I get to say I'm dating you, you get to say you are dating me," Shane had said, slowly.

Rose was smiling at him like a madman, like the two of them were about to get away with something delightful.

"Genius, right?" she said, raising her eyebrows.

And even though Shane barely knew her, it felt like one of those nights where you meet someone, and you don't know why, but you feel like you could trust them right away.

Shane got drafted to Montreal later that month. At his first game, Rose was there, wearing his jersey, smiling big for the cameras, jumping up and down, squealing with girlish glee whenever he scored. The two of them kissed, showily, on the ice, when Montreal won, to the joy of sports photographers around them.

Then, Rose's first blockbuster of the year premiered—Shane patiently had let one of her stylists dress him in an Armani suit, with Rose incessantly giving suggestions.

They showed up, matching, on the red carpet, and the cameras went wild.

When Shane had Rose around him, he felt invincible. He felt...

He felt celebrated.

They spent almost two years like that. Running around the world together, and getting photographed doing it.

Rose was right. The guys on his team left him alone, because he was literally dating Rose fucking Landry. Rose got along with his teammates like a house on fire too. She knew all their inane pop culture references, she knew her shit when it came to hockey. She made talking to them so much easier, that Shane brought her to everything—games, extracurricular outings, team retreats. Shane just felt safe with her by his side.

And anytime Rose had to suffer through some arrogant director holding her hostage at a red carpet event, Shane would swan in, all smooth-talking, Canadian nice boy chivalry, and the creep would back away and pick on someone else. Rose then would decide they've suffered through the event for long enough, and the two of them would then steal a plate of hors d'oeuvres, along with a bottle of prosecco and run. They would run laughing down the streets

of New York, LA, Paris, and Milan, food in one hand, drink in the other, and climb up to Rose's hotel, everyone around them none the wiser.

The two of them, that year, had shot up the ladder to superstardom, with each other by their side.

It wasn't a traditional relationship by any means. But it worked perfectly for Shane. He never had this much fun with someone in his life. He never liked talking to anyone as much as he liked talking to Rose. The lovesick, power couple schtick was easy to hold up when Shane, the second after practice ended, would run to the nearest payphone and call her, when she was away on her shoots. He would bitch about anything and everything—his parents, his teammates, his plays, and how bad people were at following them. And in return Rose would complain about the stupid script she was stuck selling, and how bad the main lead was at acting. Then they would plan when and where they were meeting next—what city, what time, and what the two of them could get up to.

Shane was not ashamed to say that he could've stayed together with her forever, and not have realized a single thing was wrong.

Of course, problems started when Rose finally got cast in a movie she actually cared about.

Shane could tell something was different right away. Rose explained the premise to him, and taking cues from previous conversations, he had snorted, and said it sounded stupid.

The silence on the other end of the line was deafening.

It wasn't like he and Rose never fought. But it was about stuff like where to eat for dinner, or what to watch on TV.

It wasn't like this.

"Actually," Rose snapped. Shane winced, "The screenwriter based the main character on her estranged daughter."

"Sorry," Shane said, genuinely apologetic, "I—I don't watch a lot of movies, so I don't know what I'm talking about."

"Yeah," Rose said, and her voice was hard. "You don't."

"Well," Shane wanted to change the subject. "How are your coworkers? Co-stars? Hopefully better than the method actor who insisted on barrel rolling through every doorway for three months, right?"

This joke did not go over well either. Rose did not like that Shane reminded her of the ridiculousness of her past work, "Everyone is so talented," Rose said instead, still sounding guarded against Shane. "Shane, the director and the screenwriter are this like, Hollywood creative power couple, and watching them in action just... it's so amazing. They just complete each other, emotionally and intellectually, you know? She is the brains, and he is her eye."

Shane felt his stomach turn at how wistfully she talked about their relationship, but before he could dwell on the feeling, she plowed forward relentlessly.

"It's probably because he has such a badass wife that I'm actually working with a director who takes me seriously for once. He's so patient, but methodical, you know? He knows exactly what to do to get the best possible performance out of his actors. It makes you feel like," she sighs, happily. "It makes you feel like you are making something that matters, you know? Like you aren't just making entertainment."

Shane didn't really know what to say. He liked movies, sure. Indiana Jones was his favourite, in recent memory. But he never really understood why Rose always insisted that they had to be something more. It was the same way he knew, even though hockey felt like life-or-death with him, the sport would never be anything but entertainment for people like her—people in the stands. He felt like this line of thinking, that she strove, day-after-day, to make "art that mattered," made her more miserable than she needed to be.

"I'm glad you like the people you work with," Shane had said instead.

Rose hummed. "Yeah. I'm actually making preparations to go to Iceland in a few days."

Shane's eyebrows shot up, "Iceland?!" Wasn't this movie about an American waitress? Why the hell was she going to Iceland?

"Yeah, we're going to be there on and off for the next year or so," she said, casually, apropos of nothing.

"What?!" Shane jumped. "And you are just telling me now?!"

"Oh, relax," Rose said, starting to get annoyed. "It's not like I'm moving there."

"I—" Shane stopped. He wondered if Rose had considered the obvious. "I can't call you from Iceland."

"I've worked in Milan before," Rose said, "This isn't the first time we've had to talk to each other internationally."

"Yeah, but like, what is even in Iceland?!" Shane said, a little frantic. He realized, distantly, he was starting to panic. "Do they even have mail there?!"

"Don't be ignorant," Rose snapped, "They have everything you have in Canada."

"I..." Shane found himself at a loss. He couldn't help but feel like if this was a real relationship, she would've found it in herself to give him a bigger heads up. "Okay," Shane said, doubtfully. The prospect of spending a year not talking to Rose made his stomach sink with dread. "Are you nervous?"

She was absolutely not nervous. She was so excited. She had never been to Iceland. She told him a story about how one time, her mom took her to the same Goodwill they went to everyday on Lexington Ave, and she saw a calendar there once that just had photo after photo

of Icelandic landscapes. She said she hoped the country looked as beautiful as it did on that calendar.

"We are shooting the best scenes in the movie there too," Rose said, happily, "I can't believe an independent movie like this was able to swing the budget to film on location. No more janky LA sets."

"Yeah," Shane said, feeling very far away from his body. "No more LA."

So Rose went to Iceland. She had promised him nothing on the phone, but even then, Rose managed to deliver less than Shane expected. Rose was in Iceland for almost an entire year, and during that time, Shane hadn't heard from her, once.

So Shane went from having someone entirely in his corner, to someone he never saw.

Shane's sudden obsession with food flared up very soon after.

He wasn't stupid. He knew there were horror stories. Rose would regale him sometimes with tales of actresses who passed out in the middle of filming because they were too busy doing the old "chew and spit," Rose said, laughing derisively.

So it definitely wasn't anything like that. Shane would never do anything to hurt the health of his body.

It was just suddenly, food had to be a very, very specific way, or else Shane couldn't even bring himself to eat it.

It started with Shane, about to eat an egg salad sandwich, when he suddenly became very aware of how chalky the yolks tasted, how dense the mayo felt in his mouth. How he couldn't even bring himself to swallow it, even though he hadn't eaten since breakfast.

It continued with a health and dieting book he found lying around in his parents house. On TV they were always hocking some diet that Shane never paid attention to, because he didn't want to be thin. He was bored, and he saw the book shoved underneath the leg of a loveseat, like his mom realized the book was just the perfect height to re-level the mismatched chair. Shane yanked it out, rocking the uneven loveseat back and forth, and started reading.

This book was different because it was teaching him how to be healthy, not how to be thin. It told him that food today came from impure origins, so if he wanted to protect his body from hidden evil, he had to be vigilant and know exactly where and how his food was made.

It also taught him how, like hockey, food had statistics. There were ideal numbers, categories, and percentages food had to meet in order to optimize the body's health, strength, and fitness.

From there, Shane was proud to say that he had gotten on the blender trend way earlier than most fad diets that had popped up in the late 80s. Blending his food just felt like the most efficient way to get what he needed. If he wasn't eating for taste anyway, he might as well just cut everything up, and drink it all down in one gulp. That way he wouldn't have to worry

about oil, or seasoning. He bought protein powder he saw in a commercial, and started dumping it into his smoothies too.

So fine. Rose was busy. They were never in a real relationship anyway, so it wasn't like Shane had any right to be upset. Besides, she was getting everything she ever wanted. She got to work on a movie she actually believed in. Some actresses did not accomplish a dream like that their entire careers. So how could Shane be anything but happy and proud for her?

Shane had things to be proud of too.

He was eating well, and he was on fire this season.

Everyone insisted it was a fluke that a rookie was able to lead a team like the Montreal Voyageurs to winning their first cup in fifteen years. But Shane was on track to do the exact same thing again. With no one else to distract him, discipline and victory ruled every aspect of his life.

Four months later, he and his teammates had been piling out of practice, shivering in the cold, when Shane saw Rose, in an unbearably stylish wool coat, designer sunglasses, and alternative-looking platform boots, leaning against a white limousine parked outside his practice area.

Press, dutifully kept out of the lot by an army of scary-looking security guards, circled the nearby perimeter like sharks.

"Hollander," she called out. "Your ride has arrived!"

"Damn Landry!" J.J. called out, "That for all of us?"

"Think you can swing by my kid's preschool with that thing?" Hayden, next to him, yelled.

Rose laughed, "Sorry boys. Hollander and I have an appointment," she gestured to the surrounding press, "Don't worry, these guys will all come with me when we leave."

Shane had climbed in, to loud *oooh's!* and mimed, cracking sounds of a whip as he went. Of course, he had to join her. It was Rose, and she was back, and they were also ten seconds away from being hounded by the press. His teammates hooted and hollered as Shane pulled away, and he watched them shrink, and shrink, until they disappeared into the distance.

"Okay," she was talking excitedly, while Shane stared out the limousine window, "So I was thinking, you don't need to change out of your gym clothes necessarily, but I've told my driver to go to this really nice French place—well," Rose laughed again, "Another really nice French place that opened up in Montreal—the director said the chef was like, this Michelin-starred crazy person who—"

"I'm mad at you," Shane said, plainly.

Rose stopped. Shane stared resolutely out the limousine window, not meeting her eye.

"I know," Rose said, softly. She paused, searching for words. "I'm sorry," she continued, "About how I handled things before I left."

Shane bit his tongue, trying not to feel too ambushed. "It's okay," Shane said, even though it wasn't. "I'm sorry I called the movie stupid. I know you were just excited. You worked really hard to be on something like this."

Shane laughed ruefully now, and when he looked over at Rose he saw that all the movie star charisma had melted right off her face. It just left her looking very earnest, and serious, which made Shane's heart hurt. He missed when they were just allowed to have fun together, "Plus," he said, "You know," he gestured vaguely at the partition between them and the driver, "You are within your rights. According to our agreement. I'm not..." Shane found he could barely get the words out, "you know. Anyone real."

Rose stayed quiet for a really long time. Shane returned to staring out the window, deciding not to say another word.

"You know you are my best friend, right Shane?" Rose babbled, like it was something she wanted to get off her chest. "I care about you so much. I care about you more than anyone I know."

Huh. That was interesting. Shane had considered Hayden his best friend, even though he told him nothing about his life, and didn't really have anything in common with him other than hockey. This statement had confused him, and even worse, when Rose said it, she sounded like she was on the verge of tears.

"I don't want to go to this fancy restaurant in my gym clothes," Shane announced, suddenly desperate to bring the mood up, "We should take this ridiculous car you picked me up in and go shopping."

Immediately, her face brightened up, "Really?!" Rose squealed.

That afternoon, Shane showed Rose the best of luxury shopping they had available in the great city of Montreal. They tore down Rue Sainte-Catherine, trying on clothes with a sense of ridiculousness that did not translate to any sense of practicality. Rose and Shane tumbled into a very serious suit shop, with Shane insisting that Rose order her measurements for a three-piece, fully fitted Versace suit. The tailor tried not to have an aneurysm as Shane shouted increasingly ridiculous colors the suit should be—monochrome silver, lavender purple, neon yellow. They settled on lime green, and Rose shrieked with laughter at the swatch when she was presented with it.

They still needed clothes for dinner, so Rose found a floor-length gown that looked garish on the rack, but outrageously stylish on her. Rose picked up a nice pair of straight-legged pants that flared a little at the bottom for Shane, along with a nice pair of silk, button-down shirts he really liked the texture of.

They had turned up to dinner with a crowd of press already outside. Shane held his arm out for her, and linking hands two of them ran, laughing the entire way, up the steps, through the doorway, and crashed straight into the very quiet, intimate, date night spot.

Rose had hushed him, insistently, as all the patrons turned to look at them when they burst in through the front door shrieking with laughter.

The host ended up showing them to their table, a small, private affair in the back. They did not listen to Shane when he asked them to put the dressing on the side of his salad, but he's in such a good mood that he decided to let the mistake go, and ate around what he could. The salmon was divine.

"Come on," Shane had said, after they wrapped up dinner. They were waiting on dessert, which Shane was not going to eat, but was happy for the excuse it offered to keep talking to Rose. "I actually want to know how the movie is going. Was Iceland everything you ever dreamed of?"

A wistful expression crossed her face. "It's so beautiful, we have to go together someday," Shane brightened at this idea, brightened that Rose thought about him at all when she was there. "Shane, if this movie doesn't do well," she trails off, looking heartbroken, "I'll be very, very sad."

The movie absolutely did not look like his cup of tea, at all, but Shane held his tongue. "It'll do so well," Shane said, confidently, "Everyone believes in it so much. Didn't you say the director was some like, Oscar winner for something too? He's made good stuff before. He'll make good stuff again."

Rose's face fell at the mention of the director. Shane tilted his head, concerned.

"Hey," Shane said, "Is everything okay?"

Rose sighed. She put her napkin on the table, "Shane," she looked away from him, at something on the floor, "Can we talk? In my hotel room? After this?"

So we can get some privacy.

Shane had nodded, but he spent the rest of that dinner, feeling extremely out of his body. What did Rose have to talk to him about? There was one option that was outrageously obvious—she was going to break up with him. Option two was that something might've happened in Iceland, something bad, which also worried Shane so severely, it also sent his stomach in knots.

Either way, he really, really did not want to go up with her to her hotel.

Rose had valiantly tried to keep making conversation, but Shane was not having it. He drifted off into one word answers, as his brain started to torture him with possibilities in terms of what Rose could want to bring up with him.

Rose paid for the bill without even looking at it. The two of them head back to her hotel.

She had sat at the edge of her bed. Shane stayed standing.

"Shane, these past two years—" she started.

"You are breaking up with me," Shane said, flatly.

Tears immediately sprang to her eyes. "Shane," she begged, "Please understand—"

"It's okay," Shane said, emotionless, "It wasn't a real relationship anyway."

"Of course it was a real relationship," Rose insisted. Tears rolled down her face. "I love you so much, you have no idea—"

"It's okay," Shane said again, just to say it, "I get it. Just have your PR talk to Farah and we can get a statement—"

"Shane, can you sit down, or something?" Rose pleaded, "And just hear me out?"

Shane suddenly couldn't stand how hysterical Rose was being about this. "You promised me," Shane snarled, suddenly. "You promised me this was enough. I was so," Shane laughed, humorously, "So, childish for thinking that this would be enough for *anyone*—"

"I'm seeing the director!" Rose shouted, loud in her confession.

The room fell silent.

Shane's corresponding anger felt so wild, so out of his body, that it flared up, intense and cold, all over his face. "Rose," Shane said, carefully, "The director is married."

Rose hiccuped, loud, and then she met Shane's eyes, not backing down from his rage. "I know."

"Does his wife know?" Shane said. His voice is coiled, controlled.

Rose did not say anything for a really long time. Her fists were clenched, tight, in her lap, as she yanked her head back down, staring at her feet. Shane raised his eyebrows, laughing in disbelief. He was about to accuse her of something, he didn't know what, when Rose let out a pained sound, burying her face in her hands.

She stayed like that for a while. When she sat up, she ran a hand through her blonde hair that never showed roots growing in. When she met Shane's eye again, her face was calm, and collected.

"The screenwriter knows, because I'm seeing her too."

The revelation went off with the subtlety of a grenade, in the middle of Rose's hotel room.

Shane stared at her, shocked into silence. He stared at her like she had suddenly sprouted wings. He stared at her like she was a stranger.

He stared at her like he couldn't even recognize her.

"What..." Shane said, his voice trembling. He felt like he was going to fly out of control.

"What are you saying?"

"His wife knows," Rose said, evenly, "Because I am seeing her too."

Shane let the confession fall like an anvil in the middle of the room. The hotel is quiet, so quiet that Shane could hear the sound of cars honking in the distance. He stood like that for a while, just staring at her in shock.

Then, Shane grabbed his jacket. He shrugged it on, and started toward the doorway.

"Shane!" Rose yelled. She ran and grabbed his wrist with all her strength, so he couldn't leave. Shane resolutely stared at the door, not meeting her eye, "Please understand. They make me," Rose sniffed, trying to wipe away tears without letting go of Shane's wrist. "They make me feel so special. They make me feel like I am a part of something—"

"Are you gay?" Shane snapped. His brain latched onto that, hard and stubborn, like a vice.

"Yes," Rose answered instantly. Shane had sworn under his breath and yanked, hard, on his wrist again, to free himself. Rose almost fell over with the force, which at least brought Shane a little bit back to himself, when Rose had to catch the wall to steady herself.

"I don't know who you are," Shane said, resolutely. "Iceland changed you. I wish you never left."

"Shane," Rose cried, "I'm still me. Please, I'm still me. I'm sorry I left, I'm sorry I never told you, I'm sorry I never said anything, but they just, they make me feel..." she looked up at Shane, with the saddest eyes Shane had ever seen.

"More than you've ever felt with me," Shane finished, flatly.

Rose's eyes had broken free with fresh tears. "Please understand, I have to do this. I can't..." Rose trailed off, "I can't..."

Horror and realization had crossed over her face like twin flames, "I can't keep doing this anymore."

Shane's heart broke again for the second time that night. "Wouldn't it make more sense for us to pretend to date anyway?" Shane snarled. "I don't know why we have to stop what we have so, you can what, be with these people?!"

"It's more complicated than that, Shane, come on—"

"There is no way," Shane said, smile cruel, "these two want it getting out anyway that they are a married couple, sleeping with their twenty-year-old actress—"

As if frustrated by his anger, frustrated by his lack of understanding, Rose stood up to her full height. She wiped her tears with the back of her hand, and when she looked up, her tears had finally stopped flowing. Instead, all that was left was indignant rage.

"You cannot be okay with this either," Rose spat.

Shane shrugged, "It worked perfectly fine for me. Maybe if it worked for you, your life would be less of a disaster." Shane said—calm, mean, and cruel.

Rose had reeled back, like she had been slapped. "Shane, it shouldn't work for you either," she said, slowly, "because you're gay."

Shane, the brain, felt like he had been punched in the stomach when she said this, but Shane, the person, barely showed any emotion when Rose lobbed this statement between the two of them like the obvious attack it was. "I'm leaving," Shane said, flatly.

"You're gay Shane," Rose said, voice hard. "I'm sorry you either don't see it or are choosing not to. But you are gay, and you need to accept your reality or find a new 'girlfriend,'" she snarled, liberally using airquotes around the word. "Either way, I'm not going to let you lie to yourself anymore."

Shane's temper, which had been building steadily like a tea kettle, had suddenly exploded. "Don't project your disaster of a love life on me," Shane yelled, finally, "I'm normal, and I'm sorry you are not! I'm sorry you don't see how fucked up it is that this director and this writer are sleeping with you, and I'm sorry you can't see how clearly they are taking advantage of you."

"Get out," Rose ordered.

"Yeah, don't worry," Shane snarled. "I'm leaving."

He slammed the hotel door and left.

Ilya is not happy that Rose is coming back with them to the hotel.

"Come on," Shane says, "I just want a quiet place where I can catch up with her without anyone listening."

Ilya grumbles something in Russian in protest, but his survival instincts as a public figure let it lie. So the three of them, all wearing various sunglasses and hoodies over their faces, scoot over to the hotel, incredulously undetected.

Shane takes them through the back exit, where he knew there wouldn't be press waiting. Rose really didn't need paparazzi photos of her going up to a hotel with her ex and his attractive Russian teammate. He wordlessly takes them up to his room, considering it has been completely unused for the past day, whereas Ilya's probably still reeks of victory-induced marathon sex.

When they enter the room, Shane notices that Ilya keeps staring between Rose and Shane with obvious panic in his eyes, like something is failing to compute in his brain.

"Rose," Shane says. He shoots her a meaningful look. "Do you mind giving us some privacy?"

"Oh yeah," Rose says, nodding seriously, "Sure thing, boss. I'll just go to the bathroom for the second time in twenty minutes."

"Do that and don't eavesdrop," Shane orders. "I'm serious!"

"I'm going to go into this bathroom and listen to True Blue on my Walkman until you guys say it's okay for me to come out," she says. "What a charmed life I live!"

With a showy wave, she disappears, and shuts the door behind her.

Ilya whirls on Shane immediately. "I need notice for threesomes," he says, seriously.

"Oh ew!" Shane reacts. He physically recoils at the idea of Rose and Ilya kissing. In fact, he has a very strong opinion at the idea of anyone, other than him, kissing Ilya, "Gross! That's not what we are doing, at all." Shane pauses, narrowing his eyes suspiciously at Ilya, "Unless that's something you want?"

"How many times do I need to say, I do not want to have sex with your ex-girlfriend," Ilya says, tiredly.

"Good, because that's not happening," Shane huffs, "like, ever."

But now Ilya tilts his head at Shane, measuring him. "Do you still want to fuck her?"

Shane laughs, "Gross, no."

Ilya doesn't laugh with him. He doesn't seem to think the question he asked was supposed to be funny. "Do you still love her?"

"What? Yeah, of course I do." It's Rose for christ sake.

Ilya looks slapped, and then confused, and is getting visibly frustrated that he is confused, "Do you still want to be with her?" he asks, softer.

Something clicks in Shane's brain. Shane promises he's not trying to be overly dense, as he knows he has his ex-girlfriend in a hotel bathroom listening to Madonna, while he tries to explain the situation to his... person he has sex with in the other room. Under normal circumstances, with normal people, this realization would've made itself pretty obvious within the first couple of seconds.

Instead, Shane jumps and points at Ilya. He's smiling a little too, because he can't help it. "You're jealous," he says, pleased.

Oh my god, is Ilya blushing? Shane is beside himself with glee. Ilya bites his lip, tries to collect himself. He tilts his chin up, indignantly. "I am," Ilya confirms, face still red.

Hm. Shane really likes the look on Ilya's face right now. He should blush more often. Preferably, when he's on his back, with Shane on top of him. The red-cheeked, wide-eyed expression, visibly overwhelmed by how much he wants Shane—Shane wants to bottle it up and keep it to himself forever.

Instead, Shane walks over to him. He reaches up to cup Ilya's face, thumb tracing gently against his cheek. Shane loves the way Ilya acts when he's like this—Ilya turns his face obediently into Shane's touch, looking up at him through long, hooded lashes, like he's begging to be taken care of.

"You have nothing to be jealous of, okay?" Shane whispers. He keeps stroking Ilya's cheek, and Ilya turns his face into Shane's palm and places a small kiss there.

Shane blushes, happily. He could stay here for hours, but his ex-girlfriend is still locked in his bathroom, and he needs to deal with that. So he lets go of Ilya and follows the action with a loud sigh.

"Also, uh," Shane blows a raspberry, trying to think about how he wants to go about explaining this, "She was my girlfriend, but it... it wasn't... it wasn't like that."

"Like what?" Ilya asks. His eyes are still hooded. He looks like he is still savoring Shane's touch, even as Shane has let go.

"Like..." Shane thinks, "Like I just liked being with her. All the stuff we got up to together, it was way more interesting to me than like... having sex with her, you know what I mean?"

Ilya narrows his eyes. "Like a..." he says something in Russian. Shane frowns. "Does not matter," Ilya says, waving his hand. Shane's frown deepens. He knows it's not fair, and is probably kind of annoying, but sometimes Shane wishes Ilya would take the time to explain some of the stuff he said in Russian, instead of just assuming that Shane wouldn't want to know. "So did you fuck her? At all?"

Shane flushes. He looks at the floor, a little embarrassed. "No," he admits.

When Shane looks up, Ilya's face has broken into a smile. "What?!" Shane demands.

"Nothing," Ilya says, still very amused.

"Wipe that look off your face," Shane huffs. "I just didn't want to, okay?!"

"Marriage of convenience," Ilya offers. He looks like he wants to press further, but Shane waves his hand dismissively.

"Yeah, sure, if you want to call it that, that's what it is. Anyway, no more talk about my sex life. The point is you don't have anything to be jealous about."

"Does she know?" Ilya asks. He looks a little more serious, letting the smile fall off his face, "About you?"

Shane, for once, doesn't try to pretend to be stupid, "She does," he says. Shane realizes, with a sudden lightness in his chest, that this was the first time he even admitted it to himself. That Rose knew all along. Shane feels very shy when he looks up at Ilya, with wide eyes, and asks, "Do you..." he trails off, trying to find what he wants to ask, "Do you care if she knows about you too?"

Ilya's eyes soften, "You want her to know about me?" he asks.

Shane scratches his head, "Look, if you don't, I totally get it. You can like, go back to your room, and I can talk to her by myself. But like, other than you, she is like the only person that really knows, and she was," Shane corrects himself, "Is still a very important person to me, so..."

"I would not mind," Ilya says, softly.

Shane smiles so hard he feels like his face is going to split in half. "Okay great," Shane says, happily. "Well, we should probably let her out of the bathroom now."

"Hm," Ilya sniffs. "Fine."

"Rose!" Shane shouts. He doesn't hear any movement, which actually does confirm for him that Rose hadn't been eavesdropping. He walks over, and bangs on the bathroom door, hard. "Rose!"

The problem now is that she isn't responding. Shane knocks one more time, presses his ear to the door, before he opens the door, somewhat in a panic—

To see Rose, Walkman in one hand, headphone wires swinging, as she dances wildly.

She looks completely consumed by the music, blaring so loud that Shane can hear Madonna crackle through her headphones. Her strawberry blonde hair flies around her, loose, carefree.

Shane has missed her so much.

This was the story of how the worst trade in NHL history went down.

Rose and Shane had stopped talking to each other entirely after their fight that day.

Shane didn't care. He didn't need Rose.

He had just won his second Stanley Cup. But he knew something was wrong when he tried to carry the thing, and all he saw were black spots swimming in his vision.

Shane needed it on the record. Repeated, italicized, and underlined. Shane didn't have a problem. Shane would never do anything to purposefully endanger his body.

It was just the stress of the playoffs. The stress of Rose, shutting the door in his face.

And then, the final nail in the coffin:

The paparazzi photos of Rose and the director.

They had come out an hour before the game. J.J. had been the one to show him.

"Is this real?" J.J. had asked, genuinely concerned. He showed Shane photos on the front cover of a tabloid magazine, which showed Rose and the esteemed director kissing in the backseat of his car.

Shane's stomach had sunk. Even if he was no longer Rose's boyfriend, or friend, or whatever he was to Rose, he couldn't help but think: *oh no*.

Poor Rose.

"I—" Shane's face had blanched, and it was a dead enough giveaway that J.J. shook his head, angrily.

"Fuck her, man," he spat.

"I'm sure it's a misunderstanding," Shane said, finally finding his voice.

"The photos look pretty clear to me," J.J. said, disapprovingly.

"Let's just win this cup, alright?" Shane said, with some attempt at captainly cheer. Shane realized he was hungry, but he didn't have time to eat anything.

It didn't matter anyway. He'd stopped tasting food for months now.

He stepped out onto the ice. The roar from the crowd was thunderous. A stadium of twenty thousand people, screaming his name.

The party afterward was loud and raucous. Shane was pounding shots back. He usually never drank, but fuck it! He just won his second Stanley Cup! This was everything he ever dreamed of, right?

Except, of course, it's everything he dreamed of, as of today. Then, he had to get his third Stanley Cup. Then his fourth, then his fifth—

His head was starting to swirl. He hadn't eaten enough, and he was drinking too much.

"Those fucking pictures huh?" Drapeau snarled in French. "Can't believe the bitch would do that to you."

"Don't call her that," Shane had slurred in what he hoped was the same language. Fuck. He needed water. Why don't his teammates ever shut the fuck up?

"Come on," J.J. said, also in French to his right. "Drapeau's got a point. We all liked her. It's fucked up of her to do that to one of our own."

"It doesn't matter," Shane insisted. He tried to see through the fog of the nightclub. Among the writhing bodies and neon lights, he couldn't see further than a couple meters out ahead of him. "I told you it doesn't matter."

"Hey," Comeau turned. His eyes narrowed at Shane, "Why are you so chill about this?"

Shane froze. Was he being too chill? He felt like he was behaving appropriately devastated for a breakup. "You guys need to stop talking about my girlfriend. You don't know anything about her."

"Guys," Hayden interjected from the side. "Maybe let's just let the kid figure it out on his own huh? You know how paparazzi are sometimes."

"Seems like Hollander knows it the most," his teammate, Stedlund, snorted. "His shit is always in the news."

Shane, against his better judgment, did another shot. He actually felt the whole room fall sideways, which was not good. But he had felt a lot braver saying what he said next.

Shane jolted back upright. "What the fuck do you mean by that Steddy?" he spat.

"I mean," Stedlund narrowed his eyes. "You always have to be the center of attention."

"Hey," Hayden said, getting defensive on Shane's behalf. "Steddy, back off."

"No," Stedlund pushed, "I'm being fucking serious. You are all people talk about in the hockey world, and now you are all people talk about in the real world," he flashed a horrible smile, "Can't stop hearing about you on the ice, can't stop hearing about you when I try to watch a damn movie now too. Guys like you Hollander, always stirring something up, making people look at him, you wonder what he's distracting you from instead, if you catch my drift."

Out of everyone it could possibly be, Shane didn't expect to hear a twelve-year-old Rozanov, of all people, in his head right now, forcing him to act.

You need to hit someone.

Shane punched Stedlund hard. He went down easily. He was wasted. That should've been it. Except Shane then got on his knees, pinned him down, and started wailing on him.

Suddenly, Shane could actually hear it—Helsinki Hellhole. The cold, the darkness. The screaming. He kept hitting him, and he didn't stop until J.J. and Hayden had pulled him off, horrified.

Stedlund's face was fucked up. He was moaning in pain. Shane stood up, shakily, even as the club warped around him.

J.J. and Hayden were yelling, but Shane couldn't hear any of it. His ears were ringing too loud with what he had to say next.

He thought about the fluttering in his stomach, the first time he ever saw a hockey player skate out onto the ice. He thought about how happy he felt, as a kid, going to junior camp and getting to wrestle boys with laughing eyes, helmets just barely shading their glee from the glow of the arena.

He thought about how uncomfortable he'd always been: in the locker room, in clubs, in school. Everywhere except the rink, where everything had been spelled out so clear for him.

He thought about Rozanov again, for the first time in a while. He thought about him, under those Helsinki lights, grabbing his shirt, yanking him up with easy strength.

"Rose can do whatever the fuck she wants because I'm fucking gay you fucking idiots!" Shane yelled. Luckily they were in a private booth, and even luckier the music was so loud, no one, other than his team, could hear him. They all laughed, hesitantly at first. But then that only egged Shane on harder.

"Yeah! Laugh it up! I'm so fucking gay. I love men! I fucking love men! They are so fucking sexy! There's nothing I love more than watching a hot man play hockey. This sport gives men muscles in all the right places—it literally gives men big, bubble asses, and I love fucking looking at them!" He inhaled hard and continued. "But don't worry. You guys are so ugly, if you are worried about me making you feel uncomfortable in the locker room or whatever stupid shit straight guys are scared of, don't be! You want to know why I never went clubbing with you guys?! It's because I'd rather watch Golden Girls marathons with my mom! Watching you guys try to pick up girls makes me so fucking embarrassed I actually wanna vomit! And maybe," he shouts this next part at a groaning Stedlund, collapsed onto the ground, "the press only likes talking to me because I have hobbies outside of hockey and drinking beer, and I know how to hold a conversation with a woman for five fucking seconds because I pay attention to fucking her interests! Heard of a button-down shirt?! Heard of tailored pants?! I didn't fucking think so!"

Shane had laughed as he yelled all of this to an audience of horrified faces. All his teammates circled around Stedlund, who was still crumpled to the ground. Shane took another deep breath. "How many more cups of this can I take?! How many Stanley Cups do I need to win to make you guys just back the fuck off!"

"Hollander..." J.J. said softly, "You look..."

Shane bent over and threw up.

From that point on, the night started to come in flashes.

One second, J.J. and Hayden were with him, in the men's bathroom, standing next to him and patting his back while he threw up.

"Hey," J.J. had said, "It's okay, alright. Don't even worry about Stedlund. I'll talk to the guys. If what you said is true, we got your back, no matter what, okay?"

"Stedlund had it coming, too," Hayden added. "Just... ugh gross, let it out—"

Then, Shane blinked, and he was back in the club. Everyone had left, except for Hayden and J.J.

Then, Shane blinked again, and he was completely alone. He didn't know where Hayden or J.J. went. He didn't even know where he was, except he was completely alone. He was in a phone booth, and he was crying. Hard.

"I'm sorry," Shane had begged, "Rose I'm so fucking sorry."

"You're right," Shane had wailed, "Of course you're right. No one should have to live like this. I—" Shane hiccuped, "I can't keep living like this."

But then a new well of tears sprang, "I know I'm being really selfish," Shane whimpered, "But I fucked up, really bad, and I'm really scared. I told everyone. I told them everything. I told them that I'm gay, and that everything we had was a lie. I know that just causes you more trouble, when you—you—" he swallowed another sob, "you're already dealing with so much, and I'm just so fucking sorry for everything."

In an even smaller voice, he continued, "But I need you to help me. I need you to fix everything. I need you to take me back. I need you to be my girlfriend again. I just," he swallowed, fresh tears pouring, "I just want to be normal," he begged.

Rose did not take him back.

Here was how Rose helped him instead.

See, the director and screenwriter, they weren't just making some grungy, little independent movie. They had friends in high places whom they had been working for years to get them to give them the money they needed to finance their little passion project: a love letter to their estranged daughter.

They would not let unfortunate paparazzi photos, which already framed Rose Landry as some dumb, flimsy homewrecker, and the screenwriter as some frigid, old hag who didn't want to fuck her husband, ruin what they've worked so hard to achieve.

It didn't help that Rose's boyfriend, some hockey player from Canada, had gone and blabbed to a club full of people that he was gay and never dated Rose.

Making their scandal seem more and more plausible by the minute.

The couple contacted their powerful friends, and they buried the press hard. Immediately, the executive who owned the conglomerate that owned the tabloid magazine made the rag pull the photos the next day.

Then, they had to fix the Shane Hollander problem. Rose needed to seem like a devoted girlfriend with a devoted boyfriend, so the heat would drop off the blurry, compromising photos of Rose and the director.

So they contacted their friends, who contacted their friends at the league. The commissioner had the entire team lined up, and made them sit, side by side, in a large conference room. The commissioner, the team's coach, and the team's lawyers were on one side of the bench, and on the other side...

The agency that represented Rose, the agency that represented the director and the screenwriter, and the executive producer's lawyers, all on the other.

They pushed forward an NDA.

The terms were simple. You talk about what Shane Hollander said, the night of the Stanley Cup win, to anyone, we will bankrupt you.

"This is a damn hostage situation," Montreal's Coach Theriault had yelled. "I'm not letting my players sign this bullshit."

Both sides argued for a while. A very long while, in legalese and corporate language, that Shane didn't understand. The entire time, Shane kept his head down, nursing the mother of all hangovers, doggedly keeping eye contact on the ground. But even without looking up, Shane could sense the horror on his teammates' faces, as they looked at the terms, the anger boiling, when the director and screenwriter's lawyers told them, gently, how badly their careers could be ruined, if anything about Shane ever came back to them.

When they let Shane's teammates all go back to the locker room, Shane had opened the door to eighteen faces of pure disgust. Stedlund's eye was swollen. Hayden looked worried for Shane.

J.J., however, was enraged.

He yelled at him in French. "I told you didn't I?! I would protect you. I would talk to the guys. And your fucking girlfriend slaps us with this?!" He took the piece of paper, that they all signed, and flung it in Shane's face. "Fuck you Shane Hollander. Okay. We will not talk. But we sure as fuck do not want you as our captain anymore."

Coach had not been any warmer. His answers were curt, and he didn't make eye contact with Shane. He looked just as disgusted with him. It didn't matter that Shane won him two Stanley Cups. It didn't matter that he was the center of every single one of Coach Theriault's plays. Shane was dead to him.

The league commissioner never reached out to him either. He had just shot Shane a cold, unreadable look in that conference room that day. But then, in one week's time, the news came through.

Shane Hollander, Canada's Golden Boy, had been traded to the Ottawa Centaurs.

Shane and Rose tell Ilya a version of this entire story in Shane's hotel room, as Rose smokes out the open window.

Shane leaves out the part about the food.

Rose leaves out the part about shopping at Goodwill with her mom.

Except for his eyebrows raising when Rose brings up her affair with the director and his wife, Ilya listens to the entire ordeal with the exact same expression on his face the whole time, which is general bemusement. He has also been completely silent.

"You make me sound like such a bitch," Rose says. She sticks her neck far, far out the window, and takes another drag of her smoke. She huffs, dragon-like, out into the night sky, before ducking back inside.

"You make me sound like an annoying baby," Shane retorts. Rose smiles at him, wagging her eyebrows. *If the shoe fits.*

Ilya interrupts them, a complicated expression still marring his pretty features. "Montreal does not talk to us."

"Huh?"

"Your old teammates. They do not chirp. They do not talk shit. They are completely silent."

Shane... can't really tell how Ilya's reacting. He's definitely not smiling. He hasn't left the room yet, in disgust, but maybe that's because Shane had omitted a couple of details. Mostly, Shane gets the feeling he doesn't really understand what is going on.

"Yeah, they really hate me," Shane says, flatly.

"They are scared to talk," Ilya says, distantly. "Because you bought them."

"Hey," Rose says. She frowns at Ilya, scrutinizing his reaction. "It was none of their business to begin with. It was just an extra bit of insurance."

"You do not know if they would have talked or not," Ilya has now turned to Rose, and Shane realizes that Ilya's upset. "You made that decision for them," Ilya still isn't looking at Shane, "You made that decision for him."

"You didn't hear him that night," Rose snaps, "He was slurring his words, he was beside himself, he was begging for my help, I had no idea when—"

"Hey," Shane interjects. He doesn't like the horrified look that crosses Ilya's face when Rose says this, "I wasn't that bad—"

"No," Rose says, steely, "You were. So I had the resources to help him, and I did. To this day, no one knows what Shane Hollander said in that nightclub, because I made sure of it."

"You had two rich people who know nothing of hockey interfere in hockey business," Ilya says, voice rising. "Interfere in Shane's business."

"Yeah, and because of it the worst it got was that Shane got traded to another team," Rose laughs, mean. "Could you imagine if someone got video of that night? Or if one of his meathead teammates opened their big mouths and told someone? Shane's not going to be saddled with just a bad trade. He was blackout drunk that night, so now the press is going to make him look like an alcoholic. He beat his teammate's face in until he broke bone. Now he's also violent. He told everyone he was gay, so now he's also a pervert. A violent, gay alcoholic pervert, he's never going to be let on the ice ever again—"

"Rose, come on," Shane says again, shooting another nervous glance at Ilya, because he looks like he's going to hit her.

Rose points at Ilya, "I made a lot of mistakes when I was younger. How I handled that night, and the role I played in your trade, was one of them. But I'm not going to sit here and have him lecture me about stuff he wasn't even here for."

"I do not care what you think you stopped. You do not buy people," Ilya insists, angrily. "This sport is people's lives. Is how they feed their families, is how they make their living. You threaten them with ruin, with destruction, for something they have not done yet."

Rose scoffs, "I don't care. I did what I had to do. I don't give a shit about Shane's teammates. They treated him badly. I did whatever I had to do to protect Shane."

Ilya whirls on Shane, looking a little disturbed that Shane hadn't been protesting more.

"Say something," Ilya insists. "Say I am right. You do not think what she did was right either. Is why you react the way you react to everything."

"Hey," Shane snaps. Rose is right. Ilya is being kind of presumptuous. "You don't know what you are talking about."

"You would agree to do this to Bood? Dykstra? Wyatt? The rookies?" Ilya spits.

Shane doesn't say anything. He just avoids looking at Ilya.

But then Ilya's eyes widen. "You would agree to do this to me?" he asks, quietly, seething.

"No," Shane says, half-heartedly. Rose watches the two of them now, with a curious expression on her face. "Of course not."

"You are lying," Ilya accuses, immediately. "You would."

Shane lies to everyone he loves. He lies to his parents, he lies to his teammates. He lied to Rose. He finds he does not want to lie to Ilya anymore. "Fine," Shane says, voice hard. "Yes. I would," Shane finds the truth dragged out of his mouth, almost against his will. "I would if you decided to embarrass me."

"Embarrass you?" Ilya says, eyes narrowed. He looks furious. "How would I embarrass you?"

Shane finds he doesn't have any difficulty meeting Ilya's eyes now.

"If you exposed me," Shane says. He is completely serious. This was why Shane didn't want to sleep with Ilya. He knew that the second he did, he would use everything in his power to keep him pinned to his side. "If you made me feel the way I feel, and then pretended it was nothing," Shane licks his lips and continues. "If you made me look like a fool." This part might scare Ilya off, but he wanted the truth, so he will get it. Every ugly part of it. "If you left me and stopped caring about me."

Ilya sucks in a hot breath. His fists clench, gripping the bedsheets he's sitting on. It flexes the easy strength Ilya has coiled in his forearms. Shane watches the veins strain with open interest, while Ilya glares daggers at him.

"Hey," Rose says now. The anger she'd thrown at Ilya a few minutes ago has relaxed off her face. Instead, she just looks kind of amused. "If you guys need a moment, I'm going to go smoke on the rooftop—"

"No," Both Ilya and Shane say at the same time, eyes not leaving each other. Ilya turns to her, smiling like he'd love nothing more than to bite her head off. It's a smile that shows all his teeth. "You made him like this, so you stay for everything."

"Oh please, I didn't make him anything," Rose says, rolling her eyes. "Shane was born this insane."

"I get it now," Ilya says, matter-of-factly. "You had him first. Shane told me you two were—" he repeats the same Russian word from earlier. Rose and Shane look at each other in confusion. "You did not fuck him, but he was still yours anyway."

"How about you?" Rose says. She returns Ilya's shark-like smile with her own. "You're fucking him, but do you have him?"

"Rose!" Shane says, blushing a little. But the two of them ignore Shane now, glaring at each other with smiles on their faces.

"If I was there," Ilya says, voice ice cold. "I would have found a better way to protect him."

She smiles, eyes mean, victorious. "But you weren't, and you didn't. You were in Russia. He only had me," her grin only widens. "I mean really, if it wasn't for me, fucking up so bad, I guess you would have never met him, huh?"

Ilya's eyes flash with anger.

"Alright, this is getting stupid." Shane stands up, and steps between them. The two of them don't budge. "This conversation about the past is going in circles."

"Thanks for letting me meet your new boyfriend, Shane," Rose says, eyes not leaving Ilya's.

"He's not—" Shane starts, but Ilya swivels and narrows his eyes dangerously at Shane. "He's—whatever."

"Okay," Rose laughs. She cuts Ilya a final, meaningful look. She still looks pissed at him, but her eyes also seem to say *Good luck, and godspeed*. She steps away. "Thanks for showing me your whatever."

"How long are you here?" Shane asks instead.

"I fly out to Los Angeles tomorrow morning."

Shane sighs. "Our bus leaves tomorrow morning too. Colorado."

Rose gives him a half-smile. "Yeah. Makes sense."

He and Rose stare at each other for a second, not quite sure what to say. It's been so long, and so much has happened.

They reach for each other at the same time. Rose wraps him into a tight hug.

"I'm not that sorry about Montreal," Rose whispers in his ear. This wasn't for Ilya to hear. "But I will always be sorry for Iceland."

"I'm sorry for being a bad boyfriend," Shane says in response. "I'm sorry for holding you back."

She pulls away. She's tearing up a little. "You look a lot happier."

Shane smiles. In the corner of his eye, he sees Ilya looking out the window, in some half-hearted attempt at giving them privacy. "I am."

Rose smiles back. She pats him on the shoulder. "Call me, okay?"

Shane laughs. "Of course. I have so much to catch you up on."

The room falls quiet when Rose leaves.

Shane turns to look at Ilya, who is still staring out the window. His shoulders are tense, like they are coiling for a fight.

"Whew," Shane says, "That was kind of intense huh?"

"Yeah," Ilya says, far away. "Kind of."

Shane walks over to Ilya, hugs him from behind. Ilya relaxes a little, but not enough, so Shane starts rubbing his face against the soft material of Ilya's shirt. "Thank you," he mumbles into his spine, "For listening to all that. For talking to her."

Ilya doesn't respond. He can't see his face, so the only thing he can do is bury his nose into the nape of Ilya's neck, and press a small kiss there. "Is there anything you still want to talk about?" Shane asks, in a small voice. It might be because the evening had been a little intense, with all the reunions, the introductions, and the confessions, but Shane feels very vulnerable right now. Ilya keeps looking away from him, and it's making Shane desperate to do something, anything, so he can be held by him.

"Talk? No." Ilya laughs.

"Okay," Shane just lies there, breathing in the comfort of Ilya's clothes—the cheap detergent he uses mixing in with the smell of his sweat. Shane stands there, nuzzling his face into Ilya's back, when Ilya suddenly pulls himself up, to full height. The movement pushes Shane away. Shane blinks away the surprise, unable to hide the bit of hurt that pools through when he does.

"Ilya—"

Ilya wraps him in a hug of his own. Shane whimpers into the touch, as Ilya's strong arms hold him, cradling the back of his neck, the small of his back. But before Shane can languish in the feeling for long, Shane feels himself getting walked, as Ilya, still trapping Shane in his arms, pushes him to the bed, and falls on top of him when Shane lands on his back.

Ilya looks a little sad, when he gazes down at him. "Do you really think I would do that to you?" Ilya mumbles. "Embarrass you?"

Shane blushes, but he doesn't try to fight him this time. He just lets himself say what he feels, which is, "Yes," Shane whispers back, "I want you too much. It makes me feel like you are going to do something bad to me."

Ilya swears, softly, under his breath. Shane sees the hand, planted next to his head, clench, hard, in the bedsheets. The next thing Shane knows, Ilya's kissing him.

Shane kisses him back, of course. It's the only natural reaction. He winds his hands in his curls, caresses the dip of Ilya's hip, and moans softly into Ilya's mouth when he opens Shane's lips wider with his tongue.

Shane starts to spread his legs, wanting Ilya closer, but instead, Ilya leaves his mouth, making Shane's lips feel all tingly and cold. Ilya travels down his neck, down his chest, until he finds and starts to suck leisurely at his nipple. Shane hums in satisfaction, curling his thighs around Ilya's back, dragging him in, when all of a sudden, Ilya bites, and bites hard.

"Hey!" Shane yelps. Ilya continues to lap at his chest, calming down the red, angry hurt. Shane moans shakily, falling back into the rhythm of pleasure again, this time with slight distrust, when Ilya then reaches over to his other nipple with his left hand and digs the nail of his thumb hard into the nub.

"Ilya!" he gasps, in pain, feeling a little delirious, because Ilya then gently massages the nipple in between two fingers, calming the hurt away with the drag of his thumb.

Then, Ilya finds the soft, meatier part of his chest, and with his fingers still lightly playing with his nipple, Ilya sinks his teeth down and bites. Hard.

"H-hey!" Shane tries to protest, "We agreed, no marks!"

Ilya looks up, breathing heavily. "Okay. Then I won't fuck you," he says.

"What?" Shane whimpers. His dick is leaking already.

"We don't have to do marks. I just won't fuck you today," Ilya explains, in a reasonable voice.

"Ilya," Shane pleads, "Come on."

Ilya blinks up at him from his chest. "I think you'll let me do whatever I want to you," Ilya drawls. His eyes are dark and clouded. "If it means you get to be fucked the way you want to."

Shane moans helplessly, struggling for contact, "Fine," Shane breathes. "If it's too intense, I want to be able to back out."

Ilya tilts his head. Shane watches him translate what Shane says in real-time. He nods, slowly. "Sure. Maybe if you want to stop, you can say something like... center ice?" Ilya says, laughing to himself.

"No," Shane groans. "I'll just think about us fucking on center ice," Ilya's eyes darken, and he digs his thumb into Shane's nipple in retaliation for turning him on. "Fuck, Ilya!" Shane gasps, writhing. When he comes back to himself, he looks back at him. "Nothing hockey related," he blushes. "I'll just get horny again. How about—"

All of a sudden Shane's laughing, chest rising up and down as Ilya rests his head on it. Ilya looks confused. He's laughing so hard he can barely get the words out, "Ronald Reagan?"

Ilya stares at Shane like he's grown three heads. "You are killing my boner," he says flatly.

"Don't worry, I'm killing mine too," Shane smiles, victoriously, "See, that's how we know it works."

Ilya huffs, but he's smiling back. He looks less sad, and far away, which makes Shane feel all triumphant. Ilya returns to trailing kisses down Shane's body.

He rips Shane open like that. Just moving, slowly, along his stomach, his hips, his thighs, before biting, hard. It always makes Shane arch, overcome, into the pain, as Ilya then

comforts every bruise he leaves with a kiss, a firm press of his thumb. Ilya especially loves his legs. He spends forever, just sucking and biting into the meat of his inner thighs, making Shane squirm and whimper every time he feels Ilya near his leaking dick.

His entire body feels like hotspots of overwhelming sensation—of pain, of pleasure, the distinction doesn't matter because it's swirling in Shane's head. Ilya bites another hickey into his thigh, and Shane moans helplessly, thinking that Ilya will do the same thing he's been doing for the past hour, which is lick the hurt away.

Instead, as Shane's eyes are closed, Shane still trying to catch his breath, he feels lips ghost the head of his cock. Shane whimpers, cracking his eyes open. He sees Ilya, at the foot of the bed, on his knees, with Shane's thighs thrown over his shoulders. Ilya's eyes are dark and predatory, and without another word Ilya wraps his hands around Shane's legs and yanks him in closer.

And before Shane can do anything, Ilya starts sucking his dick.

Shane is going to come. He just is. Everytime Shane squirms, moaning at the tight heat of Ilya's mouth, Ilya keeps dragging him back, and burying his face into Shane's crotch, milking his dick with his tongue. And every time Shane tries to thrust harder, trying to chase release, Ilya would stop him with a tight grip on his thighs, digging meanly into the muscles there. Ilya moans, and the vibrations start to push Shane over the edge. Shane cries, completely at Ilya's mercy, as he's shoved, onto his back, Ilya crouching over him, taking his dick and moaning deliriously around it until Shane shouts, "I'm coming, I'm coming—" and instead of backing away—

Ilya swallows him down.

Jesus Christ.

Shane shakes apart, moaning with every breath, until he finally calms down and softens in Ilya's mouth.

"Move," Ilya orders. Shane's too sated to hear him at first, his head lolling back, overwhelmed in his post-orgasmic haze. So then Ilya hikes his legs higher, and pushes him up the bed, as Shane yelps.

Ilya jacks his own dick once, twice. He shoves two fingers into Shane's hole, stretching him open. Shane's spent dick twitches, helplessly. Shane just lays there, letting Ilya do whatever he wants with him. Pry him open, spread his legs. Shane just watches him, with half-open eyes, moaning whenever he feels particularly oversensitive.

Ilya fucks him like that. Bent over tightly around him, so that Shane can hear Ilya moaning in his ear, as he thrusts into him. Shane wraps his hands tightly into Ilya's hair, dragging him closer, so he can rest his head into the crook of Shane's neck while he fucks him. This makes Ilya hike Shane's legs up higher, and thank god for yoga because Ilya has Shane practically bent in half, using him and his hole to get off. Ilya's breath quickens, and he's getting louder, so Shane knows he's about to come. Ilya bites him, one last time, into the meat of his

shoulder, and Shane cries out, as Ilya doesn't let go, digging his teeth in, as he starts thrusting faster and faster, Shane starting to feel overwhelmed by the pain—

When Ilya comes, and comes hard into Shane, and falls on top of him.

Ilya rests his head there for a while, panting hard, as Shane strokes his hair. Shane thinks Ilya might've fallen asleep (he does that a lot after sex), but Ilya pushes himself onto his forearms, and his eyes are full of wonder when he stares down at Shane.

"Fuck," Ilya mumbles. "Look at you."

Shane doesn't know what he looks like but he can imagine it. His body, covered in dark bruises, marking the path of desire.

"You are so beautiful." Ilya says. He sounds awestruck.

Shane blushes, and looks away. Ilya's never called him beautiful in bed before. Shane still remembers Ilya's first day in Ottawa, how Ilya watched him skate on the ice. How he called his skating beautiful.

If Ilya ever left him, Shane would be ruined.

Ilya patiently nudges his head back up with his forefinger, so that Shane's still staring at him.

"Don't look away," Ilya murmurs, "I like looking at you."

Shane has no choice but to look Ilya in the eye when he asks what he says next. "Do you sleep with other people?"

It appropriately ruins the moment. Ilya groans. "Jesus Christ, Shane."

"It's okay if you do," Shane continues, mumbling, "I just need to know."

Ilya huffs, disbelieving, "Really?" he says. He looks upset again, "You would be okay if I slept with someone else?"

Shane smiles at him, sadly. Ilya's so beautiful it hurts to look at him sometimes. "Of course I wouldn't be okay," Shane says, laughing a little. The anger on Ilya's face falls. As if he can't believe what he's hearing. It replaces itself with a much more gentle look. "I want you all to myself."

"You can," Ilya says. It's so low that Shane almost struggles to hear it. "You do."

Shane looks away now, and Ilya lets him. "That isn't very fair to you, is it?"

"Why would it not be fair to me?" Ilya asks. He's still propped up on his forearms, just staring down at Shane.

Shane is not a religious person. He barely believes in ghosts. But it's hard not to feel like the veil of something otherworldly was thinner here, tonight, in this hotel room. Ghosts of the

past, raking Shane open, making him feel more vulnerable, more honest than he's ever been.

"You gave up a lot," Shane says. He stares resolutely at the hotel wall, "To come here. For a better life," Shane wonders distantly if he's going to start crying. He doesn't. His voice is steady. "My grandparents were the same way. They gave up everything they had to give my mom a better life. And in Canada, she found one," Shane says. "She went to a good Canadian university, she met my dad," his voice cracks, "They had me."

Ilya listens to Shane again, for the second time that night, in rapt silence. He still hasn't moved, so they are still so close together, almost as close as they were when they were having sex. "She got a good education. She found a good job. She had a family. She built a life that honored the sacrifices her parents made for her."

Even though now tears were starting to prickle the front of his eyes, Shane finds his voice is still entirely even. He still can't bring himself to look at Ilya, however. "I want you to have a life that honors everything you gave up, to come here."

"I have," Ilya says, completely earnest from somewhere above him. "I found you."

Shane closes his eyes, tightly, tears running down his face. "Fuck," Shane says, hard. "How can you say that?" Shane laughs, disbelieving, "You barely know me."

"You know is not true," Ilya says softly. "I know you. You know me. You may not have told me everything, and I may not have told you everything. But we know. We know each other."

"If you choose to be with me," Shane continues, determined to make Ilya see reason, "You'll have given up everything you have in Russia, for a life of shame. Even if you don't want a family, you left your country to find freedom. To live a more open life. You'll," Shane chokes, "you'll never get that with me. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Ilya says. "And I don't care."

"Ilya!" Shane exclaims, and he finally turns around to look at the infuriating boy who never made his life easy, even once, ever since he was twelve and they beat the shit out of each other. "Are you actually serious?"

Ilya's entirely serious. The way he's looking at him now, the enormity of the emotion, serious is the only thing he could possibly be, "I left Russia only because I needed to escape Russia. My life at home was loveless. But since I've found you, my life..." he cocks his face in a hesitant, half-grin. "My life has so much love."

Shane has to kiss him then. Even though all of Ilya's marks are still littered all over Shane's body, they kiss feverishly, completely unbothered with the material world except for how they feel against each other, how they make each other sound.

They end up showering, and when they finish cleaning up, they lie in bed together. Even though it's late, and they need to get on the bus the first thing tomorrow morning, they are wrapped up in each other, laughing. They can't stop talking to each other.

"I was thinking," Ilya says, as Shane traces a nasty scar Ilya has on his naked chest, one he got from his Red Army training days, "of getting a huge tattoo. Of a bear there."

Shane huffs, "A chest tattoo? Of a bear?" Shane laughs now, "You like Boston that much?"

Ilya smiles at him, teasing. "Come on. Bear is for Russia, genius," he licks his lips lasciviously. "You would think it's sexy, no?"

Shane hums, thoughtfully, "That, and nipple piercings?"

Ilya laughs, scandalized, "Shane Hollander."

Shane shrugs, unapologetic, "Just if you were asking my opinion."

Ilya pinches his side, and Shane yelps, gleefully, "You get nipple piercings," Ilya says, seriously.

"You first."

"Let's play for it," Ilya says, devilishly, "Loser has to get them," his smile only grows, "Winner gets to suck on them."

Shane blushes, and retaliates by pinching Ilya's side back, even harder. Ilya curses in Russian, and chooses to end the fight by wrapping himself tighter around Shane, holding him close against his chest.

Shane relaxes into Ilya's arms. When he buries his head into Ilya's chest, the cold chain of the crucifix presses against his forehead. He feels Ilya tenses a little again at the contact, so Shane looks up, as far as he can while still keeping his face nuzzled between Ilya's pecs. "Can you tell me what this is?" Shane says, finally brave enough to ask, after sleeping together for so many months.

Shane watches as Ilya's Adam's apple works up, down. His eyes go a little glassy, as the good humor fully falls off his face. Shane decides that if Ilya doesn't want to tell him, he will be okay with it, and they'll move on. The only thing is, it seems to be weighing on him heavily, and Shane wants to be able to take some of that weight away from him.

"It was my mom's," Ilya says finally.

"It's beautiful," Shane says, immediately. Just like everything about Ilya.

"She was religious," Ilya offers again. Shane nods, and nudges the chain with his nose, tenderly. He falls quiet, not pressing the issue, but giving Ilya the space to talk more if he wanted to.

"She killed herself."

The admission hangs, like fog, in the dark hotel room. It swirls, once, twice, before disappearing into the air like a wisp.

Shane's heart breaks for Ilya.

He scoots out from Ilya's chest, as far as he can, given the tight tangle of Ilya's arms around his back. He reaches so he can stroke Ilya's hair again, soft and comforting. Maybe Ilya was right in saying that they do know each other. More than anyone. Because when Shane pets him, he knows that Ilya would sink into the touch, drown himself in the comfort of someone, selflessly, using touch to make him feel better.

"I'm sorry," Shane says, words useless, "Thank you for telling me."

"She was very beautiful, but she was very sad. She was very young when she married my dad, and he trapped her, like he does with everyone," Ilya says, staring unbrokenly at Shane as he confesses this. "Sometimes," Ilya says. He looks like he's struggling to get the words out. "I think..." he swallows, and then curses in Russian. Shane wishes he understood him. "I think I am just like her," he says, voice cracking.

"Ilya..." Shane says softly. He holds Ilya tighter.

"If you choose to be with me," Ilya says, into the night, "you'll be taking that with you too."

"I don't mind," Shane insists, immediately. "I want it all."

Ilya's crying. Shane doesn't understand how Ilya does it—feel everything so deeply. Every emotion he feels completely consumes him, and yet he tries so hard to pretend it doesn't. It makes Shane want to protect Ilya with everything in him. "I get so sad sometimes. It makes me wish I wasn't alive. I know is hard to..." Ilya pauses, but he finds it in himself to continue, "to love someone like that." Ilya's crying so hard now, Shane can feel his entire body shake, "And I do not want the same thing to happen to you."

The next thing that comes out of Shane's mouth is the easiest thing in the world to say. "It's okay. I'll love you no matter what."

Ilya stops.

Shane freezes. Maybe that was the wrong thing to say. Maybe he accidentally made his mom's suicide about their relationship. Like a socially inept idiot. Maybe Shane should stop doing this entire "saying whatever is on his mind" thing and go back to only saying something once he'd successfully calculated the best possible odds of his response being well received.

"I—" Shane starts, maybe to fix his social faux pas. But instead, Ilya's kissing him again, rolling Shane onto his back, burying his fingers in Shane's hair, strong hand under his back hauling him up so he arches into Ilya's touch.

Shane breaks the kiss apart. When he does, Ilya's looking at him with an intensity that leaves him almost speechless.

Almost.

"Did I say the wrong thing?" Shane asks, getting a little self-conscious now.

Ilya says something in Russian. He looks like he means it with his entire heart.

Shane frowns, confused. "What?"

"It means," Ilya says, leaning in, "I love you too."

They talk until the sun rises.

Ilya tells Shane about his piece of shit dad. Shane is diplomatic about it. He's really sad for Ilya, and wants to take the complicated emotions Ilya feels about his death away from him. But mostly, Shane's happy that he died, so he stopped being such a problem in Ilya's life. He doesn't do a good enough job being a good person about it, because he thinks he sees Ilya smirk.

Shane tells Ilya about food and Montreal.

"You weren't wrong," Shane says. He sees a lighter sky start to peek through the curtains. "I... was. Weird about food," Shane thinks to himself for a minute longer. "I still am."

Ilya watches him, wordlessly when he does.

"The reason I got so drunk after my second Stanley Cup win was because I didn't eat enough."

Ilya tenses up next to him.

"I'm working on it," Shane says, and he finds he believes himself when he says that. He is working on it. He's a lot healthier than he was, back then. He would also never, ever, let something like that happen to him again. "It's just, it's tough. Sometimes I think it's getting better, and then I feel like out of nowhere I've taken three steps back."

"I feel like that," Ilya says, "With my moods. Sometimes I think I will be happy forever. Sometimes I get so sad I cannot move. It never ends."

Shane smiles, even though what they are talking about definitely isn't a smiling matter, "Our brains are so fucked."

Ilya laughs. "Is why we love each other. We are both crazy."

Shane snorts, "Yeah. We're both fucking crazy."

They barely get any sleep, and so they try to catch up on the bus, collapsed in on each other. Since they barely slept, they lose to Colorado, their first loss since Montreal. But that's okay. Because the team goes out to commiserate at some dive bar with cheap beer and loud music, and Shane comes with them. They drink their loss away, and Dykstra, given the team's moving Freddie Mercury serenade, the night they beat Montreal, manages to rally the team to go to karaoke afterward.

"What," Shane, Ilya, and half the team say at the same time, "Is karaoke?"

Dykstra looks affronted, "Holy shit. You guys don't know what karaoke is?! Fucking heathens! When my wife and I went on our honeymoon in Tokyo—"

The entire team groans in protest. "Dude," Wyatt says, voice laced in disappointment. "Jar."

Dykstra curses and slaps a bill into Wyatt's waiting hand. Wyatt pockets the change to hopefully place into the communal jar in their locker room labelled, "Team Fuck-ups." There is one for every teammate except Ilya and Shane, mostly out of respect, mostly out of fear of Shane.

"Okay well, whatever," Dykstra continues. "Point is, karaoke is a beautiful pastime popularized by the Japanese where you can sing along to a song you like in a crowded bar with a mic. When my wife and I—" Dykstra stops himself. "When we went out, we would get blasted and just sing our fucking hearts out until the sun came up. It was so fucking beautiful, and now that there are actually a couple karaoke bars now out here in the west, I want to share that experience with you, my friends."

Everyone's pretty hesitant, but Dykstra's still successful in getting the team out anyway. Fortunately for Dykstra, the appeal of karaoke immediately clicks for everyone in the room, as song after popular song gets slammed onto the machine, with different combinations of people shrieking their lungs out to Prince, Bon Jovi, Madonna, Michael Jackson. Everyone gets brought to tears when Ilya decides to solo a Whitney Houston song with a hauntingly beautiful voice that comes out of nowhere, with Shane hanging in the back, smiling fondly in the background.

"Come on Captain," Bood nudges Shane, who's still sitting down, as the night comes to a close, "You should play us out. One last song."

Shane almost says no. Especially because he doesn't really listen to any music, and barely recognizes any of the songs that his teammates have been singing all night. But, with how happy he feels right now, the hurts of a loss washed away with good company, good drink, and a good night, Shane finds it hard to deny Bood, his teammates, what they're asking.

"Um," Shane says, awkwardly, "I watched this movie with my mom, a few years ago. I think it's based on a Stephen King story?"

"Stand By Me," Ilya says, instantly. He's twirling the mic in his hands, and the neon pink karaoke screen casts a soft, pink glow over his face.

"Fuck," Barrett shouts. He's drunk. "I fucking love that movie. It makes me cry like a fucking baby."

They pull the song up. Twenty hockey players link hands, throw arms over shoulders, so they could all circle around and belt around Shane, who feels a wild, wild grin spread across his face. The men belt out the entire song with their hearts, and Ilya, at the chorus, grabs Shane from the middle, so he can link his arm around Shane's waist, pulling him into the chain of grown men, eyes proudly pouring tears, as they sing:

"SO DARLING DARLING STAND BY MEE, OOH STAND, BY ME, OH STAND, STAND BY ME, STAND BY MEEEE—"

In the 1989 season, The Centaurs make the playoffs, for the first time in thirty years. They don't win the cup, however. It all ends with a tough game with Detroit, and thus, the team's supposedly record-breaking season comes to a close.

The team leaves that loss invigorated though. They know in their hearts it is just the start of a legendary run.

In the off-season, Shane tells Ilya about a special place he has along Lake Ontario, that he's never told anyone about, except his parents.

The two of them spend three months wildly happy. Chasing each other around the docks, swimming in the hot summer sun, kissing on the deck. Fucking on the deck. It's the happiest Shane's ever felt.

Ilya cooks. Shane is surprised, as during the season their diets mostly consisted of ground beef, vegetables, and for Ilya anything he can get in a drive-thru. But Ilya admits it's something he's always thought he would be good at, back in Moscow, that he wanted to try if he ever had his own place.

So, by a crackling bonfire, the two of them suck down grilled corn, roasted mushrooms, and steak, cooked to medium rare perfection.

The summer nourishes them so much that when the season starts again, it starts with a bang.

In the 1990 season, The Centaurs finally win their first cup in fifty years.

The stadium actually threatens to explode. The cheering is thunderous, as the crowd, the team, chant Ilya and Shane's name. At first, Shane grabs the cup, holds the weight of it in his

hands. It feels unbearably heavy. Shane doesn't know how he's going to bring it over his head. But then, Ilya grabs the other end, staring at Shane the whole time, with an unbelievably beautiful smile on his face. The entire team grabs the cup, hoists it in the air, and Shane feels like his heart could actually soar, with how proud he is, of everyone he's played with.

He's so happy he's on this team.

It's the middle of the 1991 season, and the team is doing Christmas. Everyone, along with their families, gathers around in Ilya's giant living room, ripping open presents, while the TV plays in the background.

"Fuck, what do we think, guys?" Bood says, "Cup number two this year?"

"The way the other teams are playing," Barrett says, spitting wrapping paper he opened with his teeth onto the floor, "It seems like cup three and four are also in the bag." Harris, who works for the press team, glances over his shoulder to see what he got.

"Don't be cocky," Shane says, diplomatically, even though he agrees.

"Yeah yeah," Barrett mumbles. He pulls up his present, which Harris coos excitedly. It's a sweater from Wyatt. Harris has a lot of opinions on how good Barrett would look in the outfit.

"You will really want to open my present," Shane says, turning to Ilya. He has a teasing smile when he does.

Ilya snorts. "Is it another mug that says second-best hockey player?"

"No," Shane says, innocent.

Ilya grabs the present, opens it. It is another mug that says second-best hockey player.

"You've known him too long to fall for something like that, Rozanov," Bood says, sadly.

"I just fall for his tricks every single time," Ilya says, and it's hard for anyone to miss the fond smile that splits his face in half when he says this.

Shane smiles back, helplessly.

Ilya moves to put the present down, by his chair, so he doesn't forget it later. They'll add it to the collection of mugs they keep at Shane's house. However, when he does, the movement jostles him just enough for him to turn around, and face the TV.

Shane sees Ilya's face fall, horrified, before he sees what's on screen.

"Oh, fuck," Haas says. The entire team turns.

The newscast starts with the Russian flag—white, blue, and red, flying over the Kremlin. They must've missed the bright, red, Soviet Union flag being lowered when they were

opening presents.

USSR's Mikhail Gorbachev comes on screen. The statesman speaks, and it takes everyone a second to understand the enormity of the words he's saying.

"Holy fuck," Bood says, "Did Gorbachev just resign?"

Gorbachev has, indeed, just resigned as the President of the Soviet Union.

Signaling the dissolution of the USSR, for good.

To a sea of shocked faces, the newscast continues. A once raucous Christmas celebration skids to a halt, ambered in complete and total silence. The only natural reaction to something unimaginably big, coming to an end.

"Society has been granted its freedom, has been politically and spiritually unchained," the statesman says, in his resignation speech. Gorbachev's glasses reflect the glare of the television screen in front of him. "And this is the foremost achievement which we have not yet understood completely, because we have not learned to use this freedom."

Ilya gets up, stalks out of the room. Shane gets up in a panic to follow him.

Chapter End Notes

i have a tumblr now! :) [come say hi](#)

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

the end! thanks everyone for sticking through the craziest few weeks of my life <3
shane and ilya you will live forever
if people are into it - in the end notes i did compile a list of media that heavily
influenced or inspired what i ended up writing for the soviet montage. if you want to
expand your horizons a bit!

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

It starts with seeing his old defenseman at a coffee shop in Portland.

Ilya is staring at the menu. Shane had called it a coffee shop—two words that made sense to him in English separately, but together just left him disoriented.

At least he has company; he stands in a line of men over the age of twenty wearing matching expressions of total confusion.

Shane wrote his order on a slip of paper, so at least that's taken care of. He watches as a teenage girl walks away with some kind of hot cream drink that looks mouth-wateringly delicious. What is he supposed to say to get that order?

He prepares himself to just give up and ask the other teenager behind the counter to help him, but as he turns his head, he sees, clear as day, Mikhail Egorov.

Squinting at the exact same menu as him, exactly as bewildered.

Ilya feels a pang of fear. Is he seeing things? Ilya is already like his mother. It would destroy him, entirely, if he finds out he is also like his father. But then Egorov turns with a frown on his face and points at the menu.

"This is the most ridiculous shit I've ever seen," Egorov says to Ilya, in Russian.

Ilya feels frozen in place, and unstuck in time. "Misha," Ilya says, like it's been punched out of him, "what are you doing here?"

Egorov's broad face widens into an affable smirk. "Come on, Captain, don't you read the news? I play for San Jose now."

Ilya stares at him, brain lagging behind his emotions. He forgets the drink, forgets the menu, and immediately wraps him into a tight bear hug.

"Ilyukha," Egorov says, as Ilya squeezes the air out of him, "People are staring." But he hugs him back anyway, clapping him once, twice on the shoulders, manly and civilized with his affections, before he lets go.

He's right. People are staring, and whispering. Two massive Russian hockey players, hugging and crying on each other? It would be hard not to.

"Do you have time to catch up?" Ilya says, hoping he says yes. "I can't believe you're here." He looks at the ground, feeling cowed. "I didn't think I'd see any of you again."

Egorov laughs, booming and loud. Ilya stares at his face, and his heart clenches involuntarily. When Ilya joined, Egorov was already older than the average player. Since the years have passed, age only makes itself more apparent on his face, crows feet crinkling his face like paper.

"Should have thought of that before you left, Captain," Egorov says, but he is not serious. Only Egorov could take a betrayal as big as Ilya's with a shrug and a smile. "Also," his face falls now, however, "Ilyukha, if I am being honest, you will be seeing a lot more of us, in the next few years."

Ilya's eyes widen, "The club..."

"You knew how it was. It's why you left," Egorov says, solemnly. "You knew Russia was getting weak."

"I didn't leave because of Russia," Ilya insists again. "I loved Russia."

"Oh," Egorov laughs, dryly, "sure, we all do. But the club, it's falling apart. I've left. Kolya is on his way out. Shura is in talks with Buffalo as we speak. No one wants to play for Russia anymore. The way our country is now..." He looks pained. "It's no place to have a life."

That's almost everyone that used to play on Ilya's line. "Jesus Christ," Ilya mumbles, in English.

"Hey, are you guys waiting?" Some American idiot with a backwards baseball cap interrupts.

"Yes," Ilya and Egorov snap, at the same time.

"Have some fucking patience, man," Ilya snaps.

"You are," Egorov says, in accented English, stabbing a finger at the kid's head, "too old to wear hat backwards."

The American blinks, offended. But he falls quiet, and obediently shuffles to his rightful place behind them in line.

"My damn kids," Egorov curses, switching back to Russian, "They wear that ridiculous shit and I want to smack it right off them."

"The west is a poison," Ilya says, solemnly, and Egorov barks out a laugh, agreeing.

They do get their coffees. The cashier gasps in recognition when she sees Ilya, so when he asks what the ridiculous drink teenage girls keep ordering is, she explains it to him very patiently, even as the line behind him grows. Egorov watches the ordeal with an amused smile, and then when she turns to take his order Egorov just points at Ilya and says, "Same thing, thank you."

They find a two-top in the corner, and eagerly start slurping at their drinks.

"This is very good," Egorov says. Ilya has to agree.

And so, the two former teammates catch up.

"So that's pretty much everyone from the old line," Ilya says. "Did Vanya make it over?"

Vanya Pelov was the Red Army's goalie, and, when Ilya played for Russia, was globally known as the Iron Curtain for his impenetrable tending skills.

Ilya's heart sinks when he sees Egorov's face fall. His age accentuates the sadness that bleeds like paint onto his face.

"Did Vanya make it over?" Ilya asks again, a little desperate.

"He's very sick, Ilya," Egorov says gently. Ilya then feels his heart actually break in his chest. Egorov sighs in frustration, but mostly in pain, "That damn Petrov. Our fucking coach. He was always too tough on him. Sent him to an early grave, if you ask me."

Arkady Petrov did always expect more of his goalies than he did his players. Both Vanya's and Ilya's dads had fallen ill at the same time, but Ilya's father was a high ranking party official, and Vanya's dad was a Gorky Street shopkeeper. So Ilya got to see his dad every weekend, even though he hated his father, while Vanya had to practice every weekend, even though he loved his father.

It was an injustice that never sat right with Ilya.

And now Ilya will never get to talk to him again.

"I tried..." Ilya swallows. "I tried to write to him, to you all, when the Union fell. I don't know if you ever received anything I sent."

Egorov looks rueful. "Have you tried to go back?"

"I can't," Ilya says, and it's a truth that feels ripped out of him. "I did not leave legally."

"When the Union fell, people were getting inundated with mail," Egorov explains, "Our postal system could barely keep up. Maybe your mail got lost, maybe it arrived late, or maybe," Egorov raises his bushy eyebrows meaningfully, "maybe, our government still doesn't want people like you to talk to us."

This is bad news to Ilya, because he had also written to Svetlana with an address he didn't know she still lived at. He wonders if he will ever get to see her again.

He did not write to Andrei.

"I'm glad our fucker coach passed," Ilya curses. "That man doesn't deserve a second of happiness."

Egorov nods, in agreement, "The current coach is worse," he still says. "Because not only is he mean, he also sucks."

They sit there for two hours. Egorov tells him about Moscow, and how it's struggling. Ilya deeply distrusts the Western media's ability to cover the conflicts post-fall with any kind of accuracy or impartiality. It still hurts to hear they got some parts right. That corruption and crime was rampant. Privatization had ruined the bones of a city that, despite criticisms, always ran like a machine.

"Funny. When we were younger," Ilya says, with a sad smile, "all we wanted was a more open Russia." He plays with a straw wrapper. "I wanted to play hockey all over the world and make lots of money. But now everything seems fucked, does it not?"

Egorov waves his hand. "The young are always naive. We will need their innocence to build a better world."

Ilya still remembers children with CSKA Moscow posters in their hands, swarming him with awestruck smiles on their faces. He thinks about the world he left behind, and now the world they will inherit because of it.

"Hey," Egorov says. "At least we are here together. Sharing a drink." He gives Ilya a warm smile. "Fuck, after all this sugar, I need a smoke. You care to join?"

Ilya checks the time. Shane's meetings are probably wrapping up soon. "I should go," he says, regretfully. Additionally, as public health turned on smoking and tobacco, Shane's renewed campaign to make Ilya quit has been rejuvenated with the passion of someone finally being proven right. Ilya can't believe he says what he says next, because he doesn't believe it all, but maybe Shane's rubbing off on him, in more ways than one. "You are old," Ilya accuses. "You should smoke less."

This really makes Egorov laugh. "I can smoke ten packs a day and still kick your little kid ass. You are playing The Rays soon, yes?"

They are. Ilya's heart starts thumping with adrenaline at the thought of being on the same ice as Egorov again, "Are you copying me?" Ilya teases. "Joining a shit team? Hoping you will turn them around?"

Egorov claps him hard on the back, "You were always the leader, Ilyukha," he says, with a fond smile.

"Wait, Misha—" Ilya grabs a napkin, fishes around in his pockets for a pen. He hastily writes down the number to his landline, the one that goes to Shane's house in Ottawa. Ilya still has his riverview apartment, but barely lives in it anymore. "My number." When he hands it to

Egorov, he grasps Egorov's hand tightly, like he's afraid that once he lets go, he will disappear. "Please use it," he practically begs.

"Of course," Egorov smiles. He pats Ilya's hand, "But, Captain, you will be seeing a lot more of me anyhow."

Ilya nods. He finds himself choking up, even as Egorov looks completely dry-eyed. His father always said he cried too much—another thing he inherited from his mother.

"Also, Captain," Egorov says, before he heads out, "If you ever see Kolya again... don't take anything he says too personally."

Kolya Makarov had been Ilya's right wing. They grew up together, roomed together, and won together. They hadn't been apart for longer than 48 hours since they were five, until Ilya defected. Ilya always suspected he would take his departure the hardest.

He smirks. "I never took anything that idiot said seriously."

Shane's meetings must have ended early, because he's already parked on the hotel bed when Ilya returns. He's laughing his ass off at someone on the phone. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to guess it's probably Rose.

"Shit okay, Ilya's back. I gotta go."

Some garbling at the end. Shane rolls his eyes. "I wish you guys liked each other more." He sticks his tongue out pointedly at Ilya when he says this. Ilya uses his right hand to mime someone talking incessantly. Shane holds the phone to his chest, to address Ilya. "Rose says she would like you more if you were less of a self-righteous, sanctimonious prick. What do you have to say to her?"

"Tell her if she wants to change my personality she will need to bankrupt me harder than she tried to bankrupt Montreal."

Shane clicks his teeth in disapproval. By the rapid-fire rambling at the other end, Rose definitely heard him. "You guys can hash this out in a couple months, during my birthday dinner," Shane says jovially. "The same fucking conversation you guys have every time you see each other." He brings the phone back up to his ear, "Come on. Time to say goodbye. I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay? And I'll see you in a couple weeks. No, *you* hang up—"

Ilya walks over, presses the button on the machine, and ends the call for the both of them.

"You two are worse than schoolgirls," Ilya gripes. He hands Shane a "soy latte" that had since gone cold. Shane sits up, drinks it, and still smiles at the taste.

Ilya likes Shane's smile. It makes him feel less sad about saying goodbye to Egorov, and hearing about Pelov.

"God, that's so good. Maybe when we retire, we can move to the Pacific Northwest. We can get a cabin or something. The coffee here is unreal."

"I would rather die than become an American citizen," Ilya says, flatly. "It's bad enough I might have to become a Canadian one."

Shane shrugs. "Did you get up to anything when I was out?" He reaches over, linking his hands behind Ilya's thighs. He yanks him closer with a teasing smile on his face. "You haven't kissed me yet."

Ilya bends down, cradling Shane's face. He presses a deep kiss against his lips. Shane hums, pleased.

They separate. "I ran into my old defenseman," Ilya says, still a little shellshocked. It was also strange, having to communicate in English again after speaking so much Russian for the first time in...a while. "Mikhail Egorov. At the coffee shop."

Shane's eyes widen. "Woah, yeah. I saw he was drafted to the Rays." He gives a small smile. "God, J.J. hated that guy in the juniors. He said it was like trying to phase through a brick wall that could also fly."

Shane is still not on speaking terms with anyone on Montreal, other than the bumbling idiot whose name Ilya now knows is Hayden. But talking about his old team and the past appears to have gotten a lot easier for him.

"He looks older," Ilya says, sadly.

Shane looks up at Ilya, considering. "Was it..." he trails off. "Was it awkward or anything? Seeing him again?"

Shane is insistently yanking him down, and Ilya finds that, despite the intensely sugary, caffeinated drink, he feels pretty tired. So he lets Shane roll him onto the bed until he's face-down, buried in Shane's chest.

It makes telling Shane what happened at the coffee shop a lot easier.

"He's getting older, but he treats me exactly the same," Ilya mumbles as Shane reaches over and starts combing his fingers through Ilya's hair. "I betrayed him and he greeted me like an old friend."

Shane hums. "People who love you understand when you have to leave."

"He told me about Moscow," Ilya says. "A lot of things are going wrong."

"I'm sure things are really different now," Shane says. He keeps petting Ilya's head, which is infinitely more comforting than Shane's limited understanding of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. "Is everyone you know safe?"

Ilya doesn't mention Andrei. He doesn't mention the fear that gripped his heart when he first saw the news—*Andrei will be able to reach me*. It's been two years since, and he still hasn't heard from his brother, but it's still a worry that plagues him on the worst of days.

Instead, he talks about his teammates. "It sounds like," Ilya says, still muffled by Shane's chest, "most of my teammates are leaving Russia anyway."

Shane unknots one of Ilya's curls. "I read an article on that, I think. A lot of the American teams have been really aggressive in poaching Russian talent. Some of the signing bonuses are actually crazy," Shane nudges Ilya, smiling. "Should've held out for two more years huh? Then you could've been a multi-millionaire."

This joke does not land well. "Do not," Ilya snarls, looking up at Shane, "ever say that."

Shane flinches. "I'm sorry," he says, in a small voice. He looks genuinely apologetic. "I don't know what came over me."

Ilya doesn't like it when Shane gets upset with himself. He lies down again and mumbles, "Is fine. Just do not say it again."

They fall quiet as Shane keeps petting Ilya's hair. Ilya can tell Shane's still kicking himself, so he tries to change the subject away from his depressing ass country.

"What did Farah need?" Ilya asks. He listens as Shane immediately launches into a rant about brand deals, press appearances, and a coaching opportunity for his old hockey school in Ottawa. Now that Shane's reclaimed his throne as Canada's biggest hockey star, he threw himself back into the press circuit like a fish returning to water. Ilya zones out immediately, and tries to keep his resentment toward this version of Shane—the polished, image-obsessed, camera bait—at bay.

"I also," Shane swallows, "told Farah I'm going to participate in the Gay Olympics with Vancouver's queer hockey team, next year."

Ilya looks up at this. His eyes are wide. Shane never fails to surprise him.

The Gay Olympics are a worldwide sports and culture event that started, according to its founder, as a way to get "people of many different backgrounds," to play against each other. It celebrated inclusion and acceptance, often featuring gay and lesbian athletes from all across the globe who compete in a number of different sports—ice hockey now included. The structure replicated the style of the Olympics in many different ways, including a torch bearing ceremony, but disavowed it in many others. It banned any kind of medal or points system to rank the players. Athletes could only play for their city, not their country, and the game had practically no barrier to entry for participation. It was, the founder said, supposed to be the antithesis to the "nationalistic" pork barrel that surrounded the traditional Olympic games.

The 1994 Gay Olympics were expected to be held in Vancouver, to huge fanfare, but heavy criticism. For the past year, conservative protesters have been lined down the block, with

local news rags calling the event an "impending sodomite invasion" in full-page ads, and the Vancouver premier refusing to use government money to fund the games.

"I just think it would be nice," Shane says, suddenly sounding very shy. "Like, maybe people think I'm like, gay or whatever for doing it, but I just think it would be really good, if like, a popular NHL player treated things like gayness or difference as something we should embrace, instead of..." Ilya looks up, and sees Shane gesture vaguely in the air. "What we are currently doing. Especially after all the uncertainty with the Soviet Union, I think attention on any event that celebrates unity is a really good thing, you know? Plus, the press around the event has been so brutal, so I feel like as a public figure I have to do it, you know? I think it would also be nice if buzz around me generates more donations or more money for the federation—not that I didn't donate already or anything—"

"Shane," Ilya says, looking at him. Shane skids to a stop. He's out of breath. "I really like that idea." Ilya thinks about being a role model. He thinks about those kids in Moscow, running up to him with hearts in their eyes. "It will mean a lot. To a lot of people."

Shane smiles, preening under Ilya's praise. "Thanks." He leans down, and presses a kiss to Ilya's forehead. Ilya closes his eyes, savoring the affection. "I'm pretty excited. Farah's super on board with it too. You..." Shane looks at him, with soft eyes. "You don't need to say yes. But if you wanted to participate too... I'd be happy to handle it with Farah..."

Ilya matches Shane's smile with a rueful one of his own. He's not quite ready to do something that brave yet, but he's really happy he's dating someone who is. "I am okay. But thank you, Shane." He squeezes his arms tighter around him. "I will be there in the stands. Play nice with the amateurs."

Shane smirks, and Ilya thinks he sees fire dance in his eyes. "No way."

People are technically wrong when they say Ilya is the fastest skater in the league.

Ilya is only the fastest because his old right wing Kolya Makarov goes only as fast as his center does.

Ilya is not knocking his current teammates, but compared to what he was working with in Moscow, The Centaurs are unbelievably slow. Only Shane, who is widely considered the best player in the NHL, can—maybe, if he focuses all his energy into it—skate as fast as Ilya's old main line. But even he would struggle to sustain the Russians' pace.

Makarov was his right wing because he was the only hockey player in the entire world who could keep up with Ilya. Now, Makarov doesn't have Ilya holding him back.

"Put me on center," Rozanov says, the second he hears who they are playing against.

"Hey!" Shane frowns. He was in the middle of talking to Coach Wiebe. "You're not taking my position away from me without a good reason."

"Washington drafted Kolya Makarov," Ilya says, dead serious. "He was my right wing back in Moscow. The guy is supernatural. You need to put me in."

Shane scoffs. "I can handle Makarov."

Ilya distantly recalls Shane, in the juniors, tearing down the rink at full-speed, so he could slam Makarov out of commission, isolating Ilya with the puck.

"Yes, when he was right wing. You have no chance against him as center."

Shane's face goes red in disbelief. He has never been told he had "no" chance against another player before. He narrows his eyes, crossing his hands over his chest. "No chance?" Shane huffs, "Everyone knows I'm a much better player than Makarov."

Ilya rolls his eyes, "Do not be a baby," Ilya demands, which only makes Shane's eyes light further with fury. "Of course you are a better player than Makarov. The problem is it does not matter how good you are if you can't even keep up with him."

"Hollander's times trail after yours by only a couple milliseconds," Coach Wiebe says, "I get the kid is fast, but I don't think we need to completely reorganize the play—"

"Makarov regularly skates up to speeds of up to 46 kilometers per hour when he doesn't have a center he needs to support," Ilya says. Shane's eyes widen a little. "At Hollander's last All-Star Skills competition, he cleared the entire rink in 14 seconds. Impressive, but that puts him at a kilometer per hour speed of 44, which, simple math, is much slower than what he needs to be to play against Washington's new center."

"Yeah? And what was your time on the All Stars?" Wiebe says.

"13.2 seconds," Shane says, instantly. He's staring at Ilya, with a frown on his face.

Ilya smirks. "Like I said, you need me in the center," he stands to his full height, "Because I'm the only one who can keep up with him."

They discuss for a little longer, but Wiebe ends up going with Ilya's lineup. For Washington, Shane Hollander will be Ilya Rozanov's right wing. Bood, and Ilya says this with all the love in his heart, is too slow for the type of play they'll be expecting, so he gets traded off the line for Haas.

Three centers on the forward line. When Wiebe sees the play, he can't help but laugh, "You better know what the fuck you're doing, Rozanov," Wiebe says.

Ilya smirks. "After all these years, Coach," he says, tutting, "what will it take for you to finally admit that my plays are the fucking best?"

Ilya is only a little nervous that Shane took the conversation about Kolya badly. It's nothing against Shane, Ilya swears. It's just the truth: North American players don't skate that fast. Plus, they agreed, when they started dating, to keep personal feelings off the ice. Ilya raised a concern that he felt would better their play as a team.

Ilya's all ready to soothe any hurt feelings with one of his life-changing blow jobs, but Shane's all smiles when they go back to his house in Ottawa. They eat dinner, and then when dishes are put away, they cuddle on the couch. Shane lets Ilya feel him up, moaning sweetly as Ilya has one hand pressing Shane against his chest, another massaging his bulge through his sweatpants. Shane even turns over obediently to let Ilya fuck the daylights out of him against the back of the sofa. After, they kiss in the shower, and go to sleep holding each other.

It's a nice night. Too bad only a week later, Ilya reunites with his old right wing on the ice.

Their eyes meet in the middle of the face-off circle.

"Captain," Makarov says, in Russian. His face is firm and serious.

"Kolya," Ilya greets, also in Russian. "I hear you're mad at me."

Makarov may smile, but he glares at him with genuine intensity from the shade of his helmet. "Never thought we'd share an ice again," he narrows his eyes, "old friend."

The puck drops.

Ilya doesn't even have time to react.

Impossibly, Makarov has only gotten faster.

Makarov wins the face-off immediately, and he doesn't even look back as he then takes off for The Centaurs' zone.

Shane swears under his breath as Ilya shoots after his old teammate.

In some of the newspapers Shane makes him read, Ilya sees that a good amount of Russian players have a hard time adjusting to playing for an NHL team. Ilya never had that problem, so they are clearly full of shit. But a lot of sports journalists say that the North American system, which emphasizes a more brutal, physical, and riskier style of play, is very difficult to get accustomed to, especially if you are coming from the East. Solid Russian players pass when they should be scoring, flounder alone on ice, and get slammed with checks they struggle to come back from.

Unfortunately, since being drafted to Washington, Makarov has fully embraced the Western style.

It is nothing short of incredible. Sensing he shouldn't get too close to Shane, Makarov swings right past Haas, using a form of deceptive puck play they drilled in Moscow to juke Haas out of his cover. Before Haas can even try to chase after him, Kolya's right wing charges forward and checks him out of the way.

That leaves Shane and Ilya, chasing after him at full speed. But it's too late. It doesn't even matter that Makarov's wings are trailing so far behind him, with Makarov all alone in the offensive zone. Dykstra and Chouinard try to close in on him, but with a lightning fast right turn Makarov actually blasts right through the middle, worming right through the tiny gap between the two men, leaving the two D-men cursing in confusion as Kolya clears The Centaurs' defense, and—

Wyatt is a terrific goalie. But not even he can stop the sheer speed, strength, and force at which Makarov winds his club back, and slams the puck into the goal.

The arena, for once, is actually completely quiet.

They couldn't believe their eyes.

Makarov scored within the first 10 seconds of the game.

Shane and Ilya make eye contact, as both are bent over the ice with their hands on their knees, trying to catch their breath.

"We chased after the puck," Shane says, panting.

"What?" Ilya says. Jesus Christ, Makarov was just about as insane as Ilya predicted he would be. They were in big trouble if they didn't figure something out, quick.

"He was so fast I had no choice but to just react," Shane says. "I chased him like he was still a right wing I had to take out in the juniors." Shane says, gulping one last fistful of air before pulling himself up. "He's a center now. We need to start treating him like one."

Ilya stares up at Shane. Shane levels him with a serious, determined look. Ilya nods, in understanding.

"We need to fan out," Ilya says. He straightens up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "I need that fucker dodging people on every meter of ice."

Shane's eyes harden.

They line back up at the face-off circle.

Ilya sees out of the corner of his eye that Shane has his head bent, whispering to Haas. The kid nods, looking up at Shane. Shane pats him once on the top of his helmet, before skating off to his position next to Ilya.

Makarov meets his eyes with the same controlled fury as point one. Their coach always taught them never to gloat. This was never a lesson Ilya ever took to heart.

But Makarov, always the more serious of the two of them, doesn't let his one point make him complacent.

"These Canadians have made you slow, Captain," Makarov hisses, again in Russian.

"Finally in the spotlight, Kolya," Ilya smiles. "No one to hold you back?"

"Had to learn to play without you," Makarov says, "old friend."

The puck drops.

Ilya lets Makarov win the face-off.

He glances at Shane, Haas. Immediately, the three of them scatter.

Ilya's not chasing behind Makarov anymore. Ilya does the unthinkable and actually turns away from the puck so he can focus on skating as fast as he possibly can to the other end of the rink. He and Makarov always skated side by side; there was no reason that should change now that they're playing against each other. No longer staring at his back, Ilya focuses on clearing the end of the rink as fast as he possibly could, and with this goal in mind he quickly gains on Makarov. Once he sees he's about level with his old teammate, he skids, sudden and quick, a classic Coach Arkady move, and charges toward Makarov with his shoulder.

He slams Makarov into the glass, and the two of them fight for the puck between the boards. Makarov, though not by much, is a little smaller than Rozanov, and tries to use his size to worm his way out of Ilya, crushing him away from the puck. They are fighting for what feels like thirty entire seconds, when Ilya finally overpowers Makarov and kicks the puck with his stick somewhere halfway across the ice—

Which Shane, like a shot, immediately claims possession of.

He glances hotly at Ilya and Makarov, who had been struggling against the glass, before taking off. Makarov swears in Russian, and chases after Shane.

That can't be good—Shane still has half the ice to clear, with defensemen still in the way, and both forwards still up. If Makarov charges after Shane, Shane is going to lose.

The Centaurs activate. Haas starts skating desperately toward free ice, in case Shane needs to pass to someone. Dykstra moves up, and does the unthinkable, crossing into the offensive zone and slamming Washington's right wing out of the way, clearing Haas' entire pass zone. Shane handily dodges out of the defensemen's way, swinging quickly to the right—

Shane reacts just quickly enough—he hits the puck over to Haas perfectly, too quick for Washington's defensemen to interfere, practically a nanosecond before Makarov slams into him.

From this distance, Ilya can see Shane's eyes flash. They are full of some dark emotion, and interest surges in Ilya because it's not a look Shane typically has on the ice. Makarov slams into him, attempting to check him into the boards, but Shane quickly catches himself. Ilya has seen Shane take checks from guys twice his size—Makarov would have to hit him much harder than that to take him out. Shane rebounds so quickly that he has enough momentum, while Makarov tries to straighten himself out, to slam as hard as he possibly can into Makarov with his shoulder.

Makarov goes down.

Makarov's skating so fast too, that when he falls, he skids practically halfway across the ice. Shane smiles, dark and victorious when he does, and then he charges over to help Haas, who now has four hockey players hunting him down as he skates as quickly as possible toward the goal.

Just as Washington's left defenseman closes in on Haas, Haas swings around, and Shane's right there to take the puck off his hands.

Shane locks eyes with Ilya, who is completely unguarded.

Shane shoots the puck far, far back down the ice, after having spent the last forty seconds trying to clear the space into Washington's zone.

The puck lands right into Ilya's club.

He's far away from the goal, but Makarov's eyes widen. He knows it's over.

All the players, who had been scuffling with Haas and Hollander, have freed up just enough space for Ilya to slapshot the puck hard into the net.

The Centaurs win, but just barely.

Everyone's so exhausted by the end, that when the cheering from the box begins, and the booing from the Washington home crowd hits a crescendo, Shane, Ilya, and Haas can't even bring themselves to hold their heads up. Shane summons just enough energy to fling his helmet to the ground, and Ilya can immediately see that sweat is pouring down his forehead, and onto the ice.

"Fuck," Haas says, "I need to lie down."

Shane gestures wildly at Chouinard, who immediately understands what he needs. He tosses him his water bottle, and Shane downs half the thing in two gulps, throat working furiously, desperate to get it all down. Once he's done, he takes what's left and pours it over his head.

Ilya watches the display in an exhausted stupor.

Barrett skates up to Ilya, and wordlessly hands him his water bottle. Ilya takes his helmet off, and downs the entire thing in a gulp. God, water tastes so good. Ilya wishes he could melt the ice beneath him and just dunk his head in it.

It takes almost twenty minutes, as players slowly peel themselves off the ice, for everyone to have recovered enough to line up in the middle. Players start going down the line, shaking hands.

When Makarov gets to Shane, he shakes his hand, firm. Then closes his left hand over Shane's.

"Is," Makarov struggles, fighting for the words in English. Washington players look at him. He's starting to hold up the line.

Shane stares at him too, but he patiently waits for him to finish, "Is honor," Makarov swallows, "Is honor to play with you again. Hollander."

The intensity, the dark anger in Shane's eyes that Ilya saw when Shane checked Makarov to the ice, completely vanishes. Shane's face breaks out into such a lovely smile, that Makarov, who never smiles, can only helplessly return the favor with an earnest grin of his own.

"You too, Makarov," Shane says, and he means it. "Great game today."

Makarov nods, once, a little awkwardly. The two of them continue down the line. He moves on to Ilya, a serious look fixed back onto his face.

"Captain," he sticks his hand out to shake.

Ilya stares at the hand for a few seconds. Makarov starts to frown, wondering why Ilya is not moving.

Ah, fuck it.

He slaps his hand out of the way. Makarov opens his mouth to protest, loud and angry, when Ilya suddenly wraps Makarov into a hug.

"Ilyukha!" Makarov orders, in Russian. "Let me go! This is so fucking embarrassing! Not in front of my new teammates!"

"No," Ilya insists. He thinks he sees lights flash, maybe cameras. For once, Ilya doesn't mind sharing a moment like this with the world—old friends, reuniting. He never thought he would play with Makarov again. He never thought he'd see his old teammates again. It was one of the many sacrifices he accepted he'd have to make, crossing into Canada, "I love you. Let's hug forever."

"Fuck you! I'm going to kill you! You're the fucking worst!"

"I am literally not letting go unless you hug me back," Ilya answers, simply.

Makarov grumbles something profane. "You are such a dickhead," he spits, and then wraps his arms around Ilya.

The cheering is loud, but it echoes like chimes around the ice. Ilya grabs Makarov tighter, like if he squeezes him hard enough he can keep him from disappearing.

Makarov finally lets go. He raises his head at Ilya. "Next time," Makarov snarls. "I will not go so easy."

Ilya smiles at his old teammate fondly. "Next time."

He and Shane collapse on each other on the bus back to the hotel. They have to be shaken awake by Wyatt, who turns to patiently give the two of them privacy as they disentangle from each other.

They go up to the same hotel room, and shower. Shane washes Ilya's back, scrubbing thoroughly wherever his hands can touch. Ilya nudges Shane to turn over, so he can do the same.

When they finish, Ilya flops down onto the bed naked, lying on his back. He throws his arm over his eyes, letting the darkness lull him into a sleepy comfort.

He thinks they are just going to go to bed, but then Shane walks over, and gets on his knees. Ilya tries to protest—the game they just had, Shane shouldn't be doing that, it's bad for his body. But Shane doesn't listen to him. Instead, he kisses his thigh sweetly, palming where the curve of Ilya's ass meets his leg.

He starts by sucking his dick. Ilya has his eyes closed the entire time, letting himself get lulled into pleasure. Shane keeps stroking his outer thigh, comforting him into stillness every time he starts moaning, thrusting up, seeking release.

He thinks he's about to come, so he relays the message to Shane, in a keening moan.

Instead of taking him deeper, Shane slides off his dick with a pop.

His orgasm disappears with the suddenness of a cymbal crash.

Ilya's eyes fly wide open, "Uh," Ilya says dumbly. Shane stares at him, innocent. "Um. I did not come yet."

"I know," Shane says, sweetly.

"So... put your mouth back on my dick? Please?" Ilya asks, as nicely as possible.

Shane smiles at him. He ignores his pleading. He is too busy looking at Ilya, with his leaking dick and overcome expression, like he's a prize he won. "I like it when you're flat on your back for me."

Shane climbs up on top of Ilya, thighs lifted above his hips. Ilya tries to reach up and grab his waist, when suddenly he gets shoved down hard, Shane pinning his hands next to his head.

"Only I get to touch you," Shane says. When he looks down at Ilya, lying on his back, stunned and completely at his mercy, his eyes are wild. "Do you understand?"

Ilya has no choice but to just nod, dumbly.

"You're not going to come are you?" Shane says, as he slowly starts to jerk him off. Ilya is not in a position to answer, moaning wildly. Shane's gripping his dick too tight for him to come. "Because I'm not going to let you until you fuck me the way I need you to."

"Shane," Ilya begs, again. He is actually incapable of the human language, only able to gasp the same name, over and over. Shane. Shane. Shane. Fuck. Shane.

Shane keeps his hand tightly fisted around Ilya's dick. With his other hand he reaches behind and starts opening himself up.

Shane closes his eyes in pleasure, as he hooks his fingers in deeper. His mouth, which is still red and slick from giving Ilya head, is parted wide, moaning louder and louder as he spreads himself so he can take Ilya's dick.

He pulls out his fingers with a gasp, and Ilya has no choice but to just watch him. Shane adjusts, and then sinks down, and yeah, fuck this, Ilya's going to come. Any normal human being would, with how good Shane's perfect ass feels around his dick. But Shane must see it on his face, because he reaches up, and grabs Ilya's chin, so he can stare right into his eyes.

"What did I say?" Shane says softly, "about you coming too early?"

"I," Ilya breathes. He's struggling to get words out, "Fuck—Shane—"

Shane sees he's making Ilya incapable of speech, because he sighs, and with two hands planted on Ilya's chest, he starts bouncing on Ilya's dick.

Ilya yells, his head tilting back. Every time Shane sinks back down, he moans like it's being punched out of him, shoved out of him as he takes Ilya's cock. "I am the only one for you—" Shane moans, helpless. The control he'd been exercising is slowly slipping, "I am—*fuck*, your dick feels so fucking good," Shane sighs. Ilya wants to grab his hips, and flip him over, and fuck him until he screams. But the second he thinks he has his opening, in the haze of his pleasure, when he reaches over, to try and hold onto Shane's hips, Shane's eyes lock back in, sweet and intense, as he shoves Ilya back down onto the bed.

Shane's bouncing crawls to a slow grind, and Ilya moans like he's been shot. Shane reaches up, buries his hand in Ilya's hair, and he yanks.

Ilya whimpers as Shane forces his head back. His mouth is forced open, and he's breathing, hard, looking up at Shane with wide, desperate eyes.

"How did you feel like I played today?" Shane asks, sweetly.

What the hell?

"I," Ilya pants, "I do not want—*shit*," he groans, as Shane yanks his hair tighter, grinds his hips even slower, "I do not want to talk about hockey right now. I want to come."

"Answer me, and maybe I'll let you," Shane says. His bouncing starts to pick up speed, and Ilya's eyes almost roll to the back of his head. Shane gives his hair one more insistent yank to bring him back to reality, "How did you think I played today?"

"Good," Ilya chokes out. "You are so good." Shane clenches around Ilya's dick, and Ilya moans.

"Just good?" Shane asks. He takes one hand off Ilya's chest, and starts playing with his own nipples. All Ilya can do is lie on his back and watch. "You were right you know," Shane moans, as his thumb presses into his chest, "He was a lot faster than me."

"Who?" Ilya gasps, "Kolya?"

"Mmmm," Shane hums. He gasps as his thumb circles his nipple harder, "Kolya. What did you say again?" Shane's left hand drops suddenly, back on Ilya's chest, as his right grips Ilya's hair tighter. Ilya feels like his head is being forced back at an almost 90-degree angle. "He was the only one who could keep up with you?"

Jesus Christ. This is what this was about?

"Shane," Ilya says, desperately, "I said I was the only one who could keep up with him. Not other way—*fuck me!*"

Shane's back to bouncing on his dick, ferociously. His lips are parted, and his cheeks are turning all red—like he's close to coming. "I am the only one who can beat you," Shane moans, as he fucks himself on Ilya's cock. "I am the only one at your level," Shane chokes out, "I am the only one who can keep up with you," he hisses, "And I—shit!" Shane screams, as he comes hot stripes across Ilya's chest, his stomach, marking him.

As Shane sags, boneless from his orgasm, Ilya finally gets the chance to lunge forward, sit up and grab his waist, wrapping one hand around his back to support him as Ilya forces him up and down on his dick so Ilya can finally fucking come.

"You are the only one," Ilya groans, into his ear, "You are the only one—"

Ilya comes into Shane with a shout, burying his face into Shane's neck, yelling for what feels like two solid minutes as he shakes apart, with Shane in his hands.

They stay like that for what feels like hours, Ilya's face buried in Shane's neck, Shane collapsed into Ilya's chest, like his strings had been cut. Finally, finally, Ilya picks them up, Shane giggling sleepily as Ilya carries him to the shower, and they both get clean.

When they lie back down, Shane pillowing his head on Ilya's chest, he mumbles:

"That all being said, he's a fantastic player," Shane says, diplomatically, "I'm really excited to play with him again."

"You cannot," Ilya says, into the night, "Make me come like that every time we play against him."

Shane laughs, "No, this was a one-time thing," he looks up at Ilya, from where he's lying down on his chest, eyes possessive, "To remind you of who your real competition is."

Shane explains the entire ordeal on the drive to his parent's house.

"Listen," Shane says, tapping on the steering wheel. "I just want to say, I really appreciate this."

"Of course," Ilya says. He's trying to pretend like he's not jumping out of his skin.

"They are both nice people, it's just you know, after Montreal," Shane winces, "We weren't as close as we were before, so it's just taken a while for us to get back to a good place, you know?"

"How much did you tell them?" Ilya asks.

Shane blows a lot of hot air out of his mouth. "When it happened? Nothing. Which was really hard, because they were," Shane grits his teeth, "*very* involved in my career. They went from knowing and managing every part of Shane Hollander, the money maker, to finding out I got traded in the news." He sighs. "It hurt my mom the most, because she was the one who had all the relationships with the brands, and then all of a sudden they wanted nothing to do with her." He starts turning into a more residential area, full of thick trees and big houses, "Her two great loves are hockey and her son, and one day, without explanation, she just lost both, so..."

Ilya blinks. "And now?"

Shane reaches down Ilya's hand, as if trying to ground himself, while keeping the other on the wheel. "Well, when we won the first cup, I called them and it was this long conversation where we all cried very hard. I think I yelled at my mom, which is crazy, because I've never done that before. She just like, couldn't understand why I didn't come to her," Shane chews idly at his thumbnail, "Which, looking back, I am like, maybe she would've handled everything better, if I got her involved, but also maybe she would've handled it exactly the same way as it went down, you know?"

Shane huffs, in frustration. Ilya gives him back his hand so he can keep driving. "I don't know. I really hurt their feelings. There's a lot of things I wish I did differently. But the one thing I will never be sorry for is getting to tell them in person, and not having them find out in some sports tabloid, with a big blurry photo of their son beating the shit out of his teammate."

Ilya hums.

"Anyway, so now they know I'm gay. They know about the breakdown. They know about Rose. They know about the cover-up—which all took them a very, very long time to come around to. Jesus Christ, with Rose, I had to talk my mom off the cliff—" Shane suddenly stops, eyes wide. Ilya frowns, confused why he stopped talking, even as Shane sneaks a shaky glance over at Ilya.

"I'm sorry. That's not a funny thing to say."

"What?" Ilya says.

"The uh... my mom jumping off a cliff?"

Ilya blinks again, processing what Shane is trying to suggest. "Is not funny because... my mom killed herself?" he asks.

Shane cringes. "Yeah."

He then rushes to fix the social awkwardness that descends in the car, "I know that's like, really not okay for me to joke about, not that I was joking about that to begin with—but like, it was more like, joking about my mom doing it? Not that that's any better. I'm just trying to get better at not just saying what pops in my head," he pauses, "But also I'm trying to also get better at just saying what I mean? And not hiding what I'm feeling all the time? Wow, there's kind of a lot I need to work on—"

Ilya suddenly grabs Shane's thigh, hard. The entire time Shane had been talking, his leg had been shaking, jostling the Camry in a nonstop state of motion. "Shane," Ilya says, gently, but firmly, "Are you okay?"

Shane takes a deep breath. He sees him count mentally to ten, letting the air he captured escape out in a puff of exasperation. "I'm kind of nervous." Shane admits, shyly.

Ilya smirks. "No shit."

"My parents always mean well, but I just wish they had stuff to do that wasn't me you know?" Shane cuts another nervous glance over at Ilya, "I know it's like, selfish for me to say —"

"Shane," Ilya says, calmly, "you can complain about your parents without pointing out mine are dead."

Shane cringes again. He grips the steering wheel tight, tension starting to coil through his arms. "Shit, sorry—"

"And you can stop apologizing," Ilya says, lightly. "Sometimes people say awkward shit. Just talk through it and move on."

Shane chews on this for a minute. The winter cold in Ontario washes his face a light blue. "Thanks for saying that man."

Ilya hums, smiling. He looks down, and sees that Shane's leg has stopped shaking too.

"So," Ilya clarifies, "They know you are gay. They do not know I exist."

Shane wobbles. "Well, of course they know you exist," Shane's eyes cut over to him, "You're my teammate."

"Do they know you have a boyfriend?"

Shane smiles despite himself. "Is that what we are?" he says, teasing. "Boyfriends?"

"If you do not like, I can call us lovers," Ilya croons, salaciously. Shane laughs. "Long-term sex havers, only for each other."

"They just know I'm 'introducing them' to someone special when we have dinner."

Ilya smiles, pleased. *Someone special*. "Has been four years," Ilya says. "Why now?"

Shane shrugs. "It was nothing dramatic. I just thought I could do what I always did, which was keep my love life separate from my family life. But then we did board game night, for the first time in like, five years. I was sitting in the den, having the kind of fun with them I hadn't had since I was a kid, and I just thought," Shane says, and as he talks a soft, fond smile grows on his face. "The only thing that would make this night more awesome than it already is, is if you got to be here too."

Ilya thinks about Shane, his mom, his dad, together as a unit. When Ilya imagines them they are always wearing matching Christmas sweaters, like they are posing for a photo. The Hollander family are laughing around a table, playing something that maybe involves dice. The scene Shane describes in the den feels so foreign to Ilya that shoving him in there too makes the fantasy feel claustrophobic, and overcrowded.

However, no matter what Ilya feels, he did really want to meet Shane's parents. He and Shane had been dating for four years now. When you date in secret, a love with just the two of you as witnesses, the days fly by like light years. You can spend year after year, the two of you in your own slice of paradise, before you even think to look up, and realize it's been almost half a decade.

So having Shane wake them both up from their stupor, and choosing to tell someone, especially someone as important as his parents...

It meant a lot.

They pull up to Shane's parents' house. It, like Shane's house in Ottawa, is very nice, and big. There is a lot more wood and stone, like the material was anchoring the home to the earth.

Shane parks the car.

"Thank you again," Shane says. "Just, thank you," he shuffles, and looks down at his hands. "I know this isn't an easy thing to ask." Suddenly, a hot, protective expression flashes over his face, and Ilya feels his breath being taken away when Shane looks back up at him. "If they

hate you, I'll..." Shane trails off, "I'll drive us back, immediately. If this sucks unbelievably bad, we can just forget the entire thing happened, we can go play Mario Kart or something, and I'll cut off contact with my parents—"

"Shane—"

"I'll choose you, okay? No matter what. My parents will just have to deal."

"Shane," Ilya says. He reaches over, and traps Shane's face in both his hands. "It will be fine," Ilya shoots him a crooked smile. "If you get nervous, I will be here." He pauses, "I will be here." he reiterates.

Shane smiles shakily, "God, I suck. You are meeting *my* parents. You are doing the hard part. I should be making you feel better."

Ilya rolls his eyes, "Do not say bad stuff about yourself. Is unattractive." On that note, he swings out of the car, and starts heading toward Shane's parents' house.

Shane catches up to him in a hurry. "Do you need their names again?"

Ilya hums. He taps the side of his head, like he's checking if it's empty. "I do not remember. But I will be lucky and guess. Mom starts with B something... Dad is... I want to say Arnold?" Ilya prepares to knock on the door, when Shane yanks his hand back.

"Are you actually serious?"

Ilya sighs. Shane looks like he's going to fly out of his skin. Just two people, both about to fly out of their skin, standing in front of a very nice doorway. "No, I was just kidding," He sticks one finger up, "Yuna," he sticks another finger up, "David."

Shane, satisfied with Ilya's ability to recall two names, takes a deep breath, and knocks on their door.

The door gets yanked open immediately, almost like the parents were standing right in front of it.

"Baby!" Yuna cries. She envelopes Shane in a hug, which leaves Ilya standing awkwardly to the side, next to Shane's white dad.

She spends two minutes too long pinching Shane's cheeks, gleefully celebrating the fact that he looks a lot healthier. "Have you been eating more? It's that lasagna your dad keeps making, isn't it? He's been taking cooking classes. Isn't he good at it? You should thank the heavens you didn't have to try his sushi—"

Since she's too busy focusing on Shane, Ilya needs to engage David somehow or else they'll just keep standing awkwardly next to each other, watching Yuna and Shane talk.

David puts Ilya out of his misery, "Ilya Rozanov," he says, affable and Canadian. "It's nice to finally meet you." He sticks his hand out to shake, and Ilya takes it.

"Thank you sir," Ilya says, all polite. Shane was freaking out over nothing. Ilya was always really good with parents. Why would Shane's be any different? "You have a lovely home."

Shane finally manages to fight Yuna off. Yuna's head spins, and her eyes zero in on Ilya.

"Where are my manners?!" Yuna pushes Shane away, who grumbles and rubs at his cheeks. "Mr. Ilya Rozanov, in the flesh! My son talks about you all the time!"

"Mom!" Shane shouts, exasperated.

"Thank you Yuna," Ilya starts, sticking his hand out. "It's nice to—"

He thinks she's going to shake his hand. Instead, with the same, joyful smile on her face, she runs, leaps into his arms, and hugs him.

"We are so happy you joined Shane's new team," she groans, into Ilya's shoulder. "Our son has seemed so much happier with you around."

Ilya only gets a minute to think about how hard he's killing this parent visit for Shane, considering he has both parents enthusiastically greeting him with smiles on their faces.

When, to Ilya's horror, they spring forth in his eyes, uncalled for and uncontrolled.

Tears.

You cannot be serious. Ilya thinks. He knows immediately why. It's because Yuna hugged him, and she smells like a mom. Ilya can't even put a finger on what exactly it is she smells like, and why it's making him react so badly. It's just the way all moms smell, even if they are shitty moms. When they hug you, it smells like nurture.

Ilya, in his panic, pushes her away. It's sudden enough that Yuna starts, almost falling over, and Shane jumps, looking alarmed. Shane reaches over immediately to steady his mom. He frowns at Ilya, looking genuinely kind of pissed, until his eyes widen when he realizes what he's seeing.

Ilya is starting to get very embarrassed. He pointedly turns his head away.

Shane jumps into action. "Mom!" Shane shouts, suddenly, "How many times do I need to tell you this cobblestone is a complete hazard to society." He uses his sneaker and taps the raised rock with his foot. "Guests trip on it every single time they come here."

Yuna blinks, and glances over at Ilya, who has his entire face turned away so no one can see him.

"Ha!" David laughs, "Once your mom and I were coming home from a holiday party over at the Treasury, and she tripped on this here path and actually flew face first into the door."

"David," Yuna says, patiently. She is successfully distracted away from Ilya's behavior, because instead she looks very intent on cussing out Shane's dad, guests be damned. "Honey,

if you tell that story to one more person I will have to tell our guests about what you did freshman year."

David looks appropriately cowed. "Come on, honey. What *we* did freshman year."

Shane shudders. "I will actually throw up if you tell that story," he says, definitively, "Can we go inside now? Ilya and I can grab a couple other things from the car and meet you there."

Yuna clicks her teeth, "Oh no, come on, you guys are our guests, your dad and I should help ___"

"Yuna," David says, firm. Yuna looks over at David, and they communicate something with their eyes. Ilya cries in silence, facing away from them. Both of them turn back around and nod at the same time. "We will meet you inside," David confirms.

When they go back inside the house, Shane grabs Ilya's hand. He walks them down the path, and back behind the safety of the car.

Ilya turns around, slowly. Shane gasps when he sees it: tears, uncontrollable, obvious, abundant, flowing down his face.

"I do not," Ilya says, quietly, "know how to get them to stop."

"Ilya," Shane says. He grabs both his hands in his. "Let's go home. My parents are nice people, they'll understand. We can come again next time. Maybe take two will be less intense," Shane says, giving him a brave smile.

Ilya shakes his head insistently, "No. I told you I was ready," he says, which is at odds with his shaky voice. "We are meeting your parents today."

Shane looks at Ilya, at the tears that keep springing up and rolling down his face. Shane's eyes are soft and loving when he reaches up and wipes a drop away with his thumb. Ilya hopes he communicates that if Shane was trying to get him to stop crying, that was completely the wrong move. Because the second Shane puts his hand back down, he sinks into Shane's arms and starts sobbing.

"Okay," Shane says, brave. He holds Ilya tightly against his chest, patting his hair, rubbing his back. "We can stay here as long as you want?"

Ilya can only cry into Shane's chest. He doesn't have it in him to respond.

"So, Dad's freshman year," Shane says, "He had this teammate that just fucking sucked. He was always like, harassing my mom, saying all this weird shit about her," Shane laughs, dryly. "So my parents cooked up this like, truly disgusting prank to get back at him."

Ilya is still crying, but he finds that listening to Shane's story at least gives him something to focus on.

"The creep was always hounding after my mom, trying to get her to sleep with him, and saying a bunch of crazy shit about Asian women I won't repeat because it's gross," Shane

takes a deep breath.

"Anyway, so my parents cook up this idea for this disgusting prank, where Yuna will tell the guy she has a 'sexy surprise for him after class' and that she will be waiting for him in his room," Shane is starting to giggle. "That's when she and my dad went dumpster diving at the only Chinese supermarket in town, and dug up all these like, really disgusting fish bones that the store had to throw out. My mom and dad spent all afternoon collecting it. Or, well," Shane laughs, "My dad did all the collecting, and my mom pointed to the ones she thought would work the best for the prank."

"Anyway, they collected all of this into a giant trash bag, and just dumped it out, all over the guy's bed. The plan was then for him to find it, freak out, and my mom to walk in five minutes later, acting all ready to sleep with him until she sees this. Then she would go all like, 'what the fuck is wrong with you?!' and embarrass the hell out of him."

Ilya pauses. He can't believe this is working. His disgust and bemusement at what Shane was telling him is calming him down. He finds himself stilling, in Shane's hands, and he feels Shane cling to him tighter because of it.

"The problem was though, because my dad had to do most of the dumpster diving, his clothes, his skin, his everything just like, reeked of old fish. He actually couldn't get the smell out. Obviously he couldn't be walking around the hockey frat, reeking of fish, or else his entire team would know he just helped mom prank this guy."

"Anyway, so he had to spend 48 hours in my mom's dorm bathing in lemon juice and baking soda," Shane says, while continuing to scratch idly at Ilya's curls, "and by the way my mom had three roommates, and they shared the bathroom with like half the floor, so they were pissed," Ilya, with his face pressed against Shane's chest, feels Shane shake, with barely contained laughter.

Even though Shane sounded exasperated by them sometimes, Ilya could tell Shane thought his parents were really cool. "So the happy ending is that the teammate became known as Fishfucker Barry by the entire school. Except then my dad also became known as Bath Salts David at my mom's dorm because of the whole, sitting in a tub of lemon juice and baking soda naked in a shared bathroom thing."

Ilya doesn't know if Shane did it on purpose, but now he cannot think of the comforting, maternal smell that enveloped him when Yuna hugged him, without also thinking of her reeking of old fish. The disgust stops the flood of his tears entirely.

Ilya detaches himself from Shane. He uses his shirt sleeve to wipe away the last of his tears. "You were right," Ilya says. Shane leans over, roots around in his car drawer, and pulls out a pack of tissues. Ilya accepts, and blows his nose into them. "That story is disgusting."

Shane shoots him a fond smile. "It's really foul. They only just started eating fish again. I was surprised my mom let my dad make sushi."

Ilya straightens. He checks himself out in the car mirror, fixing his hair, rubbing away the bloat in his eyes. When he turns back to Shane, he looks halfway normal.

"I am ready."

Dinner was lovely. David made chicken.

Despite the weirdness at the front door, it seemed Yuna and David already loved Ilya for the sole reason that he was on Shane's team, he was good at hockey, and he helped their son win games.

Also, even though Shane didn't formally say 'this is my boyfriend,' Ilya got the sense that Yuna and David already knew. They accepted the premise with grace, asking vague questions about their relationship, without being too invasive, seeming happy with the answers.

David enlists Shane to come wash and dry dishes with him. Ilya insists he help, but Yuna bats him away, telling him to let the men work.

Yuna disappears to type away at something on a massive computer chained to an even bigger desk. It's a machine Ilya's never seen in someone's home before. She's talking animatedly about deal terms on the landline that Ilya struggles to understand in English, so Ilya decides to wander the house.

He gets as far as the living room when he sees it.

Shane's parents are like Shane in that they've made every room in their home look like it was professionally decorated. It was clear his parent's Ottawa home was conceptualized with maximum comfort in mind—fur rugs, expensive wooden tables, stone fireplaces.

All greens, browns, and greys. A coordinated beige.

Which makes the elaborate shrine, full of ornate gold and red trimmings, propped in what looks like a dark, wooden cabinet, stand out immediately.

Ilya walks to it, as if in a trance.

There is a bowl of fresh fruits on the base of the cabinet, next to a bowl of what looks like dry pasta instead of rice. There's a bowl of water. Ilya peeks into it. It's been changed recently. Two candles stand on either end of the cabinet, unlit. And on the very side, looking much, much older than most of the offerings presented, a completely wrapped, family-sized Hersey's Bar.

Raised above it are two black and white photographs. One, of a young man, in an ill-fitting suit. Another, of a woman, who looks identical to Yuna, in a plain, collared dress.

"Shane's grandparents."

Ilya starts.

Yuna stares at the display with a complicated expression. Then, she walks past Ilya, and she gets on her knees. She lights two incense sticks, and lowers her head, a curtain of highlights and brown hair sweeping her face into hiding. Ilya watches rapt.

He feels a little silly just standing there, so he follows her, kneeling on the ground. He stays a little ways away from her, so he isn't in her space. She's mumbling something that Ilya either can't hear, or can't understand. When she's done, she sets the incense sticks, and lights the candles on each end. Lastly, she picks up a bell on the raised platform of the cabinet and rings it once, by her father's side, and then again, by her mother's.

She stands up. Shane and David are in the kitchen, talking about hockey in loud voices while washing dishes. Ilya stays kneeling, at a loss for words.

"They've been dead for over thirty years, but I talk to them everyday," Yuna says. Her bright, excitable demeanor when she greeted him, when she was eating dinner, is gone. Instead, there's just a woman, who's lived a long life, standing before Ilya.

Ilya swallows. "Did you like them?" he asks, still looking up at her.

Yuna lets out a startled laugh at the question. "Did I like them? Huh." She thinks for a second. "I love them, they are a part of me, and their souls live on in my memory. Did I like them? Not really."

Ilya nods, understanding. "My mom," he nudges his head toward the shrine. "She had one of those in my home, in Moscow," Yuna frowns, confused. "Not that, exactly. But holy symbols, a prayer book," Ilya can see it, as if it was right in front of him. "Pictures of her parents."

Yuna smiles now, conspiratorial. She really looks like Shane when she does. "Did she like them?"

"She would cry, every night, calling their names," Ilya says, solemnly. Yuna's smile falls, and a sad, heartbroken expression mars her face. She crosses her arms, and considers the boy kneeling in front of her.

"The," she waves her hands in the general direction of the shrine, "the thing is over. You can stand up now."

Ilya stands up. The two consider each other.

"Does Shane do that?" Ilya asks, because he's curious. Shane spends most of the time seeming inconvenienced by the fact he was born Japanese, and gets aggressively defensive when asked about it.

"Nah. He did it once when he was a kid. I think the entire thing kind of freaked him out. He thought it was like talking to ghosts. He gave his grandparents his only King-Sized Hershey Bar though," she smiles ruefully.

Ilya doesn't know why this bothers him, but it does. He knows he's here to meet Shane's parents, and make a good impression, yet he can't stop himself from saying what he chooses to say next. "You should make him do it again."

Yuna frowns, but doesn't look particularly upset. "Why? He doesn't want to."

"Those are his grandparents," Ilya insists. "He should talk to them."

Yuna's frown deepens. "He doesn't have to," she says simply, "they're dead."

Ilya finds himself getting frustrated, even though he's sticking his nose where it doesn't belong. "But you talk to them everyday, alone," Shane and David are still laughing, distantly in the kitchen. Ilya thinks about his mom again, and how she'd pet his head when he prayed with her. "Would you rather do that with him?"

"No."

Ilya falls silent.

She cuts him a measuring look. "My parents were around your age now, you know. When they came to Canada."

He freezes.

"Their home," Yuna sighs, a little frustrated with herself. She looks past Ilya, to stare right at the portraits of Shane's grandparents, "it wasn't very nice to them. When they ran, they brought with them a lot of pain. A lot of baggage."

"Did they come from bad families?" Ilya asks.

Yuna shakes her head, "It's not just family, Ilya. It's the culture too. Living in Japan destroyed them, but since they left there was no one there to make that pain feel real for them. But because I was their only child, I was the only one there to witness, and shoulder that suffering."

Understanding, like a sad, unfortunate lark, hits Ilya in the middle of the living room. "You do not want Shane," Ilya finds himself saying, as if outside himself, "to have to carry that with you."

Yuna looks at him, steely, resilient. Unlike Ilya, she seems like someone who rarely cries. "I understand why you need to keep your relationship with my son a secret," she starts. Ilya flinches a little, as this is the first time tonight his relationship with Shane has been brought up explicitly.

"But I need you to be prepared. You're all the other has, if that's the case. Life will be very hard for you," and then, against all odds, her voice cracks. "Life will be very hard for my son —"

"I will bear it all for him," Ilya says, immediately. "I will take all his pain. I will be good for him."

Yuna smiles sadly, "You idiot," she says, affectionately, "His pain is yours. Your pain is his. You take on his pain, it'll just become his again. The cycle continues."

She places a hand on Ilya's shoulder. Ilya stares at her, a little awestruck. "Sometimes it's a lot easier to have family who want to help though, no?"

A month before visiting Shane's parents, Ilya had played against his former left wing Shura Baranov.

The game had weighed on him. Baranov was a phenomenal player. Ilya knew this. He trained him since he was a rookie. Normally, he was the best support a center could ask for.

In Buffalo, he had completely fallen apart.

It was embarrassing to watch. He was smaller, so he got slammed, hard, by the bigger players on The Centaurs. When he had the puck, he would frustrate his teammates by passing to people who weren't free. Back in Russia, he was a player who had razor sharp instincts on the ice. In Buffalo, the mad scramble of players fighting for the puck left him listless.

Ilya had gotten The Centaurs a five minute penalty when he couldn't take it anymore. He jumped out of the box and skated over to Shura, who looked like he was fucking blinking back tears on the ice. He grabbed the kid with both hands fisted in his jersey, and slammed him into the boards.

The kid squeaked, terrified.

"You need to get your shit together," Ilya hissed, furious. Watching this kid play had made his stomach turn. "You are fucking embarrassing yourself."

Instead of fighting back, the kid looked down, ashamed.

"Sorry, Captain," he said, in a small voice.

"You'll never make it here if you behave like this, do you hear me?" Ilya yelled. He was begging him to understand. "They'll fucking kill you and you'll have to go back home," he slammed him, hard against the boards again, to drive his point home. The kid yelped, "Do you want to go back home?!"

Before Baranov could say another word, Ilya felt a hand on his shoulder. Shane looked up at him, stern. He gave Ilya's shoulder another insistent tug. "Ilya," Shane says, and his name, on the ice of all places, sent a shudder down his spine. The sensation was enough for him to drop Baranov, who collapsed on the ground.

When they shook hands on the ice, Ilya slipped Baranov a piece of paper. The phone number to Shane's house in Ottawa.

Ilya thinks about Shura Baranov now, on their drive back from Shane's parents' house.

"I saw my mom was talking to you for kind of a long time," Shane says. He's in a good mood. Dinner had food he liked and his parents seemed to like Ilya too, "Was she okay?"

"Yeah," Ilya says. He stares listlessly out the window.

Shane looks over, this time a little worried. "Did she say something?"

Ilya knows it's fucked up, because it's Shane's mom after all. But for some reason, he doesn't want to tell Shane about what he talked about with Yuna. "No," Ilya answers, and doesn't elaborate.

But now Shane's properly freaked. He starts glancing over in increasingly conspicuous ways. Soon, his worry will drive him to start filling the silence with a bunch of panicked, half-constructed English words that blend together in ways that make it hard for Ilya to keep up with.

So Ilya decides to put them both out of their misery, "It's not about your mom. Your parents," he shoots Shane a hesitant smile, "Your parents were very nice to me."

Shane smiles back, wide. "They liked you a lot. They want to have you back."

This does warm Ilya's heart. "Cool."

Shane laughs. "Cool."

They fall into a much more companionable silence this time. Shane is humming along to a song that does not match to what is playing on the radio. Ilya keeps thinking about Yuna, and Baranov, and Moscow falling.

"I want to get some of my old teammates together," Ilya says, out of the blue. He jolts Shane out of his reverie. "To play a game. Maybe with The Centaurs," Ilya thinks again, "Depend on who wants to join."

Shane nods enthusiastically, "That sounds like a great idea," he says, "We could host it at our arena in Ottawa?"

Ilya shakes his head, "No. Too..." he waves his hands around vaguely. He clutches at his collar, "You know?"

"Yeah, like too buttoned up," Shane says, without even having to glance over, "There are some really nice natural lakes up north. If you are looking for something a bit more casual."

Ilya nods. He likes that better. Just a game, with everyone he knows. Out on the open ice. Nothing but an eternal afternoon, waiting for them when they finish.

"...except it will have to be during the off season," Shane hums, "So not outdoors," Shane taps his fingers, "Oh! We can use my old hockey school. It's a lot less intense than the official arena in Ottawa. I know the owners and all the teachers there pretty well. They'd be willing to let us use their stuff."

Ilya shrugs. He's willing to accept that. Just no arena. No stadium. Friends and family only.

"Do you," Shane bites his lip, looking a little hesitant but plowing forward anyway. "What are your thoughts on getting the press involved? It could be a nice photo-op. I could get my mom and Farah on the phone. The game would be a really nice show of unity, at a time when people really need it. The Centaurs playing with the former stars of the Red Army," Shane smiles, "It'll be like your hug, with Makarov, on the ice. The press really liked that. People thought it was really heartwarming."

Ilya hates this idea with a passion. He also resents Shane's brain for immediately searching for how to sell and repackage Ilya's idea to the public. "No," Ilya snarls. Shane doesn't even flinch. It seems he expected this reaction, "No press."

"Okay," Shane says, softly. "No press," Shane keeps driving, and they fall back into silence, as Shane works the logistics of what Ilya suggested.

"I can call them all up," Ilya says, gruff. "Try to get them to spread the word to other Russian NHL players."

Shane's eyebrows raise, "How many people do you think are going to say yes?"

According to official counts, as of 1993, there are now forty Russian hockey players in the NHL. Much higher than in 1989—when the official count was one.

Ilya calls his old defenseman Misha Egorov, his old right wing Kolya Makarov, and even Shura Baranov, who greets him warmly, despite their last game. That exhausts the Russians he knew personally in North America, so Egorov, ever the social lubricant, talks to some of the players he knows, tries to get them to come out as well.

In the end, about twenty Russian players turn up. Ilya can't help but smirk.

As fate would have it, just enough for another team.

Yuna and David are also there, with both of them perched on the side of the rink. Yuna has a film camera with her. Ilya is about to freak out again. No press, but Yuna sees his face and puts a gentle hand on his shoulder, "It's just so we have something to remember," she says. Ilya nods, and lets her shoot a couple photos of Russian NHL players, arriving at the school.

Immediately, men are clapping each other on the back, yelling warm greetings in Russian. Other players run into each other's arms, laughing excitedly as they start warming up on the ice. Some are less friendly. Some involve threats, and shouting, and shouting threats of fist fights. It's a little overwhelming, if Ilya was being honest. He'd never seen this many Russians in one place, other than, well, Russia.

"Captain!" Egorov shouts. He's already flanked by Shura and Kolya, along with ten other players, all talking over each other excitedly, "I think it's time for another one of your famous speeches!"

Shane looks at him, confused. Eighteen other Centaurs trail behind Shane, with matching expressions of disorientation.

"Jesus Christ," Dykstra says, whistling, "I feel like I'm in Lake Placid or something."

"Do not mention Lake Placid," Ilya hisses, serious. "Or you will be killed."

Dykstra salutes, half-heartedly, still looking around the rink with wide eyes. Ilya bangs his hockey stick against the boards—once, twice, to get everyone's attention.

Immediately, forty pairs of eyes swivel to look at Ilya. Ilya smirks. No matter where people hail from, they look to Ilya like he's their north star.

"Thank you all for coming," Ilya shouts, in Russian. "It's been a crazy few years, no?"

"Literally insane!" Egorov shouts. Everyone who knows Russian choruses their agreement. A much older player yells, "Fuck Gorbachev!" to a nonzero amount of laughter and jeering from other people.

"Some of us left Moscow for money," Ilya says. "For love. For a different life. We traveled farther than we thought we could go, and the only reason that is possible," Ilya pauses, voice gaining in strength, "is because we fucking love hockey!"

The Russian players start cheering wildly, banging their sticks against the ice, against the boards, wherever they can make the most noise. The Centaurs have just been staring, confused, while Ilya addresses the crowd. They only break out of their reverie when Shane starts banging his stick in tandem, even though he clearly doesn't know what's going on. Quickly, the entirety of The Centaurs start blindly hollering in solidarity.

Ilya looks over at Shane, off to the side, with a lovestruck smile on his face. He motions him over with his head, in a *get up here* kind of way. Shane looks a little flustered, pointing to himself, and The Centaurs, catching onto what Ilya wants Shane to do, starts their own chant as well. *Captain! Speech! Speech! Speech!*

Shane skates up to the front, alongside Ilya. He looks a little nervous, so Ilya, as covertly as possible, gives the small of his back a comforting squeeze.

"Ilya Rozanov makes us a better team," Shane begins. Shane isn't slowing down his English for the Russians necessarily, but Ilya can tell he has second-language learners in mind when he speaks. Shane smiles, "Makes me a better captain."

"That is Rozanov way!" Egorov shouts, this time in English. Shura and Kolya cheer alongside him.

"He was able to make us better," Shane continues, "Because of who he is. And who he is, is a friend to all of you. He is where he came from. He is the people who played with him before

us," the ambient chatter of the crowd falls completely silent.

Shane always knew how to be a commander. "We are better because of Ilya Rozanov, because Ilya Rozanov is better because of you."

"That's fucking right, C!" Bood shouts. The Centaurs start clapping wildly, and on the Russian side, Kolya looks over at Shura, and starts clapping along with them. Soon the rink erupts into applause, as Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander, stand, side by side—

Faces turned to a new world.

"Alright," Ilya shouts, "We are going to play some fucking hockey or what?!"

Ilya frowns when he sees the teams separate, with Russians on one side and The Centaurs on the other.

"This feel right to you?" Ilya hisses, to Shane.

Shane thinks it over. "It feels very Cold War," he shoots him a grin, "Maybe we need to mix things up."

"Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov not allowed to be on same team!" Egorov shouts, "Is unfair!"

"Amen to that!" Bood shouts, on the other side. "Split those fuckers up!"

"We need another forward!" Kolya shouts back, in Russian, on the other end of the ice.

Ilya and Shane look at each other, laughing a little. Shane places a hand on Ilya's shoulder. "Come on, I'll join the Russians."

Ilya's eyes widen, "For real?" Ilya bites his lip, "You do not even speak their language."

Shane taps on his lips, pretending to think. When he looks back at Ilya, his smile is a little mischievous.

Ilya has an out of body experience when Shane lifts his hand, and starts counting down on his fingers.

"Pass," Shane says, in Russian.

Ilya's brain literally liquifies into the ice.

"Shoot," Shane says, again in Russian. His voice is soft, and silky. This sends a hot bolt of pleasure down Ilya's spine. He licks his lips in interest, "Offside," Shane puts another finger down, "Line change," and he puts his hand down now, "Puck."

He smirks at Ilya, "Are there any I am forgetting?"

Ilya swallows, "When did you start learning Russian?" he asks, voice hoarse.

Shane's still smiling at him, "Here and there at first. But I started learning pretty seriously when you suggested we do something like this. I'm pretty bad, but I really wanted to make sure I knew at least all the hockey terms before today," his smile widens, "Oh, I did forget one."

He leans close to Ilya, hand loosely wrapped around his wrist. Ilya lets himself get yanked forward, as Shane brings his lips close to his ear.

"Nice shot," Shane whispers, charged. Then, before Ilya can grab him, and commit horrible acts of indecency, Shane laughs, and pushes himself off Ilya's chest so he can skate off over to the Russian side.

Wyatt hangs back as the Russian's goalie. When he skated over to join Team Russia, he reached out and shook everyone's hands. After he finished introducing himself, he told them that, as a kid, to practice before games, he would watch old goalie tapes of Vanya Pelov in his living room, and try to imitate his technique. "The guy was my hero," he said seriously. Team Russia nods, solemn, "I'm really sorry for your guys' loss."

When Shane goes over, Shura's eyes go wide, "We get Hollander?" he squeaks, in English.

Shane skids to the right of Kolya Makarov, and takes his position on his wings. Kolya's eyes go wide. "Hollander," he says. He looks kind of flustered. "You beat me in Washington." he says, chivalrous. "Please take center."

"Oh come on," Shane says. He gives Kolya a friendly nudge. "Don't you want to show your old teammates how much better you've gotten on the Capitals?"

"Yeah, come on, Kolya," Ilya skids to center circle, dangerous smile cutting across his face. He needs Kolya to dial back the fawning over Shane. Not that he can blame him. Ilya addresses him in Russian, "Hiding behind the skirts of North Americans now?"

"Fuck you!" Kolya spits, gentlemanly behavior dropping off his face the second he starts yelling back in Russian. "If I am, I'm learning by fucking example, dickhead!"

"I want to say," Shane says, cutting in diplomatically, "I've always admired the Soviet Style, even when I played in the juniors," he says, "You guys always just looked so complete on the ice." Shane ducks his head, "It would be an honor to learn from the best."

Team Russia, and Ilya, look at him, astounded. They nod, awkward in the face of genuine praise. Only defenseman Misha Egorov is brave enough to cut in.

"And it will be honor to do the same," Egorov says, smiling. Then he turns and shouts. "Get this game fucking started then!"

Ilya leans in the face-off circle. Kolya is to his front, Shane, opposite him to the left. He looks at all his former teammates, getting into position, with fire in their eyes.

"Let's dance," Ilya says, with a smile.

The puck drops.

At around hour two, people stopped keeping score. Line after line of people would play against each other, laughing as they did.

Shane held his own with his old teammates. It made his heart clench, like it was going to explode with happiness, when he saw him out there with them. Ilya always knew he would never have a family for Shane to meet, so it surprised him, completely, to see him experience the next best thing, as Shane shouted hockey terms in Russian, flying with his old teammates on the ice.

Ilya wished the night would last forever.

But by hour seven, people had started filing out. Egorov had to leave first and call his kids. The rest followed soon after.

He and Shane end up driving home. They're exhausted, having chased and attained the euphoria athletes live for—tired from playing the sport they love, with the people they love. Shane presses Ilya against the wall when they get back, kissing him deeply, hand snaking up his shirt, before he climbs up the stairs and into the shower.

Ilya, shaking off the kiss with a silly smile on his face, starts checking the mail.

His heart stops.

Unmistakeable, even after ten years—

Svetlana's handwriting.

He rips the envelope open.

When he had written to her, he had scribbled all his thoughts in a panic. Letter after letter he thought about everything he could possibly say to everyone he left behind. Svetlana's had been especially confessional. He wrote about how much he admired her as a person. He

wrote about how beautiful he thought she was, back when he was fifteen, how desperate he was to impress her. He wrote about how, as a teenager, with weekends as rare as his, he remembered the afternoons he spent together with her the most.

He wrote about how stupid he had been to fuck up the relationship as bad as he did. He wrote that, even though he gets that she cannot forgive him for leaving her, for leaving Russia, he hopes, against all odds, they can still be friends, and reconnect.

He had stared at the letter, reading it over. He cringed a little. It was overwrought, emotional, and, as he shot a nervous glance over to Shane, kind of sounded like he wanted to get back together with her.

He didn't have it in him to cross any of it out however. He'd just hoped she could read between the lines and understand that he just missed her, without any ulterior motive.

When he had written the letter, it had taken him ten pages of notebook paper.

What he gets back, two years later, is less than one page, scrawled in her signature, ant-like script.

You were always such a baby. I missed you too.

I'm also sorry about how our relationship ended. We could've at least stayed friends. We missed out on a lot of time together before you left.

My father passed away last month. It was a long time coming, but it still broke my heart.

I am starting school at a Canadian university next fall. Sports Business.

Did you know that's something you can even study?

...

See you soon, old friend.

January 1, 2026

"Thank you guys so much for agreeing to do this," The journalist is young, and looks a little harried. It doesn't help that hockey legend Ilya Rozanov is glaring at her, as he wanders in from the outdoors, shirtless despite it being zero degrees out. "We couldn't believe it when you guys replied to us."

"I know, we're sorry about the delay." Hockey legend Shane Hollander sits in an armchair, wearing a ridiculously stylish pair of wireframe glasses, "We just completely missed it in our inbox, especially between fundraising for the foundation, hiring the new coaches, managing the new home renovations, oh," Shane giggles. "Not to mention, our third vacation this year..."

"I wish I was still in Reykjavik!" Ilya shouts from the kitchen, "And not talking to this—" he calls the journalist a "body-picking vulture" in Russian, which flies over her head in incomprehension.

Shane turns around, and shouts, also in Russian. "Put a shirt on! You look indecent!"

"You like me indecent!" he calls back. Shane scoffs. Of course he chooses to say that part in English.

The journalist heroically keeps a straight face. She clutches her shut MacBook tighter however, holding it in front of her like a shield. "Anyway," Shane says, "We just had to, especially after we saw the news. That Scott Hunter," Shane turns around, to shout back at Ilya. "So handsome, and so brave!"

"He looks older than we do!" Ilya yells back.

Shane rolls his eyes, and returns his attention back to the journalist. "When Hunter brought his husband out onto the ice last year, I couldn't believe my eyes. I thought it was the sweetest thing in the entire world." Shane sighs. "It's been so heartwarming to see how accepting the hockey community has been. It's really a brave new world."

"I'm actually happy you brought Hunter up," The journalist says, excitedly, jumping on the chance to get back on track. "As my email said, this session is just a pre-interview for the documentary we've been making on LGBT athletes in hockey. I'll just be talking through some questions with you guys, see if we'd be interested in bringing you on as a larger part of the documentary. Given the support we saw for Scott Hunter, we feel that young hockey fans especially would really find something valuable in what we're making here—"

Ilya wanders in, thankfully wearing a shirt, "Gay people and hockey have existed forever, " he says, waving his hand dismissively as he joins Shane on the couch, "Is not nothing new, and did not start with Scott Hunter." Ilya turns serious, "Your young fans should make sure they know that."

"Mr. Rozanov, we can start there actually," she gestures to the home they share together, and then gestures back to them both. "You two share a home together. You two are frequently photographed together. You played on the ice together, on the same team, until you both retired. Now you two run the Irina Foundation together." She takes a deep breath, and fixes

them with a look, "People have speculated endlessly on the nature of your relationship. You do not confirm it, yet you do not work particularly hard to deny the allegations either."

Shane blinks, "Well," Shane looks up at Ilya, looking to him for support. Ilya reaches down, and squeezes Shane's hand. Shane smiles, emboldened, so he turns back to the journalist. "That's because we're not."

The journalist frowns. "Not what?"

Shane shrugs, "Denying it."

The journalist falls silent, trying to process what she's hearing. Ilya lies back on the couch, with his arm thrown over Shane's shoulder. He looks like he's laughing at her.

"... was that on the record?"

"Yes," Shane says, leveling her with a serious look. "Everything we say is all on the record, moving forward."

The room falls silent for one, two, thirty seconds.

"Holy shit," the journalist mumbles. She flips her MacBook open in a hurry, looking devastated by what she sees. She starts fumbling around in her backpack. She is unsuccessful in finding whatever it is she was looking for. She curses, and holds up a finger up to Shane and Ilya, "Wow, just give me one second." Ilya cuts Shane a look *who sent the B team in?* to which Shane replies, also with his eyes, *she's young, it's a good thing. She only knows how to ask the easy questions.*

The journalist shakes her laptop, stabbing helplessly at buttons. She murmurs, "You gotta be kidding me." It does not look like the MacBook is working. She sighs, in defeat. "Fuck it."

She throws her laptop onto the ground, and pulls out a pen and a pad of paper.

"So let me just make this very clear," she says, maintaining eye contact with Shane and Ilya as she starts scribbling illegibly on the notepad, "You are confirming you two are in a relationship."

Ilya laughs. "Relationship? We've been married for over twenty years."

Her eyes bulge out of her head, "Married?!"

"Oh, your audience will love this story," Shane says, excited. "It's the turn of the millenium, and the entire year we had a running competition to see who would propose first, and," Shane smiles victoriously, "Not to brag, but Ilya did lose—"

Ilya rolls his eyes, "Is because I let you win, Hollander."

"Mr. Hollander, Mr. Rozanov," the journalist asks again, a little more desperate than before for them to stay on track. "2000? Married for over twenty years?" she swallows. She sounds incredulous. "How could you have kept it a secret for so long?"

Ilya turns to her. "We didn't keep it a secret. Our friends knew. Our teammates knew," Ilya nods to Shane, "Shane's parents knew."

"Back in the day at least," Shane says, with a geezerly smile on his face, "it was about the people you keep around you, and because they love you, they will agree to protect you," he fixes the journalist with a hard look then. "It's our love," Shane says, "It's our life. So if you belong in our life, we trust you enough to let you know."

The journalist frowns. "But why now? You've kept this secret for over twenty years. It can't just be because of Scott Hunter."

"Actually," Shane says, frowning. "It is that simple. That man did a brave thing, but now he stands alone," Shane looks over to Ilya, who nods, "We want the public to know about our relationship, to show that Scott Hunter isn't alone, he isn't an anomaly. He's now a part of a family, a culture, a community of people that have won and lost on the ice, way before him."

"Plus," Ilya says, smirking, "Can you imagine his face, when we go on TV and one up him this hard?"

Shane clicks his teeth disapproval, "Ilya," he looks over at the journalist, "He's kidding. That's obviously not what we are trying to do."

The journalist nods, "Sure."

Ilya sighs, resigned. "Is what I was saying earlier. Gay people have existed since time began. Gay people in hockey have existed since the sport began." Ilya sits forward. "For me and my husband, is because, look at us," Ilya gestures to the home they've built. The journalist looks around.

She'd seen the property a few times on Architectural Digest, but what the shoots never capture is how the wooden beams encircle its residents in almost a protective embrace, the bright red mahogany hand-picked by Shane and his late father. From every detail, to the throw rugs designed by millionaires Yuna hired, to the blankets made by Zane Boodram's daughter, to the framed photo of The Centaurs, winning The Stanley Cup, in 1990.

To the two deck chairs, always facing toward each other—everything had been handpicked, had been used to immortalize in some way, someone they love.

In the corner, just as intentional as the rest of the home, are portraits of three people.

Yuna Hollander. Irina Rozanova. David Hollander. Crystallized in their most youthful, their most joyful. Along with them, fresh fruits, music, and three candles light their way to their next destination.

"We have had our careers," Ilya laughs, and when he does, Shane, even after all this time, can't bring himself to look away. "We have had our glory. We have had our share of pain. For once in our lives," Ilya smiles, looking light as air, "we have nothing to lose."

Chapter End Notes

thank you everyone for reading :)

as promised, here's everything i watched/read recently that either really helped me write this fic, or just inspired me in general:

The Russian Five, 2018 - this documentary actually kick-started everything. If you watch it, you will see that i straight up ripped off entire beats from Federov and Konstantinov's defection stories for Ilya. There's a healthy mix of Mogilny in there too.

The Russian Five: A Story of Espionage, Defection, Bribery and Courage - this is such a cool book. it was written by Keith Gave, the journalist who served as a pretty crucial go-between for Detroit, Federov, and Konstantinov, and was just general useful guy for getting The Russian Five into America, probably because he was a Russian linguist for the NSA (yikes) for six years before he went to work for the Detroit Free Press

The Red Army, 2014 - this is such a good documentary, and it really informed the last chapter of the fic. It's about the rise, and then fall :(of Russia's hockey dominance, all told through another pretty crucial member of the Russian Five, Slava Fetisov, who was the Red Army's Captain before he left.

also can't believe i forgot to mention, Helsinki Hellhole absolutely is a reference to a real thing that happened in the World Juniors (but irl it happened in 1987, not 1979 like in this fic) between canada and russia. the "**punch-up in Piestany**" look it up! [here's](#) a CBC article that sums it up pretty well. there's video too if you want to watch a bunch of teenagers pummel each other in the name of international relations.

this fic is literally called the soviet montage so have to tip my hat to the goats Kuleshov and Eisenstein - i watched **Ivan the Terrible** while obliterated by the flu after New Year's.

ok these last two are mostly on here for the meme factor:

The Americans - this is obvious. Russian spies, and the most romantic story ever told? sign me up.

Mad Men - LMFAO, but seriously. the JFK episode lives rent-free in my brain.

i have a tumblr now! :) [come say hi](#)

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