

I'm Reading Your Lips (You're Speaking My Language)

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I'm Reading Your Lips (You're Speaking My Language)

by [some1_around](#)

Summary

Rozanov cocked his head. *"You speak Russian? Or just the curse words?"*

"Yes, I speak Russian," he snapped, defensive and angry. He knew that it had been a mistake to even try to be friendly with Rozanov. *"Why? Do I not look Russian to you?"* He scoffed.

"No, not really," Rozanov said. Some of his teammates laughed, although they mostly looked surprised that Shane was speaking to them at all. Rozanov didn't laugh, though. *"Are you Russian?"*

"Go fuck yourself."

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Despite an inauspicious start, when Russia's Ilya Rozanov learns that Canada's Shane Hollander is fluent in Russian at their first World Junior Championships tournament, it changes everything and sets them on a different course. Instead of being branded as rivals from the very beginning, Ilya and Shane start off as friends.

And, after all, a little friendly rivalry never hurt anyone, did it?

Notes

Перевод на русский by wowwhat_itis: <https://ficbook.net/readfic/019bfc8e-f9b2-7720-8de8-e1be4428363c>

Перевод на русский by pizduyotsyuda: <https://ficbook.net/readfic/019c0b8d-5fd6-70a2-a7f0-6d71738fc746>

Notes on my translations in the text: Any italicized sentences are spoken fully in Russian (or French). Unitalicized words are spoken in their original language and not translated into English. So, *"translated Russian or French"* vs *"original'nyy Russkiy / ou en version Française originale,"* I found this was the most consistent way of doing it. That being said, I don't speak Russian or French lmao, here's hoping google translate and internet sleuthing did me good.

I am using romance letters instead of the Cyrillic alphabet for any Russian words. I'm assuming that my audience is majority English speakers who don't also know Russian or

know how to read the Cyrillic alphabet. In my personal experience, I prefer roman letter transliterating because I think it looks a little more fluid in an English text and I feel like it gives English readers a better sense of what is being said even if they can't read it. I really hope for any Russian readers it doesn't detract or make this unreadable (if you have thoughts on the topic, let me know, Thank you!)

(CW: a Russian homophobic slur is used once, as would be period-typical amongst teenage athletes and not intentionally directed at someone's sexuality)

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: [【授权翻译】我能听懂你（你会说我熟悉的语言）](#) by [briocheleveshiiiish](#)

Chapter 1

*December, 2008
Regina, Saskatchewan*

“You’re not supposed to smoke out here.”

Ilya Rozanov turned just as a flame flared from the tip of his lighter, igniting the cigarette between his lips. “Huh?”

Shane swallowed. “Sorry, I just meant—there’s a smoking area over there.” He resisted the urge to point. “Never mind.” He held out his hand instead. “I’m Shane. Shane Hollander. I wanted to introduce myself, and I just have to say, you’re a really incredible player, you know. You’re incredible to watch. I sat in on your practice earlier.”

Slowly, Ilya took his hand and shook it, almost limp with disinterest. “Yes. I know. I saw.”

“Oh, yeah.” Shane wondered if he should admit that he had also seen Rozanov sitting in on Canada’s practice, but unlike the Russian prodigy, he wasn’t trying to be a dick. “Well. You’ve played really well in the tournament so far.”

“Yes.”

Shane glanced around. There was nothing around them, nothing to look at or comment on. On the other side of the parking lot, he saw a few of the other Team Russia players loitering near the fence, and he wondered why Rozanov wasn’t with them. He doubted they cared that their star player was smoking. “Are your parents here with you?”

“No.”

“Oh, that sucks, sorry. I guess it would be hard to travel. My family is from Ottawa, so... it’s actually pretty far away from Regina, but they made the flight.”

Ilya didn’t respond to that, just shrugged.

Shane shoved his hands into his pockets. “Cold, huh?” He should probably just leave.

“Rozanov, is this little pidor bothering you?”

Shane flinched. He looked up. The three teenagers he had seen by the fence were swaggering up, all dressed for the weather in toques and tracksuits. The one who had spoken was the biggest of the lot, but Shane had seen him on the ice, and he was barely competent even as an enforcer. The Russian slur slipped off his lips easily, like he had said it many times before, and Shane knew he should really, really leave.

“No, I’m pretty sure he was just leaving,” Rozanov answered, meeting Shane’s eyes and smiling even though he was speaking in Russian. *“And if he doesn’t, I was planning on*

making him cry right here before I make him cry on the ice tomorrow. Think I can get him running back to his mommy?"

Shane felt himself go bright red in a sudden, violent flush of anger. He thought of his grandfather, who had never shouted except at hockey matches on the television, and the vitriol that would spew from his mouth then and only then, and it came to him. "Ey, poshel na khuy! Idi na hui, kozyol." He wanted to spit, to emphasize his point, but he refrained. Even still, it was an unusual outburst for Shane Hollander, extremely out of character for him, and even at the World Junior Championships, most of the players already knew his reputation for clean games and a meek personality. The Slavic players were gaping, open-mouthed, and Shane knew why.

What he had just said hadn't been very polite, after all.

Rozanov cocked his head. *"You speak Russian? Or just the curse words?"*

"I speak Russian," he snapped, defensive and angry, turning to glare at the Russian player who had called him—had called him a.... Shane looked away. He knew he was on edge, and now he knew that it had been a mistake to even try to be friendly with Rozanov. (He was also keenly aware that he was alone, and Rozanov was not). *"Why? Do I not look Russian to you?"* he scoffed.

"No, not really," Ilya said. Some of his teammates laughed, although they mostly seemed surprised that Shane was speaking to them at all. Rozanov didn't laugh, though. He looked... curious. *"Are you Russian?"* He raised the cigarette to his mouth and blew smoke into the cold, grey sky.

"Go fuck yourself," Shane repeated, feeling heat climbing into his face from rage and humiliation.

"Why can you speak Russian?" Rozanov pressed. *"I'm just asking. I want to know. Almost everyone here seems to assume that we should all speak English."* His teammates were closing in, and Shane felt very nervous. He had never been in a fight before, not on the ice and certainly not off it, but right now Rozanov and three of the Russian team's starting line were surrounding him, watching Shane. And he'd just insulted their captain.

"My grandparents met at university, in Moscow," Shane said, hoping it sounded casual, but he knew he was a bad actor. He couldn't help the way his feet shifted back on his heels, probably making it very obvious that he wanted to run. But that was exactly what Rozanov had said to his teammates, which meant that Shane had to stay put. *"My grandfather was Mongolian. My grandmother was Japanese, but she loved Russian literature. They taught me to speak it."* He didn't want to go into his family history with Rozanov, but he also didn't have any other explanation ready for him. Russian was a rare second language in the US, and he doubted Rozanov would buy a line about mandatory high school language requirements.

Rozanov frowned. *"Do Mongolians speak Russian?"*

Another thing about the Russian team: like most of the European teams, it was entirely white. *"Mostly they speak Mongolian,"* he said dryly, *"but some do, yeah. It's, uh, a Soviet Era*

thing, I guess. Most students and businesspeople in Mongolia studied or worked in the Soviet Union. My granddad grew up speaking it in school, and then he taught me."

Shane hated this little history lesson, but he had given it a million times. He wished that when people asked him why he could speak Russian, he could say, "My granddad was Mongolian," and leave it at that, but people always had more questions. Sometimes he would end his explanation with "My grandparents went to University in Moscow," or let people assume he was talking about his dad's parents or something. But that felt dishonest. It felt like the easy way out.

Rozanov took another drag of his cigarette. "*Huh,*" he said. "*That explains why you speak like a grandpa.*"

Shane glowered. "Okay, well, whatever," he said in English, at the end of the rope. If Rozanov was done with him, then he was done with Rozanov. "Just wanted to say good luck, that's all," but he didn't extend his hand a second time.

"No, wait," Rozanov said, "*you were just starting to get interesting! Why are you speaking in English again?*" His teammates snickered.

"*What, I'm more interesting when I'm speaking in Russian?*"

"Yes," he said, to more laughter. Shane wanted to sneer at the guys around him, following Rozanov's every lead and bend and whisper, but he knew a few guys on Team Canada who were like that too. He hoped that he didn't visibly revel in it as much as Rozanov clearly did. "*I instantly have more respect for any single person who can speak Russian than any person who cannot. That's what everyone thinks about English in this country, after all.*"

"*You're thinking of America,*" Shane said. "*Canada is a bilingual country.*" Not so much Saskatchewan, as most French speakers lived in Quebec, but Shane wasn't going to bring that up if Rozanov didn't know it already.

"*I didn't say bilingual,*" Rozanov said. "*I said, speak Russian. I don't give a fuck if someone is bilingual, but I think everyone should speak Russian.*"

"*Very world domination of you,*" Shane said, hoping that the sarcasm didn't trip awkwardly off his tongue. He was fluent in Russian, both from his childhood with his grandparents as his primary babysitters, and later, when he and his mother took lessons together after they died, but he hadn't had much practice speaking it with strangers. Especially not young strangers.

Rozanov snorted. "*Why the fuck were you trying to talk to me in English? You should know better, Hollander—they say you're the smartest hockey player in the Championships right now. You should have known better.*"

This triggered another wave of anger, and Shane scoffed, loud and hard, taking a step back. Rozanov didn't even know what he was saying, didn't know how microaggressive he was being, because he didn't need to know. His team was entirely white, and no one on it was going to call him out. Hockey was, in general, a very white sport. The World Junior Championships even more so. Japan was the only country outside of Europe, other than

Canada and America, that had ever made it into the Top Division, and that had been in the early nineties.

Shane, truly, was sick to death of hearing how fucking *smart* he was.

"I don't like it when people assume I can't speak English," Shane said, short and angry, even though the real answer was that he had heard Rozanov speaking to some local reporters in English earlier and figured that he was fluent or wanted to practice. *"I was trying to afford you the same respect. My mistake. See you on the ice, Rozanov."*

He turned and walked away to some laughter from the other Russians, and Shane knew his shoulders were around his ears.

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"Hollander! *Ey*, Hollander!"

Shane looked up, then immediately regretted it.

He had known, of course, who was calling him.

His teammates, gathered in the lobby of the hotel they were staying in, crouching over a coffee table to eat their meager dinner, swung their heads back and forth, looking between Rozanov and Shane. His coach, sitting off to the side, cleared her throat.

"Hollander!"

He had seen Ilya Rozanov as soon as he strutted inside, because he was hard to miss. Even on the burly Russian team, he was one of the taller players, and their heavy winter jackets made them all look bigger. They had drawn the attention of the other teams scattered across the lobby common area as soon as they clomped in, mostly because everyone knew by now that the Russians had been staying at a different hotel. It was late, almost 9:00 pm, but the entire Russian team had come slogging in with their coaches, dragging suitcases and with duffels of gear slung over their shoulders.

Shane had been trying to ignore them. He especially tried to ignore the loud, argumentative, disjointed English of the coach, who was having a very hard time communicating with the receptionist. From the corner of the room, Shane had a hard time making out exactly what he was saying, but he had been glad for it. He had hoped that being farther away would keep Rozanov from noticing him.

No such luck.

He made the mistake of glancing up, trying to gauge how many of his teammates were staring at him, and caught Rozanov's eyes from across the room.

"Yes, you, Hollander, I'm talking to you," Rozanov said, clear exasperation written across his exhausted face. He swung his arm dramatically, calling Shane over. *"I know you can understand me, come on."*

Shane glanced over Rozanov's entire team. They slumped over the front desk, both the adults and the athletes, and most of them were looking between Shane and Rozanov in confusion, the argument with the receptionist apparently stalled by Rozanov's disruption. But their coaches and managers seemed as enamored with their star player as his teammates did, and they didn't tell Rozanov to shut up, even though the receptionist was asking him to lower his voice.

"Shane?" his coach asked.

"Sorry," Shane said to her. "I guess he wants to talk. Do you mind...?"

She blinked at him. "Uh. No. If you don't have an issue, I don't."

"Okay." Shane stood up. "Be back in a moment."

Everyone was watching him. Pretty much the whole lobby had looked up when Rozanov started shouting, and now they were watching Shane's progression across the wide room toward the despondent-looking Team Russia.

"What do you want, Rozanov?" he asked when he was close enough that he didn't need to shout.

Rozanov waved a hand dismissively. "*Russian, Hollander, Russian,*" he said, and abruptly lunged forward and grabbed Shane's biceps. Shane dug his heels in, but Rozanov's grip strength was insane, and Shane stumbled to a stop in front of the desk. "*Hollander speaks Russian fluently. He can translate for us.*"

"Translate?" Shane blanked. "*No, no, I can't! I am not at all capable of translating for, uh,*" he was going to say 'for adults,' but that sounded childish, so he said, "*I don't think I've ever translated for anybody in my life. Not in Russian, at least.*"

Rozanov tilted his head. "*You speak other languages too?*"

"*French.*"

"*Perfect!*" Rozanov slapped his hands on the counter and pointed at Shane as he leaned over it, pushing into the receptionist's space. "He speaks French, too," he said loudly. "He will help."

"Wait," Shane objected, but he said it in Russian, so it probably wasn't very effective. "*What's going on? Why are you, um,*" he glanced at Rozanov's enormous, scary-looking coach. "*I thought you guys were at a different hotel.*"

"*We were,*" Rozanov began, but his coach finally cut him off.

"*Power went out,*" the man said. He had a deep voice and a grumbly accent that Shane couldn't identify, but Shane could still understand him. "*We might be Russian, kid, but we're not quite capable of sleeping through a Canadian winter without any heat. Neither of our translators were staying with us, and I haven't gotten a fucking response from either. I know*

Rozanov here is a real charmer, calling you over like that, but do you think you could give us a hand?"

"*Oh, yeah. Of course.*" Shane folded as soon as the adults looked at him, and he saw the way Ilya grinned.

The situation was not difficult to untangle once Shane communicated the full story. The Russian coach had contacted the event organizers for the WJC, who had managed to find them rooms at Shane's hotel, but the organizers had booked them under the wrong coach's name and gotten the numbers of the available rooms incorrect. The receptionist seemed relieved to be speaking to Shane, even though he was doing his best to parrot the coach's words directly, and it only took a few minutes before she held out a fresh stack of hotel cards. Except that she held them out to Shane.

Shane held up his hands. "I'm just translating," he said, nodding to the coach.

The coach put a large, meaty hand on Shane's shoulder and reached for the cards. "*Thank you, kid, you're a lifesaver.*" Shane flinched when he suddenly barked, loudly and very close to his ear, "*All of you, in a fucking line! And in order! Not a fucking word, Rozanov!*"

Rozanov winked at Shane.

"Hey, Shane," his own coach said, walking up casually. "Everything alright?"

"Yes, Coach."

The Russian coach slapped his heavy hand on Shane's shoulder. "Good kid," he said loudly, as if the entire lobby hadn't already been watching curiously. "Good Russian."

Shane's coach nodded sedately but didn't say anything. "We're about to turn in, Shane," she said. "Big day ahead. Let's go, okay?"

Shane was eager to shimmy away from the enormous Russian man. "Yes, thank you, okay." He glanced at the Russian team. "*Glad I, uh, glad I could help.*"

"Spasibo, Hollander," Ilya cooed in a sing-song tone. His coach barked at him to shut up. Shane nodded once, awkwardly, and followed his coach's heels closely back to their table in the lobby, where most of the team was already standing with their bags repacked.

"God, Hollander," his coach muttered as they walked away. "If they beat us tomorrow after you found them a place to sleep, that is not going to feel good."

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It didn't.

But in the handshake lineup, he still looked Rozanov in the eye and spoke Russian when he said, "*Congratulations.*"

Rozanov held onto his hand, halting the glide of Shane's skates. He put a hand on his upper arm, and Shane forced himself to smile. Cameras were flashing, and someone was probably filming them as Rozanov said, *"You are a very good sport, Shane Hollander. Not a bad player, either."* He smirked. *"And I always like a man who speaks Russian."*

"Rozanov!" his coach shouted, waving him over.

Rozanov winked. *"See you at the draft."*

"See you," Shane said, responding by rote, and then feeling his face go a little blank. He skated away quickly, let them put a silver medal around his neck, and tried not to catch Rozanov's eye again.

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June, 2009
Los Angeles, California

"Shane fucking Hollander. *I am so fucking glad to see you!*"

Shane turned his back on coaches and sponsors, body reacting to the familiar drawl. "Are you?" he asked, surprised as Ilya Rozanov sauntered up to him and took his hand in a firm grip, smiling slyly at him.

Recently, his face and Rozanov's had been everywhere. Together.

It was that damn photo on the ice, shaking hands post-game, close to each other despite their opposing team colors. The story of Shane's translation for the Russian team had spread like wildfire, and, at some point, it had morphed into the claim that he and Rozanov had become fast friends in the brief period where they had both played as their respective countries' rising stars. People called it a good example of sportsmanship. They said Rozanov and Hollander were going to represent the league well. They talked about what a strange coincidence it was that Hollander already knew Russian, and speculated as to why, and commended how fucking smart he was.

They'd barely shared three conversations, but several people that night had already asked Shane where Rozanov was. Like he was his keeper.

Shane glanced back at the huddle of important white men his mom had abandoned him with and gestured Rozanov into the circle. The draft was about to begin, so many people were watching the two of them, some with knowing smirks, some with frowns. "I'm sure all of you know Ilya Rozanov," Shane introduced.

"My English is terrible," Rozanov declared, drawing laughter from them with an ease that made Shane jealous. He clapped a hand on Shane's shoulder once again. "At WJC, Hollander was, uh, helping. Very helping, yes?"

Shane gave Rozanov a side-eyed glance. He was pretty fucking sure he'd heard him speak better English in interviews before tonight, even six months ago. Rozanov smiled back

pleasantly, so Shane forced his lips up, mimicking him.

"I'm sure Shane wouldn't mind translating for you, Ilya," responded one of the owners of the Admirals. He was watching Rozanov with an almost salivatory gleam in his eyes.

"What did he say?" Rozanov asked glibly.

Shane, for once, wished he had a drink in his hand, but they were in America and he was sober. *"I fucking know you know what he said,"* Shane answered, keeping his tone even.

"Oh, that's nice of him!" Rozanov responded, and Shane almost laughed, surprising himself. "Nice guy, Hollander, right?" He grinned stupidly, putting on some caricature that Shane didn't quite understand. *"Tell Mr. Big-and-Mighty that his fly is down and his shoes are untied. I want to see the bald spot on the top of his head when he looks down—I need a mirror to check that my hair looks good."*

Shane almost choked. "Rozanov's a huge fan of the Admirals. He visited New York to watch their last playoff game. Scott Hunter sure was on a tear this season, huh?"

"How do you know I visited New York? And don't put words in my mouth—I would never compliment Scott Hunter."

"He really thought they had a chance for the Cup, but if Hunter keeps playing at that level, this year might be the one."

The Admirals' owner lit up, opening his mouth to respond, but Rozanov cut him off with a loud burst of laughter. Shane cracked up, too, then quickly tried to hide his mouth.

"I suspect we're being made fun of, Joe," one of the other guys, a sports anchor for one of the larger networks, said, but his smile was wry and amused.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Richter—"

"No, no, it's okay." He waved them off. Rozanov was still snickering, but Shane felt a little shocked at himself. These men were important, and he was not the type of person who made fun of important people. "It's good to see some camaraderie between you two—in the past, we've typically expected a lot of animosity between the most likely early draft picks. A lot of competitiveness in the game makes it off the ice. Too much, sometimes. This," he gestured between them, "is genuinely nice to see."

"Well, thank you."

"Is all good fun," Rozanov said. "Shane is good friend." Shane glanced at him. Rozanov was grinning, wide and hard. "Won't stop me from beating him, but still, good friend."

"That's what I like to hear!" Richter said, laughing.

"So, Shane," asked the Admirals' owner, "how on earth do you speak Russian so well?"

Shane gritted his teeth.

Rozanov grabbed him by the wrist. “We are starting, I think. And I will be picked first, so I cannot be late.”

And damn him, but he was right. Shane was drafted second, and after the silver medal the winter before, even the minor setback felt cutting.

They held up their new jerseys, Ilya grinning like a loon next to Shane. Shane wanted to hate him.

But, when he glanced out the corner of his eye, and saw Rozanov already watching him back, he noticed a sincerity in his smile that hadn’t been there earlier. Pride, yes, but who wouldn’t be proud to be drafted first in the league? This was different from Rozanov’s typical cockiness.

He looked like he had just proved a point to someone, and he knew it.

When the cameras lowered, Shane held out his hand to Rozanov. “Pozdravlyayu,” he said. *“Congratulations. Really, man. You’re a great fucking player.”*

There was something in Rozanov’s eyes, then. Something Shane hadn’t seen before, and it wasn’t just the reflection of a million cameras flashing as all the photographers rose back up to capture this moment.

Shane got the feeling that Rozanov had needed to hear that.

He took his hand under the hot bevvvy of lights. *“It’s something I can be proud of,”* he said slowly, *“to have you come in second after me.”* Shane thought he understood what he meant, and felt his smile soften. Just a little. Then Rozanov jerked his head. *“You should be ashamed, though. Korogyi almost beat you—that’s embarrassing.”*

Shane laughed, real and genuine, and every camera in the room caught the moment when Rozanov started laughing too.

(Unfortunately, their words were later translated and aired across every major network, and Korogyi pretty much shunned Shane from then on, but in the moment, after such a devastating disappointment, it still felt good to laugh).

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They stumbled upon each other in the gym later that night. Apparently, neither of them could sleep. So they ran next to each other, bumping up the speed and incline of the treadmills until they were stumbling, breathless from exercise and laughter, hands trying to slap the buttons of each other’s machines until Shane finally gave up and Ilya stumbled off after him, brushing into each other, sweaty hands on sweaty shoulders, legs pressed together as they collapsed on the floor and shared a water bottle.

“Not bad,” Ilya purred.

Shane stared at the sweat dripping down his throat, trailing onto the golden cross that sat so warm on his skin.

He lifted Ilya's water bottle and put the nozzle between his lips.

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December, 2009

Ottawa, Ontario

"Okay, boys, smile, we're gonna get some shots just with you—yup, just like that—could you, actually, Mr. Rozanov, could you—Shane, do you mind telling Ilya-?"

"You are so goddamned annoying," Shane said, and Rozanov immediately nodded and gave a thumbs-up to the cameraman directing them, shifting into the position they had asked him to. *"Why do you always pretend like you don't know English? I mean, they're going to figure it out. You do just fine in interviews, eventually someone is going to realize that you only play stupid around me."*

And why was Ilya Rozanov playing stupid around Shane Hollander? Just to inconvenience him? To make fun of people whose jobs were dedicated to making them look good?

"That's great, that's great! Yeah, hold each other's hands a little higher now—Shane, can you tilt a little towards us? Okay, looking good, gentlemen!"

They had been asked to do most of the promotional materials for this year's WJC. This was just one of many photo shoots, but hopefully, it would be their last. It made sense, given that they were already drafted and as No. 1 and No. 2 in the NHL, and Shane didn't mind because they were paying them for the extra work, but he knew the real reason they had been called in. They both did.

After the NHL draft, ESPN presenter Carter Richter ran a whole segment on the two of them. Not just on their performances at the WJC and their careers leading up to that point, but on them, specifically. Rozanov and Hollander. He called them "unlikely friends," and overnight, everyone was obsessed.

The viral video of their exchange after the draft, making fun of Korogyi and snickering like children, had featured prominently.

Sometimes, the NHL did this. It was easy and engaging to spin a story about two players' relationship, be it friendly or antagonistic. Most hockey fans enjoyed the competitiveness of the game, and enjoyed the violence as well, so rivalries tended to blow up more than feel-good stories about the best players in the league getting along, or attending the other's children's bat mitzvahs or christenings or whatever, but apparently, when it came to Shane and Rozanov, the people couldn't get enough.

"You think I am playing stupid?" Rozanov asked. They were wearing suits and they weren't on the ice. Shane felt a little hot, and he felt shorter than usual without his skates, and he was sure that his tie was sitting too high on his neck. *"That must mean you think I'm secretly smart."*

"I think you speak English better than you pretend. You know they're going to translate this, right?"

"Yes. So stop giving away my secrets, Hollander."

"Okay, boys, just smile for a second? Don't mean to interrupt, but we need some still photos. Great, thank you!"

Rozanov snickered. Shane bit down on his cheek to keep his smile from getting too large, too genuine. He was still holding Rozanov's hand, and it was warm and dry against him. They had the same callouses, he realized.

"Okay, wonderful. That's all we need from you guys today. Good luck tomorrow!"

The finals. Canada was undefeated, and so was Russia. Shane and Rozanov were being touted as some of the best underage players the tournament had ever seen.

And, apparently, they were also best friends.

"See you tomorrow, bestie," Rozanov said, playing into it as always. He let go of Shane's hand, and Shane held it there, suspended, before he remembered to let it drop. *"I will bring tissues to dry your eyes when you come in second place."* He tilted his head. *"Again."*

"Never going to happen, Rozanov," Shane said. And he made sure of it.

He got the fucking gold, and Ilya still managed to smile at him when they gave him the silver.

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July, 2010
Toronto, Ontario

"Hollander! Good buddy-friend, hello! Welcome to Toronto, we are filming commercial, so much artistic merit, so much integrity for us, professional athletes, yay!"

Shane was already laughing. Rozanov was fucking annoying, but it was crazy how much he made Shane laugh. *"God, you're such an idiot,"* he said, breaking away from his agent as he stepped up to Rozanov, who had arrived first and was partially dressed in CCM gear. On a whim, and without really thinking about it, he grabbed Rozanov around the shoulders and pulled him into a hug.

He felt Rozanov tense. Shane nearly whipped away. From the corner of his eye, he saw the back of a phone, the camera already trained on them.

Rozanov's arms rose around his shoulders and he clapped Shane hard on the back. Shane took the easy out and returned the gesture, casual, manly, and pulled back quickly. Their chests separated, though they left their hands where they were, gripping each other's shoulders and biceps.

“Mne ochen' zhal,” he murmured, apologizing and hoping the camera would not be able to read his lips. *“I wasn't thinking-”*

“I know, I am totally irresistible,” Rozanov said, cutting him off with an affable, untroubled grin. *“Some people say it is my accent, but you prove otherwise. My face inspires you, doesn't it?”*

Another laugh, mostly made of relief, bubbled out of Shane's mouth. *“Your face pisses me off, that's what it does,”* he said.

He was still holding Rozanov.

He dropped his hands to his side and stepped back.

“Okay, Shane, your dressing room is down there, this is Melissa, she'll show you around. Ilya, let's get you back on the ice, we'll do a few solo shots with just you—Shane, we'll be doing yours later, at the end of the shoot, okay?”

“Got it,” he said.

He didn't look over his shoulder at Rozanov as he was led down the darkened hallways of the empty rink.

He did not.

+++

Yuna Hollander had been putting Shane in front of camera crews for years. Hockey was an expensive sport, and modeling was a way that Shane could contribute to his own dream. He was happy enough to do it, and he knew that these types of gigs comprised a large part of any athlete's revenue, but it wasn't fun.

It *usually* wasn't fun.

“And we skate in, and look at us stop on a dime, so talented, so focused, wow, we are so intense, and we look hot, damn Hollander, we look so hot, and then we look up, and we fucking lock eyes, yes we do, and now, smile Hollander, smile for the camera-”

Shane broke into laughter, standing up and slipping backward on his skates. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry!” he called to the crew. He waved a gloved hand at Rozanov. “He's being a dick, making me laugh!”

“That's alright,” the director called. “This is supposed to be fun, we want you guys to look like you're having fun—but let's try to get the shot, okay? Ilya, we can see your mouth moving on the monitor. Let's take it again.”

“Sorry!” Ilya called out, but he was grinning. He winked at Shane, his visor reflecting the spotlights trained on them. *“But we do look hot.”*

Shane flushed. His smile slid away, and he swallowed. He skated back to the other side of the ring.

“Theme is friendly rivalry,” the director called. “We want competitiveness, we want aggression, but at the end of the day, we want to enjoy a good game! This is good sportsmanship.”

“What?” Ilya asked loudly, mouth opening wide around the word.

“There’s no good translation into Russian,” Shane called to him across the ice. They were both in the shadows now, but the empty ring echoed with his voice. *“I don’t think you could understand the concept.”*

“He is bullying me!” Ilya said in English. “You can’t understand, but I am bullied!”

“Okay, guys,” the director said, and Shane focused because he could hear laughter in his voice, but there was also an edge of frustration. “I know, I know, but let’s try to get the shot, alright?”

They skated in. They stopped hard, chipping ice over each other’s laces. Their sticks hit the ice in a synchronized clatter. They looked up, frowning, and then their mouths split into smiles and they collapsed forward, leaning on their sticks as they broke into giggles.

“How’s that look?” Shane heard the director ask as Rozanov slid forward, knees bumping into Shane’s elbow. “I kind of like that. Can we make it work? These two clowns aren’t gonna get much more serious than that.”

“What did he call us?” Rozanov asked, looking up. Their helmets knocked together and Shane pulled back, just a little.

He opened his mouth. He closed it and frowned. *“You know... I don’t know the word. Clown? Like in a circus? Circus? God, how do you describe a clown? They wear, like, face paint—make-up, and make people laugh? In a tent? With animals and... acrobats? What the hell are they called?”*

“Wow,” Rozanov said, still grinning. *“I’ve never heard you struggle so much.”*

“I’ve never had any reason to talk about this with you before! It’s pretty random.”

“It’s funny,” Rozanov said, *“because I hear it now. The word is ‘kloun,’ in Russian, by the way—sound familiar? They perform in a ‘tsirke.’”*

Shane groaned through his laughter. *“Maybe we are klouny.”* He couldn’t help his smile, and couldn’t have wiped it off his face if he tried.

Ilya grinned back. Someone took a picture, shutter clicking, even though the cameras had never stopped filming.

Skating with Rozanov was fun. Shane already knew that playing against Rozanov in a game felt more intense than anything else. He was sure that once he was playing for the NHL, he

would meet other players who could also match his skill, but in the junior leagues and even at the WJC, there just were not very many players on their level. And Shane didn't like hockey because it was easy. He liked a challenge, and before Rozanov, he hadn't found many.

But racing him around the rink was fun. Shooting with him was fun. Practicing tricks and trying to balance the pucks on the ends of their sticks between takes was fun.

The most fun Shane had had in a long time, maybe.

From the sidelines, they mocked and catcalled each other in Russian during all the shots they were asked to take alone, and they jostled each other when they were finally sent onto the ice together. Shane was not used to acting so carefree, not when he was technically working, but no one on the creative team seemed angry about it. Rozanov hung back to make fun of Shane from the stands while he finished his last part of the shoot, which meant that they headed into the showers together.

Shane knew himself to be a high-strung person. He knew he was neurotic. He knew he was sensitive, and anxious, and awkward, and none of those things had ever detracted from his performance in the rink, but sometimes they prevented him from getting close with his teammates. Or anyone.

Not Ilya. For some reason, he was the exception.

And he was beautiful. Shane didn't want to think about it, just like he didn't want to think about the fact that he had broken up with his girlfriend the month after his first WJC ended. He didn't want to think at all, which was hard for him, because overthinking was his natural state of being.

But Rozanov was so beautiful sometimes it just... shut off his brain. Sometimes, around him, surprised laughter burst from his mouth before Shane had given himself permission to release it. Sometimes, around him, he got hard.

Rozanov noticed and Shane thought to himself, *Okay, well, it was nice while it lasted. Friendship over. And our fucking last day caught on camera, too.*

He swallowed, hoping the shower water would disguise his watering eyes.

Ilya turned to face Shane and grabbed his own cock, stroking it from base to tip, even though he wasn't hard yet. Shane couldn't help the way his eyes followed the movement, and lingered.

"*Not here,*" he said, the words dripping from his lips in Russian.

Ilya smiled slowly.

+++

Months later, Shane got to see the final edit of the commercial.

He and Rozanov, faces recognizable through their modified helmets even if the numbers and names on their jerseys hadn't been enough, skating up to each other. It was intercut with shots of them racing across the ice, their sticks clashing, pucks skidding, a mix of the footage they had filmed and generic b-roll. Tightly laced skates, covered in freshly shaved ice. A beaten-up puck and a brand new one dropping on top of it, wobbling, then landing. Shane, undressing on the ice, dropping pieces of gear around him, trying to make undoing velcro erotic. Rozanov, his jersey hanging loose on his frame, clearly not wearing pads, doing acrobatic turns in the middle of the rink, shirt flaring high enough to show his stomach.

And then, again, Shane and Rozanov, skating up to each other, concentrated frowns on their mouths like this was a real face-off, like it mattered. And the moment where their eyes met, and suddenly they were smiling at each other like they couldn't do anything else, bending back with laughter, and it became a supercut of every fucked up take, each irresistible smile or affable shove, fading into a wide shot, clearly not lit like the rest of the commercial, just him and Rozanov standing side by side by the barriers, chatting and laughing and shoving each other between takes.

The campaign slogan faded over the screen in blocky white letters as Rozanov slung his arm around Shane's shoulders and pulled him in.

Competition is better with a friend. CCM.

Shane swallowed.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I'm so happy this story got such a lovely response! Thank you to everyone sharing their personal experiences in the comments, it is so interesting and inspiring to read and I'm beyond happy to know that this story is resonating with people!

Edit: text messages are also italicized! sorry for any confusion

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

June, 2011
Las Vegas, Nevada

“Where’s your buddy Rozanov?”

“I don’t know,” Shane said, leaning against the bar. “Probably snuck off for a cigarette.”

Scott Hunter laughed politely. “And he didn’t invite you along?”

“No,” Shane said, rolling his eyes. “For some reason, he thinks I would disapprove.”

“Right.” More polite laughter. Hunter sipped his drink. “I’m not used to seeing you at these things without him anymore. You’re usually glued to each other.”

Shane felt a frisson of panic. He shoved it down, looking into his ginger ale. “No, not really,” he said, trying to be casual. “He’s just—he likes messing with people, so he prefers it when he doesn’t have to speak English.”

“You know, I’m always wondering how much actual translating you guys do,” Hunter said. “Some of the Slavic guys I know say you’re almost always just lying through your teeth. It’s just about the worst-kept secret in the NHL.”

“I translate for him during interviews and stuff,” Shane said, a little defensively. “You know, when it actually matters, or whenever he’s being serious. But he plays up how bad his English is around people, and I can’t exactly take him seriously when he does that. And I definitely can’t translate some of the shit he says. I could get sued.”

“No, I guess not. Rozanov always looks like he’s making fun of people to their faces.”

“Well.” Shane didn’t know what to say.

Hunter rushed off. “I mean, we all know he’s a cocky asshole, right?” They both laughed, but Shane could hear the strain in his own voice. “Sorry,” Hunter said. “I know you’re his friend,

just—unlikely duo, you know?”

“Yeah,” Shane said. “Like... a snake and a bunny rabbit, right?”

Hunter laughed, still a little too loud, something awkward in the air between them. “Right. Anyway, he's not taking the Rookie loss hard, is he?”

“No. He told me he's gonna win MVP next year, and that it matters more, anyway.”

“Oh, good.” He paused. “Well, what would you say if me and some of the other old fucks wanted to do shots with the rookies?”

“That sounds great,” Shane said, but now that Scott had mentioned it, all he wanted to do was find Ilya.

+++

“Hi,” Shane said. His fingers closed on the railing on the edge of the roof, his right hand inches from Ilya's. They stared down at the city below, the cars and people milling, the roar of crowds reaching them all the way up in the air. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Ilya said. “Congratulations. You deserve it.”

“It could have gone to either of us-”

“It went to you.” He glanced at him, smiled. Shane could see the tension in it. “You deserved it, Hollander.”

“Thanks,” Shane breathed. “Why are you up here?”

“Smoking cigarettes where you can't bother me about it.”

“Your team is going to fine you.”

“No, they won't. Is Boston, Shane, they don't give a fuck, they just must run the numbers and say whatever the doctors say. I can have one cigarette when I lose award on national television.”

“You didn't lose,” Shane murmured, sliding his hand the last few inches over so they were touching. “And besides... *you're gonna win MVP next year; aren't you? Isn't that what we do, what we've always done? We have to share the top, but the league isn't set up to have two of the best at the same time, so we take turns.*”

“Shane,” Ilya said, voice strained.

“If you had won,” Shane whispered, “I would have given... done something to celebrate.”

“Are you asking for blowjob?” Ilya asked, sardonic, but he was leaning in.

“No.” Shane pulled back, even though he had subconsciously ducked his head toward Ilya as he spoke. “Not here,” he whispered, glancing over his shoulder, but there was no one watching them. “Come to my room later. Okay?”

“I have early flight. Back to Russia.” He curled his fingers into a fist and punched it, gently, into the railing twice.

Shane felt his pulse kick up with worry. “I’ll—I’ll make it worth your while.”

Ilya looked at him closely, searching for something on Shane’s face. “You always do.”

+++

Ilya was intense that night. He pressed Shane into the mattress and slid his cock between his thighs. Shane kept them squeezed tight, breath knocked out of his stomach every time Ilya thrust down sharply. He stared up at Ilya’s face even when Ilya wouldn’t look back, and he blinked every time his swaying necklace bumped into his chin or nose.

“It’s okay,” Shane murmured. “You feel so good. You feel so fucking good inside me.”

Ilya shuddered and came. Then he crawled down the bed and sucked down Shane’s cock like he was proving a point, and he swallowed when Shane came.

They held each other, naked bodies touching from their knees to their cheeks, pressed together as they regained their breath.

Ilya brushed a few sweaty strands of hair off Shane’s forehead. He sat up. “I have to go. I got penthouse apartment. Would be stupid waste of money if I didn’t even use it.”

Shane’s stomach twisted.

“You can sleep here, if you want to,” Shane said. He swallowed. Ilya gave him a hard look. For good measure (to prove how much he meant it), Shane repeated it in Russian. *“You can sleep here tonight, if you want to. You can wake me up in the morning when you leave. I don’t care.”*

Ilya stared at him, barely visible in the darkness. He lay back down before he spoke, arms slithering around Shane’s waist as he breathed an, “Okay,” on the back of his neck.

Shane wanted to say something more, but he couldn’t think of the right words.

“I might not be able to talk much this summer,” Ilya said into the darkness, fingers drawing patterns on Shane’s stomach. *“I will be busy in Russia. Sorry.”*

“No, it’s okay,” Shane said, facing away, even though his eyes felt suspiciously damp. He coughed a little, choking down a worse noise. *“I’ll miss you, though.”*

Ilya kissed the back of his neck. *“I already miss you.”*

+++

August, 2011
Ottawa, Ontario

Shane's phone chimed as he turned onto a secluded path in the park he jogged through every day.

The text was from Lily, and it was written in Russian.

Shane slowed to a stop, staring, brow furrowed. He racked his brain, trying to remember his Cyrillic letters and match them to their Roman counterparts so he could sound out the words. His fingers hovered over the keyboard. He didn't even know how to type in Russian on a smartphone.

Sorry, he sent Ilya in English. *I can't really write in Russian that well. Or read it.*

It said, i miss your cock daddy, was Ilya's prompt response.

Shane choked. He glanced around frantically, but he was alone. *You're such a dick.*

You like my dick. why cant you read russian? Ilya sent, still writing in English.

Shane found a bench and sat down. He pulled off his earbuds and considered how honest he wanted to be, then shrugged to himself. *I learned as a kid, not in school. The lessons I took later prioritized conversational skills, and that was a long time ago, so I've forgotten most of the written stuff anyway. I'm sort of a heritage speaker—that's what some people call it in English, like I only learned Russian at home, informally, and not to a very high level.*

So many big words hollander, you should practice Russian so i can actually understand you, Ilya said. *Then I can send you dirty texts in russian and no one will know.*

It would actually be way more suspicious if 'Lily' was Russian than just sexting me in English. But also, don't sext me at all. He waited for a moment. Ilya sent back a winking emoji. Shane rolled his eyes, but he was smiling. *What did you actually say in your first text? I'm about to run it through google translate, so don't lie.*

Ugh, embarrassing for you, google translate. A moment later, Fine. I said, 'how are you, what are you doing.'

Shane double-checked, just to be sure. *Wow... you actually did say that. What the hell?*

I know. Embarrassing for me now. I miss you.

Shane bit his lip and glanced around, but there was still no one else nearby. Carefully, he typed *Not just my cock?* and sent it before he could second-guess himself.

Not just that, Ilya said, with another winking emoji. Shane fought down an idiotic grin, pretty unsuccessfully.

I miss you too. I'm actually like stupidly excited for the season to start for all the wrong reasons. I just want to see you again.

Maybe that was too much to confess over text. It felt like too much, openly admitting that he was looking forward to seeing Rozanov as much as he was looking forward to playing hockey again. It didn't seem like him, and it certainly didn't fit with what everyone thought they knew about Shane Hollander.

But it did feel honest.

Not wrong, Ilya responded, and Shane had to reread his last text to understand.

No, he responded, blushing alone in the park. *Not wrong. I'll see you soon, okay?*

Okay.

Shane stood up, slipping his earbuds in, and as he started running again, he felt as light as air.

+++

October, 2011

Montreal, Quebec

Boston and Montreal played their first game of the season at the Centre Bell, Shane's home turf.

Shane won. He and Ilya shook hands on the ice, then Ilya put his hand on Shane's helmet and jostled it, giving his shoulder a friendly knock. "I get you next time, Hollander," he said, playing it up for the cameras.

"You can try," Shane said.

(Ilya sent him his hotel room number, and Shane slipped out of the team celebration early to see him.)

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January, 2012

Boston, Massachusetts

They played their second game in Boston. Ilya fulfilled his promise, but honestly, Shane wasn't that upset. It felt like an alright way to start a season, with each of them winning a game in their own arenas, in front of their own fans. Playing Ilya on the ice only made Shane faster, more accurate, more personally invested in winning, and he would never, not in a million years, throw a game. But the loss didn't sting too badly.

I have big celebration with team tonight, cannot miss. But if I invited you to get a coffee with me tomorrow, Lily texted him when he was still in the dressing room after the game, *would you say yes, maybe?* He quickly followed up with, *you are my only good pr, the management love you and they say i fight too much.*

That would make you my worst PR, you know.

No, i make you interesting. People like to see new side of you (i like to see all sides of you).

He hesitated. He sent, *Tomorrow? Okay. Our flight is at 3:40 and I'll probably want to be back at the hotel by one. Meet at 10?*

Boo, you make me wake up early after my big win. Fine. I take you to dunkin in revenge, you might get coffee poured on your head - show you a real boston welcome!!!

10 is not early, Shane sent, but he was smiling.

They didn't even hook up. They just... got coffee. They were photographed getting coffee together, and it was fine; people liked their friendship, and no one thought anything untoward. His mom even sent Shane an article about it.

And... the pictures weren't half bad either. Just Hollander and Rozanov, mostly laughing, standing a careful few feet apart and not touching, but still. Laughing. Shane saved a few to his phone in a password-protected folder.

+++

*April, 2012
Montreal, Quebec*

"I just can't believe you're friends with that asshole," Hayden said. "Guy's a fucking pest, I mean, look at that play, that's fucking dirty, ref, come on!"

"Yup," Shane agreed, because he had heard a million iterations of the same observation over the past two years, and there was only so much he could add at this point. He focused on the TV, broadcasting the Bears' first playoff game. Shane didn't think Boston was going to win the Cup this year, but they had gotten further than Montreal, and some of Shane's fellow Voyageurs had started expressing disdain for their friendship with more fervor than usual.

Hayden was not one of those guys, though. He bumped his shoulder into Shane's lightly, clearly hearing the tightness in his voice. "Hell of a player, though. I guess that's why you two get along."

"He's fucking funny, when he's not being an asshole," Shane said. He thought about it. "And, honestly, even when he is being an asshole."

"Right," Hayden said, and then, like he couldn't help himself, "you got *coffee* with him, though."

Shane sighed, but he also bit back a smile.

+++

*July, 2012
Ottawa, Ontario*

If I invited you to my house for a few weeks, would you come?

Shane held his breath. It was 7:00 am in Ottawa, which meant it was 3:00 pm in Moscow. Shane had been up for two hours already, but he didn't want Ilya to know that. He just couldn't wait any longer to ask.

The message was marked read. Shane wasn't blinking as much as he should have been. The three little circles popped up, disappeared, then reappeared.

I would love to, Ilya replied, and Shane's heart was already sinking, *really, would love to see the city that made Shane Hollander—is it still plastered everywhere with your face?* Then the real answer came, which was, *I cannot leave Russia now. Family things. I'm sorry.*

No, don't be sorry, it was a last minute thought. It sort of was. Shane had been thinking about it for weeks, but he really should have planned it in the spring. *I get it, family has to come first.*

The ellipses appeared and disappeared.

Yes, Ilya said. *Another time though? You should ask, and I might say yes.*

That was good enough, Shane decided.

+++

November, 2012

Boston, Massachusetts

Ilya slammed Shane against the wall next to the door of his apartment. "I want you," he whispered against his mouth, and Shane panted his agreement. "I want all of you. Can I have it?"

Shane almost said, "*You already do*," but at the last moment, he managed to turn it into a shaky, "Yeah."

He gave everything to Ilya, and Ilya gave him everything back.

"I love sex," Ilya whispered after they were done, still tangled together on dirty sheets. "I love sex with hot people. You, Shane Hollander, are very fucking hot."

"Thanks," Shane panted.

"You are nicer than most of the people I fuck. And is nicer that you speak Russian because I don't want to think about English in the middle of sex, you know?"

"Yeah," Shane said, agreeing for the sake of it, still trying to reboot.

"Do you have to think about Russian? Or is it like... like first language?"

"Uh." Shane blinked hard. "You know, I'm having trouble with words at the moment, just in general."

Ilya kissed his shoulder. “Take your time.”

Shane caught his breath, mulling over Ilya’s question while his brain came back online. “It’s... mostly like English for me. Sometimes I’ll hit a word that I don’t know, and it will trip me up, because I know that I should know it. Because I know it in English, you know? Or something. Um, or I know sometimes I say random French words in the middle of a sentence without realizing it when my wires get crossed-”

“You do this a lot during sex,” Ilya said, kissing his shoulder. “*Uh, uh, fuck me, pryamo tam*, then suddenly it switches, and you are *oui, oui, bien, bien*.”

“Excuse me, how many languages do *you* know?”

“It’s fucking hot, Hollander,” Ilya groaned, pressing his soft cock to the cleft of his ass. “I make it my secret goal, trying to fuck the French out of you.”

“Jesus.”

“But I interrupted—is the same, mostly? English and Russian?”

“I mean.” Shane traced his fingers over the back of Ilya’s hand. “I learned them both as a baby, you know? I didn’t become fluent in Russian until I was older, or maybe it’s more accurate to say that I forgot most of what I knew for a while and had to relearn it, but, yeah. They both... kind of feel like my native language. But English more so. I know I have a larger vocabulary, and I can actually write it.”

“You can write in French.”

“Yeah, well, French too.”

“God, so impressive, Hollander, wow.”

Shane pushed him onto his back, straddling him. “You asked.”

Ilya sat up with Shane in his lap. The position put Shane’s head slightly above his own, and it was easy for Ilya to nose under his jaw. He placed a kiss on the soft hollow of skin beneath Shane’s tongue. “What about Japanese?” he asked, words vibrating against him. “Mongolian? Where is your father’s family from?”

“Um. Well, his ancestors were mostly French. So I’ve got that covered. I can speak, like, a little Japanese, and a tiny bit of Mongolian, but, well. My grandparents mostly talked to each other in Russian, you know? She didn’t speak any Mongolian, and he knew a little Japanese, but not much. They met in Moscow, and my grandmother taught Russian in Ottawa for a living. Like, that was their language when they were together. She taught me some Japanese, but my grandfather was... I don’t know, it’s complicated, he didn’t really... ever speak Mongolian. So I never really had the chance to learn more from him, and obviously, it would be pretty hard to find a Mongolian tutor in Canada. Or even to just find the time to learn it.”

Ilya pressed his nose into the soft skin beneath his jaw, indenting it slightly. “Do you want to learn?”

“I’d like to know more Japanese,” Shane admitted. “I think I have enough of them basics down that if I ever had the time to really, like, memorize some shit, I could at least get better at conversing. I don’t know about writing. I’d prioritize Russian over Japanese.”

“Pry-ora-tize,” Ilya murmured.

Shane pulled back a little, rocking on his knees. He cupped Ilya’s jaw and kissed him. “It means to decide what matters most to you, and put it before something else. Like... No, I don’t know what it would be in Russian.” He huffed. “Yeah, maybe before my head gets too big, I should finish learning Russian first.”

“You speak Russian perfectly,” Ilya said fiercely. “No, this one word? We can say it in English when we need to. Prioritize. I will remember it.”

Shane draped his arms over Ilya’s shoulders. “Really?”

“I’m capable of one word,” Ilya huffed. “You know I am bilingual, too, yes? I am fucking speaking English with you right now?”

“My Russian is better than your English,” Shane teased.

“Oh, he is bragging,” Ilya said, rolling them over so Shane was pinned beneath him. “He is getting too cocky. I had better fuck him until all the words in all the languages slide out of his pretty head again, hmm?”

“Please,” Shane gasped, and by the end of the night, he had said the same word in at least four languages.

+++

*January 2013
Montreal, Quebec*

Ilya texted him after his latest ad campaign started airing.

When do you ever fucking sleep?

I sleep seven hours every night. Why?

Of course you do. Why can I not turn on my television without seeing your face then?

Shane felt himself blush. *My mom is a very efficient manager*, he typed, and wished he could take it back as soon as he sent it. It sounded so fucking childish, but it was true.

We should work together more, Ilya said. *Is she looking for new clients? Maybe i can buy another Bugatti if I get the Rolex money.*

No, just me, sorry. But if you’re serious, she could probably work something out. I’m surprised she hasn’t cornered you yet, she’s a big fan of our friendship. He sent the text and

bit his lip. Ilya didn't respond immediately, so he added, *She thinks it's good PR, you know. Good free PR, too.*

It is not bad, Ilya agreed. But I worry people will think I am boring by association.

You think that's bad! Shane sent. *People might start to think I'm also an asshole if I keep hanging out with you.*

When you are in Boston next, Ilya texted, I will show you just how much of an asshole I can be.

+++

*May, 2013
Boston, Massachusetts*

The thing was, they had never really talked about it. About what they were doing.

They hung out. They fucked. In interviews, they said they were rivals on the rink but friends off the ice. Sometimes best friends. They were fiercely competitive but always happy for the other's successes. They took shit from their teams and their fans, but the league ate it up and shoved them together at every opportunity.

They filmed a fucking Dunkin' Donuts commercial together, and Ilya was right, Boston fans were crazy. Shane almost feared for his life a little on the second day of the shoot, but Ilya was there, shielding him from booing fans and laughing the whole time.

But it was fun. It was wild. It made Shane feel good.

Mostly, though, he wanted more.

He knew Ilya was still sleeping with other people. He knew they weren't in a relationship, and he knew how impossible it was to imagine that they could be. They were still so young. Their entire careers were in front of them. The league was still so... silent, about that kind of shit. Shane didn't even have the courage to label it for himself.

So they grabbed pizza together, and once, Ilya took Shane to an insane car dealership that one of his Russian friends, Svetlana, worked for and introduced him to her, and Shane thought about trying to introduce Ilya to the Pikes, but he shot that idea down. And he didn't really have any other friends, so.

It was good. It was fun. They talked, and talked, and talked, and never said much.

+++

*October, 2013
Montreal, Quebec*

It made his heart race, but before their first game of the season, Shane sent Ilya his address and the code for the front door.

“You wanna get drinks after this?” Hayden asked him in the dressing room.

“Oh, I can’t,” Shane said. He paused. He confessed, “Ilya and I are gonna catch up. He was in Russia all summer, so I haven’t seen him since before the play-offs.” And he fucking missed him, but he couldn’t admit that, not even to Hayden. Catching up with a friend who lived in a different country was normal. Missing that friend so keenly it hurt the space behind his ribs? Not so normal.

Hayden booed, throwing his sweaty jersey from their morning practice at Shane's head. “You are literally fraternizing with the enemy after a game, Hollander, what the hell!”

“You don’t speak French with me as much as you speak Russian with Rozanov,” Boiziau pouted.

“Because you aren’t half as annoying in English as Rozanov is,” Shane said.

Ilya made fun of his apartment and he mocked his pillows. He pinned Shane to the bed and fucked him through the mattress until he came untouched, and he didn’t make fun of Shane when he changed the sheets as soon as he could stand up without wobbling. They ordered dinner. They ate it in Shane’s dining room, where no one outside of his team or his family had ever been before.

It’s nice, Shane thought. This is nice. The moments when I can have this are nice.

Ilya grinned at him with half-chewed food stuck in his teeth, and Shane’s heart thudded.

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February, 2014

Sochi, Russia

“So, Hollander, let’s cut to the chase—do you think Canada has a shot at the gold this year?”

“I think Canada is strong, and I think our performance is speaking for itself. I’d be surprised if we weren’t on the podium at the end of this, and as a Canadian, of course I want to represent the sport we invented.”

“But you’re not just a Canadian, is that right? What’s it like being in Russia as a native speaker?”

“It’s, uh, it’s helpful. I’m definitely being dragged around by a lot of my friends to translate for them.”

“And what’s it like returning to Russia for you on an emotional level? Do you have any attachment to Russia? Any relatives who still live here?”

“Oh, uh, I’m not Russian. I don’t have any family from here—my granddad was Mongolian, and my grandmother taught Russian. Uh, both on my mother’s side.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry—I’m so sorry, I have that wrong in my notes.”

“No worries. It’s... a common mistake. No worries, really.”

“Well, I’m sorry about that. Anything you want to say to your Russian fans out there regardless?”

“I’m not sure I have any Russian fans! Um, but yeah—thank you for your hospitality, Russia! I’m having a blast.”

“Thank you so much, Shane Hollander.”

“No, thank you.”

+++

“Hey.”

Ilya glanced at Shane. He was leaning against a pillar, far from the rink, solemn and shadowed. He looked away. “Not here.”

“No, I—I know that. I just wanted to check in. You didn’t respond to my text.”

“No, Hollander, I did not.”

“Okay,” Shane said. “Um. Is something... wrong, Ilya? *Are you feeling alright?*”

Ilya closed his eyes. He breathed out. “*No. Not really. Fucking Latvia.*”

“*I know,*” Shane said, taking a step forward. “*It was crazy, but they played better than anyone expected-*”

“*I don’t want to hear it,*” Ilya interrupted. “*And we shouldn’t—we can’t be seen-*”

“We’re friends, Ilya,” Shane said quietly, sidling up next to him. “Everyone knows we’re friends. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Ilya breathed out, long and slow. He nodded shortly. “*Yes. That’s true, I suppose. You are my friend, so you are comforting me after a catastrophic failure.*”

“*I wouldn’t call it catastrophic-*”

“*I would,*” Ilya snapped. “*My father would, my brother would, my teammates would. Every single piece of coverage of this whole fucking event is calling it a catastrophe, while also broadcasting it around the world. It was fucking awful, I haven’t played worse since I was twelve. The team—we just did not click, I could not do anything about it, and I knew, I knew going in that it was going to be a clusterfuck, and I couldn’t fucking do anything.*”

“*And that’s not your fault,*” Shane said softly. He slowly sat down in the empty row of seats in front of Ilya, which meant his back was facing him now. Shane could see Scott Hunter and Carter Vaughn in their seats below, but Shane had told them he was going to find Ilya, and

they probably wouldn't be looking for him for a while. Ilya wasn't wrong about that, at least. Everyone was talking about how unexpected Russia's loss had been.

It took a minute or more, but Ilya eventually sat down in the folding seat two down from Shane's. Two seats. They felt like a chasm between them. *"It feels like my fault."*

"I guess it's subjective, technically," Shane said, *"but I've been playing against you longer than anyone. I think if there was literally anything you could have done, you would have."*

Ilya turned and looked hard at the side of Shane's face. *"My father is furious with me,"* he said bluntly. *"He says I have fucking embarrassed all of Russia."*

"Well," Shane said, feeling left-footed. "That's... fucking stupid."

Ilya laughed, loud and sharp, and Shane was glad their section was empty and that no one was on the ice at the moment. "Fucking stupid, yes," he said in English. "Speaking of, I heard that fucking god awful interview you did yesterday."

Shane groaned. "No, you didn't listen to the whole thing, did you?"

"Yes, I did. Lady did not know one correct fact about Shane Hollander. She wanted you to speak Russian so bad, she kept trying to get you to say something, anything, and you just would not—Americans, they think it's hot when you do it."

"I know," Shane muttered.

"People are fucking idiots," Ilya said, kicking his feet up on the row in front of him. "They don't—they don't get it. They don't get the pressure. They don't get... the responsibility."

Shane understood that sentiment better than he thought Ilya knew. "No. They definitely don't."

"You more than me," Ilya murmured. "I know that."

"No, we don't have to compare—"

"No," he said softly. "I know that. It's a lot of pressure, huh?"

"Yeah," Shane said. His mouth was dry.

Ilya nodded. Silence settled between them comfortably and Shane waited for Ilya to break it. He could tell he was thinking about something. "My father," he said softly, eventually, "he is... sick. Is why I couldn't travel this summer."

Shane switched to Russian without thinking about it. *"Oh, Ilya, I'm so sorry. I didn't know."* He wished they were sitting closer. He wished they were allowed, and that he could hold Ilya's face in his hands and put his head on his shoulder, and everyone would just think it was because they were friends.

Ilya nodded. *"He has Alzheimer's, but it is still in the early stages. My brother wants to deny that anything is wrong, and my father can't even remember that something is wrong. His wife is... well, he is a difficult man, and has been difficult with her, and I don't think she wants to support him through this. I can't get either of them to take it seriously. And now tonight I have to go to some stupid fucking gala with him while people complain about how I have let everyone down, and I, I have to cover for him. I have to listen to what he says and keep him from embarrassing himself. It is my job, somehow. I feel like it is all my responsibility, but I don't know what to do."* He curled his hand into a fist and pressed it hard into the plastic armrest.

"It isn't only on you," Shane murmured.

"Or you," Ilya said. *"Maybe we both take on too much."*

"We don't take it on," Shane said. *"Other people put it on us. We just have to... bear it."*

"Da," Ilya said, eyes dark. *"Very wise, Shane Hollander."*

"Thanks," he breathed.

"I wish you could come," Ilya said, abruptly. *"To the gala, tonight, to meet the minister. You would look good in your fancy suit."*

Shane's stomach twisted. *"I wish I could see you in yours."*

Ilya breathed out sharply. *"It would not be good, even if it were possible. My father is an asshole, and he will not like you because you are not Russian. I would not subject you to him. But Svetlana will be there. She would have liked to see you again. She'd probably be happier seeing you than me right now. Of course, she wanted Russia to win, but she mostly just enjoys watching good hockey. And watching you. She loves to get under my skin by telling me that you are her favorite hockey player."* He grinned, some of the mirth returning to his eyes.

Shane was helpless to do anything but smile in return. It surprised him, sometimes, how different Ilya could be when he was speaking Russian instead of English. Shane knew that he liked to play up his cockiness and aggressiveness as part of his media persona, but sometimes he thought that it had carried over into everything he said in English. He seemed to dumb himself down, sometimes, in a way that didn't even occur to him when they were speaking Russian. Maybe, at some point, so used to playing for the cameras, it had become a habit.

Shane was pretty sure that when Ilya didn't know the words he needed to express himself perfectly in English, he would just choose not to say anything at all.

He didn't have that problem in Russian, and Shane had never been so grateful to know Ilya's language.

"I wish I could come," Shane said, instead of saying, *"I wish I could be part of your life."*

A determined look entered Ilya's eyes. *"Someday,"* he said. *"Someday, you will."*

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*June, 2014
Montreal, Quebec*

Nice job, Shane texted Ilya from Hayden's bathroom, still blinking tears out of his eyes. The guys would never understand that. Sure, they might be able to understand being happy for a friend, but the fact that they saw his friend as their enemy would always get in the way.

They probably wouldn't understand the tears even if they knew absolutely everything. And they couldn't know everything, ever.

I did good, didn't I? Ilya responded much later. *Did I look hot, holding it? Did it make you horny?*

Made me proud, Shane answered, sequestered in the darkness of his apartment. *A little jealous, maybe, but don't worry. I've got the next one.*

I'd love to see it, Hollander. If you think you can beat me.

See you in Vegas?

I cant wait.

+++

*July, 2014
Las Vegas, Nevada*

"And the award for Most Valuable Player goes to... Ilya Rozanov of the Boston Bears!"

Ilya immediately started cackling, bouncing up in his seat. He grabbed Shane's shoulder and shook him, pointing excitedly at the cameras that were swooping towards them, seated next to each other because the event organizers thought they were clever. "See! See! I said I would beat you!"

Shane rolled his eyes but couldn't help laughing. "You are such a sore winner," he said. "It's unbelievable, actually."

But he didn't care. If he was going to lose, he was happy to lose to Ilya.

And he had known, after the Olympics, how much Ilya wanted this. And needed it, maybe.

He shoved Ilya out of his seat as the music swelled, encouraging him to move to the stage, but Ilya grabbed his arm. "Come," he said, leaning over him as all around them, the audience applauded and watched.

There were a lot of eyes. "What? You won! Go!"

"No, you come, too," Ilya said, still grinning, but his eyes were serious.

"Ilya, no, man, I'm not getting up on stage for an award I just lost-"

“You don’t do it for them,” he said, yanking Shane hard. The cheering grew louder as Shane stood, chest to chest with Ilya as they were crammed between two rows of seats. “You do it for me.”

Fuck. “Fine,” he said helplessly, and listened to the raucous cheering and catcalls as Ilya dragged him down the aisles and all the way onto the stage. Shane’s heart was racing, and he tried to loiter to the side as Ilya accepted the trophy from the presenter, who gave Shane a bemused smile, but Ilya grabbed him again and dragged him to the podium.

“Don’t worry, this is not sportsmanship,” Ilya said into the microphone as soon as he was close enough to it. “I am not sharing trophy, it is mine. I won it, fair is square.” The audience laughed, and Shane did too, feeling a little relieved and extremely embarrassed and... comfortable. Comfortable enough, even though he was on a stage, on live television. He rolled his eyes, playing along with whatever Ilya had planned. Ilya looked over his shoulder and winked. “I need him to translate my speech, da?”

“He did not tell me he was doing this,” Shane drawled. He had to lean in to use the microphone at the same time, and if he leaned in just a little farther than necessary, and their shoulders brushed, then he felt strangely certain no one would care. They were friends. They were best friends.

(If Shane felt a twinge of annoyance that Ilya had sprung this on him, he shoved it down. He knew that this was Ilya’s way of inviting him onto the stage, reminding him that the award had almost gone to him, and showing off their relationship in front of a clueless world. Ilya enjoyed it when Shane interpreted for him, even when he didn’t actually need the help, and this was Ilya’s night. And really, it was just a twinge. Shane was happy to help.)

“Come on, I am on time limit, Hollander!” Ilya said, and their audience laughed, engaged with the bit.

The joy in Ilya’s eyes, that cocky confidence and his sly grin, settled Shane. “Get on with it then,” he said, more at ease than he had been earlier, when he’d had an actual script to follow and he wasn’t facing down spontaneous translation on live television. That was the effect Ilya had on him. Shane was so fucked.

He and Ilya shuffled so they were both at the podium, Ilya standing in the center, but moved the microphone toward Shane’s mouth. Shane let his eyes fall half-closed, an odd sense of concentration falling over him. He wanted to get this right. He didn’t want to stumble, or pause, and he didn’t want a single person to question what he had said. Whether he had conveyed everything Ilya wanted to say.

He could do this. He could get it right, this time.

Ilya took a deep breath, and Shane breathed with him.

“Nachnu s ochevidnykh blagodarnostey-”

“I’ll start with the obvious acknowledgements-”

“I vyrazhayu vsyu svoyu blagodarnost' moyemu-”

“And offer all my gratitude to my team-”

“I moim treneram, moim instruktoram, moim agentam, moim menedzheram-”

“And to my coaches, my trainers, my agents, my managers-”

“I moyey materi.”

Shane turned his head slightly, away from the audience. “And to my mother.”

He spoke along with Rozanov. “Everything I do, I do in her memory. Every time I step onto the ice, I think about skating away from her for the first time, the first time she let me go because she knew I could make it on my own. How fast I felt. How steady, how strong. It was like learning to walk. It was better than that, because I knew that skating could take me anywhere. And now it has.”

“Ya znayu, ya znayu-”

“I know, I know, sappy nonsense from Ilya Rozanov? It’s certainly out of character for me. But the one thing I hope to communicate tonight, and the reason I’ve dragged my poor friend up on stage with me,” Shane’s lips twitched in a smile, but he kept translating, “is because I usually can’t say these kinds of things. I know my Russian accent is sexy as hell, though currently being very poorly portrayed,” Shane fought back the urge to interject a quip of his own as laughter rolled through the audience, “but I don’t always have the words to represent myself. I can always represent myself on the ice, and that’s why this matters.” Ilya held up the trophy. “Because hockey has the potential to be a language that transcends some of the barriers all ordinary people face. So does friendship. Quite literally, tonight.”

“Ya blagodaren-”

“I’m grateful for how we, our community, has chosen to define ‘value,’ and the steps we are constantly taking to bring that value to everyone.”

“Spasibo, vy chertovy pridurki.”

“Thank you, you fucking assho—*Ilya!* They’re going to fine me! This is live!”

Everyone was laughing, and Ilya held up his trophy triumphantly as the music quickly queued in, playing them off. “I got Shane Hollander to swear on live television!” he cheered, and the crowd roared its approval. “You are welcome, world!”

“Get off the stage, you idiot,” Shane laughed, pulling him along as the next presenters hurried out.

They got a few tight smiles from the organizers as they were quickly ushered back to their seats, trying to stifle their giggles.

“You jackass,” Shane whispered onto the back of Ilya’s neck as they ducked into their row.

“Is whatever. I will pay for any fines from the network,” Ilya whispered as they sank back down. “And maybe I will let you hold it later.” He placed the trophy demonstrably on his lap, leering.

Shane’s breath hitched. “Cameras.”

“Later,” Ilya agreed. “We have later.”

Chapter End Notes

I cut a 2000 word scene where Shane and Ilya do go to that gala together because I hated how it turned out whoops. Sometimes things happen lol. The only thing I regret cutting is Sasha talking to Shane in French while Ilya glowers because he can't understand, so I'll just give you that mental image for free.

The ending maybe turns OOC for Ilya but I really am so interested in thinking about how his English affects his personality in the show. Especially considering the last episode, we know there are moments when he is willing to express himself more fully, but literally can't do it in English. Because it's the premise of this fic, I felt alright stretching that conclusion a little further to include an Ilya who really trusts someone else can help him be understood, and is willing to be more honest as a result. (Also, it was the first scene I thought of after the concept of this fic came to me.)

Lastly, Shane's response to being pulled on stage is important! Ilya doesn't really get how much work he is asking of Shane here, and it will be addressed later. Thanks for reading!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

The Rose arc doesn't feel necessary in this verse so that plot point doesn't happen and this chapter instead covers ep 4 and 5—strap in, this one is intense! Some tags have been updated.

(Shane and Ilya have a tough conversation that has been building for the first few chapters. Ilya is not perfect but he loves Shane and is trying!)

Edit: Sorry if you got two notifications for the chapter, I had a technical error where it uploaded the same chapter twice? sorry lol

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

February, 2015
Montreal, Quebec

"I can't believe you still haven't formally introduced me to Ilya," Yuna announced loudly toward the end of their lunch.

The declarative statement was a non sequitur. They had been talking about the playoffs, and the Bears were likely contenders, but no one had mentioned Ilya specifically. "Well, Mom," Shane said carefully, "he lives in a different city. A different country. We usually hang out before or after games, and we're both pretty busy then."

Shane saw the glance his mom and his dad exchanged, and he looked pointedly at his plate. "Yes, that's true," Yuna said. "But, I don't know, it's been a long time, Shane, and I've never met him other than in passing."

"I don't know when you would have had the chance. Other than the Voyageurs, have you met a lot of players?"

"I've met some," she said. "I've met your other friends. I've met Hayden."

"Hayden is a Voyageur, Mom. He lives in Montreal."

"Then you should invite Ilya to Montreal," she said, as if it could be that easy. "Or to your cottage. We would love to meet him, Shane." She took his dad's hand and laced their fingers together on top of the table. Shane stared at the easy grip, the way they held each other, and felt something terrible in the pit of his stomach. "I have to admit, I'm a little curious... I know you both speak Russian, and I'm sure that means a lot to him, but other than that, the two of you are so... different."

“He puts on an act,” Shane said. “It’s his way of dealing with fame.”

“I understand that. I’m still curious, though. We both are,” she said, but Shane was very aware that his dad was not saying much. He didn’t want to look at their faces. “But you two sure spend a lot of time together, don’t you? Considering that you’re not on the same team. People talk about it, you know, and I’m your mom, so I figured I should know a little more than them.”

“Yuna,” David said quietly.

“People talk about... what?” Shane asked, blinking rapidly, his stomach full of ice.

Yuna sighed. “Have you—I don’t know, Shane, I can’t imagine that you’ve missed it. People love to spread rumors. Silly things.”

“Rumors?”

“Yuna,” David repeated.

His mom slumped in her seat. “Oh, never mind,” she said, trying for a light tone. “It’s nothing. Shane, you know we love you,” she emphasized, “and we want to be part of your life.”

“That’s all,” David added quickly. “Just in case you needed to hear it, son.”

Shane shoved a forkful of brown rice into his mouth and left dinner early.

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June, 2015
Montreal and Boston

Shane answered the phone call, already smiling.

“I am out of the playoffs,” Ilya whined. “Happy birthday to me.”

“Happy birthday,” Shane said.

“And now in a week I will have to watch you win it, when it should have been me.” He sighed. Shane could picture Ilya dramatically flinging himself onto his expensive couch.

“And then you’ll have to Tweet me some congratulatory message that your agent drafts for you,” Shane cooed, folding his arms closer to his body, phone pressed tightly against the side of his face. “Maybe you’ll even get the award for Most Sportsmanlike this year.”

“Too many fights,” Ilya said, sighing again. “Shane.”

“Ilya.”

“Come to Boston.”

“Ilya, it’s the middle of the playoffs! I literally just got off the ice, and I have another game in three days-”

“Come to Boston tomorrow. Stay the night. Leave in the morning. You are back in Montreal before your next practice.”

“Well, I mean, only if the flights work out-”

Ilya burst into laughter. “Already! Already I have you convinced? You are easy, Hollander!”

“I am not easy, and I’m not convinced! I’m just saying-”

“Come to Boston,” Ilya interrupted. “Is my birthday. I am going out with my friends, who are all sad sack losers because we will not win Stanley Cup this year. Imagine how funny it would be if you were there.”

“They might jump me.”

“I will protect you,” Ilya said. “Shane. Please. Come to Boston. Celebrate my birthday. You have never seen me on my birthday.”

“It’s not your birthday yet....”

“Close enough.”

Shane put the call on speaker, pulling up flights.

+++

Shane did not like nightclubs. He really didn’t like clubs that were filled with mopey hockey players. Especially when those mopey hockey players were meant to be his rivals, and were spending a lot of mental energy glaring at him from every corner of the dance floor.

But Ilya was beautiful. This was a side of him that Shane rarely saw. Usually, he saw Ilya when he was naked and in-control on hotel sheets, or fierce and violent on the ice, and sometimes, when Shane was lucky, soft and bored in the mornings. But rarely did Shane see him bathed in strobing, multi-colored lights, dancing with his hair slicked back from sweat, a broad, drunk grin on his face that showed all his teeth. Ilya didn’t look like he was mourning getting knocked out of the playoffs.

He looked happy.

“He keeps looking at you,” Svetlana teased in Russian, letting her fingers crawl up Shane’s arm. She didn’t have to whisper because the music was so loud, and it felt strange to hear someone shouting at him about Ilya in public. *“Can’t take his eyes off you.”*

“Well,” Shane said. He felt awkward, which was normal for him, but the club atmosphere only intensified his discomfort. He wasn’t drunk, and he definitely wasn’t going to get drunk this close to the finals. Ilya had shoved a ginger ale into his hand as soon as he’d arrived here,

straight from the airport. Shane was still nursing it, like it was a beer he was trying to drink slowly. He took a sip. *"That's... nice."*

Svetlana laughed at him and flounced off, dragging the Bears' new Russian-speaking rookie with her to the dance floor, and Shane lingered by the bar.

Shane soon struck up a conversation with one of the second-line left-wingers, Victor St-Simon, a French player who was eager to chat in his first language. It was fun, even though Shane worried his voice would be gone the next day from all the shouting he was doing.

Ilya spilled out from the mass of bodies and landed next to him, clapping both hands on Shane's shoulders. "Hollander!" he shouted. "Fucking Hollander! At my birthday! Let's fucking go!"

Cliff Marlow and a few other members of the Bears followed behind Ilya. "Ballsy of you to show your face in Boston," Cliff said, leaning in as he ordered another round for his teammates.

"This guy begged me," Shane said, grabbing Ilya by his biceps and jostling him, trying to subtly push him a little farther away. "He was guilting me like crazy. I had to cave."

"You always cave for me," Ilya said in Russian, pushing against Shane's hand like he wanted to move closer.

But they were already close enough. *"Not here, you dumbass,"* Shane said, trying to keep his heart rate from speeding up and his voice light. The flashing lights and pounding beat of the music were not conducive to a serene mindset.

Ilya pulled back a little. *"No, of course not, shut up."* He accepted the beer Cliff passed him. *"I wasn't going to—"*

"Can we have one fucking night where you two aren't jabbering in Russian the whole evening?" Varkov, one of Ilya's defensemen, asked with a groan. A pretty woman was with him, holding onto his waist, but she looked bored. "I swear to god, I'm going to learn it through osmosis any day now, just from having to listen to you."

"Fucking leave if you don't like it!" Ilya shouted over the music. "I have to listen to your awful fucking English all year! Sounds like a pig snorting through a—a—"

"Trough," Shane said.

"Fucking trough, yes!" Ilya slammed back his beer. "S'my birthday! And I missed Shane's party, so, you know, is his birthday, too, here! We celebrate how we want. He can fucking speak French if he wants and we will all play along—St-Simon will translate for us."

"No, I will not, Capitaine!" St-Simon declared. "I cannot do this! When my mother visited, I tried to translate for 'er, it was a nightmare! Absolument pas, s'il vous plaît. 'Ollander would better translate for me!"

“God, I forgot you fucking speak French, too,” Cliff said, shaking his head as he drained half his beer in a single gulp, apparently trying to keep apace with Ilya. “How do you have space in your brain for all those fucking words?”

“Biggest fucking IQ in hockey, right?” Varkov said darkly, slapping Shane’s shoulder with more force than necessary, but not hard enough to bruise. “The commentators never fucking shut up about how smart you are, Hollander.”

“I don’t control what they say,” Shane said, watching Ilya’s eyes darken with hostility.

“You only know English, so you couldn’t understand,” Ilya said to Varkov. “Shane speaks four fucking languages, I don’t know why you think we should not be impressed.”

“Four?” Cliff asked, probably in an attempt to de-escalate the rising tension.

“Three,” Shane corrected, glancing at Ilya. “I speak three languages. English, French, and Russian.”

“And Japanese,” Ilya said, looking at Varkov instead of Shane. “Four. I can count, too, Hollander.”

“I don’t speak Japanese,” Shane said. “I know, like, a few dozen phrases at best.”

“Is more than that,” Ilya said, glancing at him.

“No, not really.”

“Well, by all means,” Varkov drawled. “Why don’t you show off? Speak some Japanese for us, huh?”

Ilya snarled, glancing at Shane with furrowed brows. “Close your fucking big mouth before I close it for you, Varkov.”

Shane answered more sedately. “No. Fuck you.”

“Why?” Varkov asked. Cliff shoved his shoulder, but couldn’t do much else with the woman still leaning on him. “No, why? Come on, Hollander, give us a show! Speak a little Japanese! How do you say, ‘I speak four languages and I know I’m better than everyone else here?’” He sneered. “Or is that too complicated for you?”

Shane was about to win his first Stanley Cup. He wasn’t going to take this shit.

He stood up and walked away.

Ilya followed him. “He is fucking asshole,” he growled. “Want me to beat him up for you? Season is over, I will do it. Put him in hospital, no one will be mad.”

“No, I don’t fucking want that,” Shane snapped, and Ilya pulled back, surprised. Shane took the opportunity to surge through the crowd, looking for the back exit he had spotted earlier.

“Shane,” Ilya called, loud enough to turn a few heads on the dance floor as they shoved through. “What the fuck? Why are you leaving?” In Russian, he said, “*It’s just fucking Varkov!*”

“*It’s not about Varkov,*” Shane snapped, reaching the door finally and pushing through it. The balmy wash of summer air was not as satisfying as he had hoped as he stumbled through it.

Ilya grabbed the door before Shane could slam it shut and forced them both outside, spilling into a dim alley that smelled like garbage and urine but was, blessedly, empty. “You are upset,” Ilya said. “I don’t understand. He is fucking prick, and I am sorry about it, but-”

Shane snapped. “I can’t fucking speak Japanese, Ilya! I can barely hold a conversation with a middle schooler, and my accent is terrible, and I stumble all the fucking time-”

“Who cares?” Ilya interrupted. “They don’t speak Japanese either! They don’t know! Everyone, even Varkov, knows you are smartest in the league, that is why he is pissy little bitch-”

Shane cut him off, a sudden rage boiling inside his chest and spilling out, pushing out like steam screaming from the nozzle of a teakettle. “Do you even hear yourself?” he shouted, flinging his arms out. “Roz, people think it’s cute when your grammar is bad. They think it’s funny, and yes, sometimes they’re assholes, and they think you’re dumb because English isn’t your first language, and I get that, okay? I get how unfair that is. I really get that, and you fucking know that I understand more than anyone else. But it would not be cute or funny if *I* couldn’t speak English *perfectly*, okay? And it wouldn’t fucking be hot! Do you *get* that? And people do not want to hear my broken fucking Japanese, because it wouldn’t make me sound hot, or—or foreign. Not in the way it does for you. God, fucking say something, Ilya!”

Ilya’s hands were tucked into his pockets. His head was hanging, chin almost touching his chest. The summer air was warm but muggy with city smog, and his shirt hung open in the front, showing his cross and his chest hair, and his slightly damp skin.

“I’m sorry.”

Shane panted. He closed his mouth and swallowed. “Okay. Thank you. I... forgive you.”

Ilya cocked his head without looking up. “Just like that?”

Shane nodded. He licked his lips, which were chapped and tasted like ginger ale. “Yeah, I mean... I just... I had to say it, you know? Varkov was being a dick, but you didn’t mean anything by it. It’s okay.”

“S’not okay,” Ilya said, looking up. “How long have you been thinking it without saying?”

“Thinking what?”

“Thinking about how I am asshole who fucking—I can’t fucking think around you, Hollander,” Ilya said, suddenly snapping his head up. His mouth was twisted into something

like a snarl, and Shane was shocked by his anger, which had come so late but now burned hot. “I can’t fucking think. You take all my words, you make me act like an *idiot*—”

“Hey,” Shane snapped. “I don’t fucking *make you* do anything—”

“No! No, I didn’t mean like that! See? I can’t—I can’t fucking explain myself.”

Shane shrugged, annoyed and hurt, his shoulders hunching like he was expecting a blow. From the world, not from Ilya. “Then say it in Russian.”

Ilya growled, frustration bleeding from him into the air until it felt like a tangible thing between them. “I shouldn’t have to,” he said, anger coating his words. “You know I get along without you for most of the year, yes? I play games, I give my team speeches, I give interviews, and I do stupid fucking advertisements for crazy money—I can speak English, Hollander.”

Shane blinked. “I know that, of course I know that.”

“But around you, it’s like I can’t, sometimes,” Ilya said. “I fucking lose it. Because you will understand me, regardless. You give that to me, and it makes me stupid. You make me feel stupid.”

“I’m sorry—”

“No, shut the fuck up!” Ilya yelled. “Don’t be fucking sorry!”

Shane glanced around, unable to help his anxiety about being overheard, but the alley was still empty. Empty and dark.

“Sorry,” Ilya said. “I’m sorry. I yell and I snap at you and you haven’t fucking done anything wrong.” Shane wanted to say it was okay, but he held his tongue. “I’m sorry, for in there,” Ilya said, jerking his head at the door. “You are right. Was fucked up. You are not a monkey in a circus doing tricks. I only... you are so brilliant, and people act like they don’t fucking know it. I want them to know it.”

“I don’t want to be called brilliant, Ilya,” Shane said, a wave of exhaustion hitting him. He wanted to go home, but he was in Boston. In a grimy alley in Boston, standing six feet away from Ilya Rozanov.

“I know that, too. I should have known better, tonight. I am *sorry*, Shane, I am so fucking sorry. I... when I am with you, and I can speak whatever language I want, and I know you will understand, is like my brain stops working. Is selfish. I didn’t think of you, in there.”

“No,” Shane murmured, “but... it’s okay. I get it. I do get it, Ilya. I wish I hadn’t yelled.”

“Yell all you like,” Ilya said. “I am big strong wall of muscle. I can take it.” He thumped his fist on his chest, a small grin returning to his face. It was almost shy, as if he was quietly asking permission to move on from their abrupt fight.

Shane swallowed hard. "I genuinely wouldn't have expected you to notice," he said slowly. "But sometimes, people treat me... different. Because I'm Asian, obviously. Not always, like, *bad*, but different. And so... being asked to show that off, in front of a group like that, it's... it doesn't feel good. I know that's not how you meant it at all, in any way, but it still doesn't feel good. Alright?"

"Okay," Ilya said, nodding seriously. "I should have known that. I do know it now. Will not happen again."

"Thank you," Shane said, and he felt such a relief that he took a step forward, and Ilya matched him step for step, their hands extended into the air between them until their fingers touched. "Thanks."

"Is nothing," Ilya breathed, pulling Shane in. They were in public, and Ilya's arms tight around his waist, Shane's hands cupping the back of his neck, did not feel like an acceptable bro-hug between two friendly pro-athletes, but they were alone. And it was dark. Ilya pressed his nose to Shane's ear. "See how good my English is now?"

Shane chuckled, breathing in the close scent of Ilya's skin. "It's incredible," he admitted.

"I have to make do when you aren't there," Ilya said. "Stupid league, not providing enough fucking translators. Have you seen me? I started translating for new rookie in interviews. Is fucking hard, Hollander. I did not realize how hard. Sorry about that, too."

Shane smiled faintly. "It's worth doing, though, isn't it? For your rookie? It's hard, but it feels kind of good."

"Da," Ilya murmured. "Will you stay the night?"

Shane pushed into him, swaying a little. "I can stay the night," he murmured. "My flight is at six, though."

"I will drive you to airport," Ilya murmured. "We can get papped. 'Shane Hollander, partying in Boston during play-offs, no beard in sight,' that's the headline."

"Shut up," Shane said, pushing in and in, like he could crawl through the open front of Ilya's shirt and straight into his heart.

"You like it," Ilya teased. "Come on. I'll get you home so I can blow you before you must sleep your seven hours."

Home, Shane thought. *Just about*. He pulled away just enough to kiss Ilya. "Okay, good," Shane murmured against his lips. "Because I have a Stanley Cup to win."

"I know," Ilya said, pressing their foreheads together and grabbing Shane's hands. "They will not know what hits them when they meet Shane Hollander on the ice. They never fucking do."

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June, 2015
Montreal, Quebec

He won the Stanley fucking Cup. And all he wanted to do was tell Ilya, even though he knew he must have been watching.

He kissed it. He held it above his head. He skated a lap around the rink with the goblet hoisted above him, and he watched his teammate's families and his own parents file onto the ice, and he thought, *Fuck, I wish he were here.*

A year later, when he earned the biggest trophy in all of hockey for a second time, he thought that same thing and then, promptly, *I am so fucked.*

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October, 2016
Boston, Massachusetts

Ilya invited Shane over to his new house. They had athletic sex in his new bed, on new sheets, soft to the touch. They napped together, wrapped in each other's arms. Shane murmured something about needing to go back to his hotel room, and Ilya said, "Or you could stay."

They had done that before. Spent the night. The first time was in Las Vegas, Shane thought, when Ilya had to leave early to catch his flight back to Russia.

"Okay," he said.

Ilya made them tuna melts. Even in his new house, ginger ales were already cooling in the fridge, and Shane suspected that Ilya had gone shopping that morning because it wasn't quite cold yet, but he lied when Ilya asked.

It was so easy. It was so easy between them. How many years had they been doing this, and with so few words exchanged about it? How could something as potentially life-ruining as this ever feel so easy?

Shane tried not to think about it. It hadn't ruined their lives yet. It would not ruin them today.

They could have this afternoon, Shane thought. He could stay the night. They could be friends, or something more, and it didn't have to ruin anything. It didn't feel like this should be ruinous.

The TV was on, but the game was terrible, so they were mostly talking. Ilya told Shane about Svetlana's recent escapades, and Shane was trying not to gaze into his eyes too obviously. "So she dates this loser for, like, two weeks, and I keep saying, break up with him, he is loser, but she says she will, but the sex is good, so not now. I told her there is good sex everywhere, you know?"

"Oh," Shane said. "Sure."

Ilya smirked at him. "What? You disagree?"

"I mean... there's better sex some places than... others."

Ilya grinned, smug, but nodded. "Is true enough. Some cities, though, I think have hotter girls than others."

"Yeah, sure."

Ilya leaned forward. "Do you like them?" he asked. There was curiosity in his tone, but Shane didn't think he was mocking him. "Girls, do you like girls?"

Shane picked at his food, not feeling very hungry. "I don't know," he said after a moment. He had the same feeling in his stomach that he had felt that awkward day two years ago, sitting at the table with his parents. This time, he could feel it crawling up his throat, trying to push into his mouth.

Ilya paused. "But... you have been with them, no? You said you weren't a virgin when we met-"

"Jesus, no, I wasn't a virgin, you asshole," Shane said, reaching across the couch to shove him. Ilya fell back dramatically, bouncing amidst the cushions, and Shane laughed. "Yes, I have had sex with girls, alright?"

Ilya lifted a pillow off his face. "But you didn't like?"

Shane looked at the crumbs of food on his plate and suddenly felt too full. "No," he admitted, staring at his hands. He'd already rubbed them off on his napkin, but he could tell there was still grease clinging to his fingertips. "Not really. No."

He hadn't. He had never. If he was being honest with himself (or, more accurately, honest with Ilya, who he had never really lied to), Shane didn't think he ever would.

"Oh," Ilya said. "I do."

"Yeah, I know," Shane said, forcing a laugh.

"I like you more, though."

"Oh."

"Come on, Hollander, you shouldn't sleep with people you don't like. Is, like, rule number one." Ilya sat back up and put a hand on his shoulder, pulling him closer. "Duh."

Shane nodded. "Yeah. Sure. Easy for you to say."

"Hmm."

Silence settled between them uncomfortably, soon broken by the ringing of Ilya's phone. "Blyat," he muttered, pulling it out. "Is my father, I need to answer... you are alright?"

“Yeah, go ahead, no worries,” Shane said. He turned the volume up on the TV, trying not to eavesdrop as Ilya’s voice rose and lowered with agitation in the other room. He caught a few words anyway, unable to disassociate completely from the conversation. He heard Ilya asking where his father was and calling Alexei, and his stomach twisted with sympathy. He couldn’t imagine how he would feel in Ilya’s place, with his parents sick and helpless on the other side of the world, unable to help them.

Ilya had a much more complicated relationship with his father than Shane did, though. He knew that. He knew it a little too well.

Eventually, Ilya fell silent. He took a minute to collect himself before returning, sitting next to Shane and putting a hand on his knee. “Sorry,” he said, squeezing the joint gently.

“Don’t be sorry,” Shane murmured. “I, um, I caught a few words. How’s your family? I wasn’t trying to listen in....”

“I know you weren’t. Is okay.” Another squeeze. Shane dropped his head to Ilya’s shoulder. “My family is... terrible, as usual. Don’t know where the fuck my brother is, that kozyol.” He made a sound like he was going to spit, but thankfully did not. “My father is scared and alone, and I cannot help. If my brother does not take this more seriously, I will have to find him a nurse, and no one will like that. The nurse, least of all.”

“I’m sorry,” Shane murmured. “I’m sorry you’re the one who has to deal with this.”

“No,” Ilya sighed. He put his head on top of Shane’s. “Is family. Sometimes you have to. I get it.”

“You’re a good son,” Shane whispered. “A good guy, you know. Even when you’re an asshole.” He tilted his head until he could catch Ilya’s mouth. Ilya pressed down, hard, into the kiss.

“I don’t want to talk about my family,” he said.

Shane nodded. “Okay.”

“I want to hear about yours,” Ilya said, shifting back on the cushions and pulling Shane’s head down onto his chest, curling into each other and filling the concavities of their bodies. “Tell me about your grandfather. I’m curious. I want to know about the man who taught you Russian.”

“I don’t know that there’s much to say,” Shane admitted. “He and my grandma both died when I was twelve. We all took it pretty hard, but it was a long time ago now.”

“No,” Ilya said, catching his hand and kissing his fingers. “Tell me about him—they before they died.”

Shane blinked, staring listlessly at the TV. “He was an immigrant,” he said, “they both were. They came to Canada when my mom was a baby because they could get better jobs here. He was an engineer and she taught Russian at a college in Ottawa. They loved Canada. And they

fucking loved hockey, really, if you think my mom is crazy, you should've met them. They devoured every single game they could—sometimes they would drag an extra TV into the living room so they could watch two at the same time. My dad fit right in with them; he played for his college, and when my mom started dating a hockey player, everyone says they were thrilled."

"Adorable," Ilya murmured. "You come from a dynasty."

"Yeah," Shane agreed. "I sort of do. They took care of me when I was little, when my parents both worked. They were older, so they were retired, and I spent most of my time at their house. It was small, very kitschy, full of stuff from Mongolia and Japan and Russia—it was a weird house. My mom sold most of the stuff when they died. She was too sad to go through it all."

"My grandparents all died before I was born or when I was a baby," Ilya said. "I don't remember them."

"That sucks," Shane said, "because... they were awesome. I loved them. And it was so important to them that I learn Russian—I never really understood why, you know? Because they didn't really care about teaching me Japanese or Mongolian, I mean, my granddad never spoke Mongolian. Ever. I remember a few times when he told people we were all Japanese. He said it was simpler that way, but... I don't know. I wish I had gotten the chance to talk to him about that." He shook his head slightly. "It was really shocking when they died. My mom and I decided to take lessons in Russian together, since it was so important to them and their marriage. It was a good bonding moment for us, too. It was the only thing she and I ever really did outside of hockey. It was... important."

"Yes," Ilya said. "Sounds important." He brushed Shane's hair in circles, probably messing it up, but Shane let him. "What about your other grandparents? French ones? You don't mention them, are they...."

"Oh, they're alive. They live in Ontario, too, but out in the country. Close to Timmins? It's way out there. They're retired."

Ilya tilted his head, stroking his fingers through Shane's hair. "You don't see them much?"

Shane paused. He had never really told anyone about his father's parents, but no one had ever actually asked him. He shook his head. "They never liked my mom," he admitted. "I don't... I don't think they ever said anything to her? Nothing that bad, at least, but they never liked her. And they were not... super affectionate with me either. When I got older, like, as a teenager, we all sort of agreed to just go our own ways—just a silent, mutual understanding. We still send Christmas cards. Facebook happy birthdays. That's about it. I know it makes my dad unhappy sometimes, but unless they are willing to change and apologize overnight after, like, thirty years, there's just nothing he can do."

"What fucking idiots," Ilya said darkly. "Morons. Fucking entire world is so fucking stupid. Shane fucking Hollander is their grandson, and they don't even care? Fucking idiots," he finished with tight vehemence.

Shane grinned, tired. “I know. They actually did congratulate me after I got drafted, and when I won my Stanley Cups. Those are the only times we’ve talked in years, and it was just brief phone calls, but, yeah, I mean—they are Canadian, they still give a shit about hockey.”

“Fuck them,” Ilya said, and Shane could tell how deeply he felt that sentiment, and how he didn’t have the words or the life experience to express it.

“It’s okay,” he soothed. “I don’t need them. I don’t want them. I’ve got some of the best parents in the world, and I had truly some of the greatest grandparents.” He tried on a grin. “We all have problems, you know? What’s that Tolstoy quote about unhappy families?”

“I fucking hate that quote,” Ilya muttered, and Shane laughed.

Ilya turned and lay down on the couch, putting his head on Shane’s thigh. Shane shifted slightly so he could cross his legs and cradle Ilya’s head and neck in his lap. Slowly, he slid his fingers through his curls. Shane felt compelled to whisper, like if he raised his voice, it might shatter the world around them. “Is this weird?” he asked.

“Is what?” Ilya said.

“I don’t know,” he murmured. “Sitting here. Talking like this. We don’t... do this that often.”

“I like listening to you talk,” Ilya said.

Shane felt his eyes burn and had to look away. “I like it too, but you know what I mean.”

“Do I?”

Shane huffed. “Ilya, we share two languages, and we’ve talked about almost everything there is to talk about, but we’ve... we’ve never had a single conversation about *us*. You know?”

“In Russia, when I needed to talk, you let me,” Ilya said, contradicting him. “My birthday, two years ago, you needed to yell at me, and you did. Right now, we don’t *need* it, so maybe it feels different because we are not desperate, no, but... we can still talk. I like talking with you. I like your voice.”

“I like your voice too,” Shane admitted. Ilya’s eyes were on him, and they were so fucking familiar; those eyes had been watching him for nine fucking years. How could Shane ever look away? “I could listen to you talk for hours. About anything. Even if I didn’t understand the words.”

It was so close to a confession. Like dangling a foot over a hundred-foot drop without knowing if you had a parachute or not.

“I’d listen to you speak French, if you wanted,” Ilya said, eyes slipping shut like he was drifting off to sleep. “I don’t care what you say. You could read out your grocery list to me. I’d listen.”

Shane wanted to close his eyes, too, but he couldn’t tear them off Ilya’s face. “*Is that what you want?*” he asked in French.

Ilya's lips quirked up. He responded as if he understood. "Yes."

"Okay," Shane murmured. He stroked his fingers along Ilya's precious skull and stared at a face that he adored so much it hurt him, deep in his gut and in his chest. He wanted him, fiercely and desperately, and he wanted this, tuna melts, ginger ale, and conversation, spread across three languages, or more than that. He took a deep breath. *Parachute*, he thought.

"I kind of want to tell you how I really feel, but I think you would recognize the words if I did, and I suspect that you're listening in, trying to hear them. Maybe that's just delusional hope, though. But yeah. That's right. I'm hoping that you're listening to me with your eyes closed, and praying that you hear the only French words that everybody knows. How many words do you recognize, Ilya?" Shane saw his eyelashes flutter, but he didn't open them. *"Would you recognize the word 'oui' ? 'Non?' Or, I don't know, 'je m'appelle... Shane?' Okay, what about 'baguette?'"*

Ilya laughed, shoulders shaking in Shane's lap. "What are you saying?" he muttered, brow furrowing, and Shane smiled helplessly, happy he had guessed correctly.

"I knew it, you eavesdropper," he said, pulling on Ilya's curls gently. *"I think I know what you want to hear. Mon ami? Not quite. Mon chéri? That's a little closer. In Canada, maybe I would call you mon chum, but I never liked that. Ma blonde? Non, but it does fit you. I know what you want to hear, Ilya."* He leaned down, his body curled over Ilya's like he could shield him from the world they lived in, and the decision they were about to make. "Mon amour."

Ilya opened his eyes. Shane grinned.

"Je t'aime," he whispered. "Aishiteru." He swallowed. "I love you. Ya lyublyu tyebya." He closed his eyes and concentrated, and he didn't think about whether his pronunciation was perfect or about what people would have to say about him or his family or his grandfather as he said, "Bi chamd khairtai." He smiled a little, and the tears welling in his eyes spilled over. One splashed onto Ilya's cheek, and he blinked. "But you already knew that."

Ilya reached up slowly. The tips of his fingers brushed Shane's cheeks as light as gossamer, then slid across his face, up and back, until they ran through the silky strands of his hair. His thumbs settled on the sides of his mouth. "Je t'aime," he said clumsily. "A-Ay-eesh-i-ter-oo?" Shane nodded, smiling brightly. Ilya pulled him down and kissed him. "I love you. Ya lyublyu tyebya." The English and Russian rolled off his tongue quickly, both fluent. "Teach me how to say the last one," Ilya murmured desperately.

"Bi chamd...."

"Bi chamd...."

"Khair-tai."

"Khair-tai. Bi chamd khairtai. Bi chamd khairtai, *Shane*."

"Those were the only Mongolian words my grandma knew," Shane confessed.

Ilya kissed him again. "I will learn more," he promised.

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December, 2016
Montreal, Quebec

"Who the fuck," Ilya said, "is Rose Landry?"

Shane laughed, increasing the speed on his treadmill by a few notches. "I know you know who she is," he teased.

"No. Nope. Never fucking heard of her."

"No?"

"No. And you should not see her again. You are too famous to be hanging out with a nobody."

Shane laughed again, loud and bright, and he grinned at his reflection in the mirror. *I love him*, he thought, staring at his reflection. He loved Ilya Rozanov, and Ilya Rozanov loved him. "She's a friend, Ilya. I meant to text you about the photos, but you got to them before I could. You know the paparazzi. They'll say anything for a story."

"Hmph." Ilya muttered something that didn't sound like coherent English or Russian. Shane heard the whir of a blender. "She's pretty."

"Yeah, sure." His reflection was still grinning.

"You like her?"

Shane put a hand on the treadmill's monitor and let his eyes shut. "I like her as a friend. Ilya...."

"Can I be jealous? Will it turn you on?"

Shane's mouth was dry, and it had nothing to do with his exercise. "Maybe...."

"We should go out, next time we are in same town," Ilya said. "I want more photos with you, okay? Want to rub it in their faces. Stupid, clueless."

Shane felt his chest tighten. "I want something like that too," he admitted quietly, and for a moment his breath was the only noise across the line.

"I miss you," Ilya said. "I did not think I could miss you any more than I already did."

"I miss you," Shane echoed in Russian. *"Soon, okay? Soon."*

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February, 2017
Tampa Bay, Florida

They played together on the ice for the first time.

Like lightning.

The moment when Ilya held Shane's helmet and kissed his cheek, in front of a stadium cheering them on, Shane almost wondered if he had died.

"Nice shot," Ilya said in English.

"Nice pass," Shane responded in Russian.

It was everything, and it was a terrible, stark reminder of what they still had to keep hidden.

Later, after they had all gone home, Shane heard the news that Ilya had not flown into Nashville with his team, but all of his calls went straight to voicemail.

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Ilya called him back a few nights after that.

"My father...."

"Oh, god, Ilya. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"It's not even the worst of it," he said, and Shane could hear the telltale breathless stickiness in his voice. "It's my brother, it's my niece, it's my whole fucking family imploding beneath me but expecting me to hold them up—fuck, I can't even, I don't even have the words."

"Say it in Russian, then," Shane said. He pressed his spine into the metal railing behind him and laid his hand on the rough concrete steps. *"I'll listen. You know I will."*

Ilya sighed, throat clicking across the line and across the world. *"Even in Russian... I have nothing to say. I have already told you everything."*

"Say it again," Shane whispered. *"I just want to hear you."*

Ilya breathed. Shane could hear the tension in his breath and the tears. *"Okay."*

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May, 2017
Montreal, Quebec

Montreal was playing hard, as fierce as they ever got. Tonight was their last shot at a wildcard slot in the playoffs, and Shane had never started this season expecting a three-peat (he didn't even conceptually like the idea of a three-peat in any sport), but after two Stanley Cups, they all wanted to make it to the playoffs.

During a commercial break, he thought about how different it was to play against Ilya than when they were on the same team. There were the obvious things, of course. Their synergy when they played together was utterly unmatched in the league, and it turned to electric conflict when they met in a face-off, sticks clattering on the ice. But, in a way, that felt the same. The knowledge that his biggest competition, the skater who could go toe-to-toe with him in every category, was only a few feet away.

The knowledge of what they were hiding also felt similar.

When they played against each other, fans screamed. No one wanted them to go easy on each other, and they never fucking had. All those years ago, during the CCM shoot, they had called their relationship a “friendly rivalry.” It was weird that Shane thought calling their relationship a *rivalry* felt more accurate than calling them *friends*.

When they played together, people screamed for them to be closer. Commentators talked about their shared language and their early connection in the WJC, occasionally dredging up the story of Shane helping Team Russia find lodging for the night, which, over the years, had turned into an epic about man versus nature, and friendship prevailing against the cold Canadian winters. People loved them on the ice. They loved them off the ice. People loved Rozanov and Hollander, whatever combination they came in.

(“Have you—I don’t know, Shane, I can’t imagine that you’ve missed it. People love to spread rumors. Silly things.”)

It was bizarre, and maybe cosmically cruel, that he and Ilya got to stand side by side with their arms wrapped around each other in front of the world, and they still weren’t allowed to say what they were out loud.

The face-off. Shane was focused. So was Ilya. They still found a moment to smile at each other, and it didn’t matter if the cameras caught their fond glances or not.

Everyone knew they were best friends, after all.

Ilya won the face-off.

He tore down the ice, skidding wide, getting out of the way of his own team as he found an open path across the ice. Shane was at his heels, eyes locked onto the flashing blades on his feet, the puck weaving in front of his legs.

Ilya had started to turn, smirking over his shoulder, and Shane’s eyes had just drifted off the puck, when a flash of blue slammed into Ilya, just a few feet in front of Shane.

Shane didn’t see the collision because he was a part of it, lost in the tangle of limbs. He crashed into two enormous bodies and tipped up and over, almost landing on his head as he spun around across the ice, his stick flying out of his grasp.

He didn’t know how long he was down for, although he was sure he never went unconscious. It was just a moment of shock, surprise, the stomach-twisting sensation of having left the ground unexpectedly before gravity crashed back in.

He sat up before the first medic reached him, and heard through a roaring wind tunnel the cheering of the Montreal fans in their arena.

“I’m okay, I’m okay,” he said. His helmet had been knocked loose, his visor twisted awkwardly, blocking his vision. He ripped it off his head, eyes seeking, eyes finding-

Ilya, slumped on the ice in an unnatural position, his hands covering his face. Utterly unmoving.

“*Ilya!*” Shane shouted. He put one hand on the ice and tried to stand. The medic shoved him back down.

“That was a hard fall, Hollander, even if you feel alright, you need to stay put for a minute-”

“*Ilya!*” Shane shouted, trying to shove the medic off. His ears were ringing. He could feel something on his face—not tears, he realized gratefully, because it was dripping down from his forehead. “*Ilya!* I’m fine, I’m fucking fine, why are you—is *Ilya* okay?”

“I’ll decide if you’re fine,” the medic said, pressing gauze to Shane’s head. “Rozanov has his own people. Can you look me in the eyes, Hollander?”

Shane saw blood on the gauze, but he couldn’t care. They turned Ilya on his back. Shane saw someone run in carrying a neck brace. “*Ilya,*” he gasped, and tried to stand again.

He saw Ilya’s eyelids flutter, and thought his heart might have collapsed in his chest.

“Hey, look at me, Two-Four!” the medic shouted. “The other team is working on your buddy, let me make sure you’re alright. Follow my finger.”

Shane tried to obey, but he couldn’t stand to look away from Ilya for too long. He saw his mouth moving, his jaw twitching, then heard a loud, long groan that sounded like sunshine.

“*Ilya,*” he said again, useless to say almost anything else.

“You need to be screened for a concussion,” the medic said. “And this cut needs stitches. You’re out for the game.”

Shane nodded absently, hardly even caring.

He was vaguely aware of their teammates circling the collision, of a fight between Marlow and Varkov and JJ and Hayden being broken up by the refs. He saw Ilya’s fingers, stripped of their gloves, twitch. Then Marlow skated in front of him, ignoring the ref to lean over the huddle.

“We’re getting you off the ice,” the medic said, finally letting Shane get to his feet after he had taped fresh gauze to the cut that was weeping blood down his forehead.

“Can I—can I check in on him?” Shane asked, voice so shaky he would have been embarrassed if he could have thought straight, but how could he? That was *Ilya*. Lying on the ice. How long had he been unmoving?

“Not now. Later. You two can visit each other in your hospital rooms-”

“Hollander!” That was Marlow, and Shane jerked toward him, tearing out of the grip of the medic to skate up to him as soon as he was called. “He won’t speak anything but Russian,” Marlow said, grabbing Shane’s shoulder to stop him from barreling through the huddle. “This guy can translate,” he said to the doctors. “Can he-?”

“He’s speaking,” Shane said, dropping to his knees next to Ilya in relief. Ilya’s eyes were open but unfocused, roaming over the ceiling and all the bodies kneeling around him. “*You scared the shit out of me, you fucking asshole,*” he said. He hoped the tremor of his voice was not as audible in Russian.

Ilya’s pretty eyes locked onto him. “*Oh, good, you’re here,*” he rumbled. “*I was waiting.*”

“*I’m here,*” Shane agreed.

“Reverting to a native language is not uncommon after a knock to the head,” the doctor said. “Shane, can you ask him a few questions for us?”

“Yes, yeah, of course, anything to help.”

He ran through them as quickly as he could, stumbling over words in his haste. Ilya only responded to half of his questions, but he was still responding. That meant everything.

“*What the fuck are you talking about?*” Ilya slurred as the gurney was wheeled onto the ice. “*Why is your face all red? Are you a doctor now?*”

“Keep him talking, it’s really best if he stays awake,” one of the medics whispered.

“*Right now, yes, I am like a doctor,*” Shane said quickly. “*I’m um, I’m the voice of a doctor. Ilya?*”

“*No, you are the voice of an angel,*” Ilya said, then louder, “*voice of an angel!*”

“*Ilya,*” Shane said, heart racing. He looked around, but he knew the only reason he was here was because none of the medics spoke Russian. The cameras had moved away, giving Ilya privacy and getting out of the way of the medics, but still. “*Ilya, we’re still on the ice. Can you understand me?*”

“*Of course, I understand you,*” Ilya said. His face was already bruising and swelling but he blinked slightly and Shane saw a sliver of his light-colored irises. “*You are speaking Russian. How could I not understand you?*”

“Shane, does he sound coherent? Is he making sense, following your conversation?” the Bears’ doctor asked.

“Hollander needs to get to a hospital, too,” Shane’s medic from earlier whispered.

“Da,” Shane said, then shook his head. “Yes, sorry, yes. His words—he’s slurring a little, but he’s speaking in full sentences and he’s responding.”

Ilya's arm snapped out and grabbed Shane's wrist. "*Why?*" he growled, tugging on him with surprisingly reassuring strength. "*Why are you speaking English? My fucking head hurts, Hollander.*"

"He says his head hurts," Shane said, voice shaky. Someone pulled Ilya's hand away and then they were ushering Shane back so they could lift him onto the spinal board.

"Alright, Mr. Rozanov, three, two, one—"

"Shane!" Ilya shouted. Even the fans, with the arena almost silent as they watched the injured players, could probably hear him from the stands. "Shane! *Where the fuck did you go?*"

He was let back into the circle, skating alongside them as Ilya was evacuated. Shane glanced up, locking eyes with his coach, who was in discussion with one of the EMTs. Shane's coach glanced at him, glanced at Ilya, then glanced at the scoreboard. Shane ground his teeth together. His coach looked back at Shane and nodded. "*I'm right here, Ilya,*" Shane said, letting Ilya grab his wrist again. "*I'm coming to the hospital with you, alright?*"

"Hollander!" That was Ilya's coach, racing up to them as well. "Listen, the number and name we have on file, it was for his father." Shane nodded. "But, uh, you are also listed as an emergency contact?"

Shane almost froze. Some higher part of his brain, running on instincts and self-preservation, made himself nod. "He doesn't have any family here—I'm his closest friend who can speak Russian, that's important to him. To have. In the hospital."

Fuck, Ilya.

His coach nodded. Shane couldn't read his expression. "Is there anyone else I can call?"

"Yes, I'll text you a number from the ambulance—Svetlana Vetrova," he said. "He would want her at the hospital. She lives in Boston, though...."

"*Svetlana?*" Ilya moaned as they were pulled into the tunnel, the lights suddenly gone. "*Oh, god, Hollander, Svetlana was watching, I know she was.*"

"*Your coach is going to call her, okay, Ilya?*" Shane said. They reached the ambulance.

"Sir, you can't wear your skates."

"Fuck," Shane said, ducking down. Someone else was already working on his left laces.

"Thank you, thanks."

"Get me that number, I'll call his girlfriend," Ilya's coach said, nodding stoically.

Shane froze, then ripped his skates off. "Great. I—they need me to translate."

"Yup, you got it. And—thank you, Hollander. Lucky you were here. Good luck with that cut."

“Yup, thanks,” Shane said, jumping barefoot into the ambulance right as Ilya started to call for him again. *“I’m here, I’m here. You’re awake? Good, that’s very fucking good, Ilya. Don’t fall asleep.”*

“Why do you keep leaving?” Ilya whined.

Shane blinked away tears. *“I always come back, though, don’t I?”*

Ilya’s eyes opened a little wider, even though his face was more swollen. *“Who hit me? Was it fucking Boiziau? Did we win anyway?”*

“No one won yet. The game isn’t over.” He didn’t need to mention that Montreal had been up by one.

Ilya blinked. He strained to look at Shane’s face, lying flat on his back in the neck brace. The ambulance doors slammed, and they were off. *“Why are you here then?”*

“You needed me.”

Ilya’s fingers trembled, then squeezed tight enough on Shane’s wrist that he could feel the bones grinding against each other. *“Always,”* Ilya said. *“Moya lyubov.”*

Shane gasped. He looked up, frantic. There were two EMTs crowded in the back of the ambulance with them. One was studiously looking at the medical equipment he was attaching to Ilya’s gurney, but the other was frozen, staring at Ilya’s hand on Shane’s wrist.

Did she know Russian? Shane wanted to grab her and shake, demanding an answer.

“Moya lyubov?” Ilya repeated. *“Where did you go?”*

Shane breathed. *“Nowhere,”* he said, and the EMT looked away respectfully. *“Nowhere, lyubimyy. I’m right here.”*

Chapter End Notes

This ending is out of character for me - shane is my shayla so usually i’d be beating the shit out of him and not ilya, but the injury scene just made so much sense to invert for this fic.

Thank you so much for reading! This fic has gotten such a wonderful response from people, I love all your comments, and thank you again to everyone sharing their experiences with multilingualism, they are so wonderful to hear! Apologies for the cliffhanger but we all know it's gonna be okay :)

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

This work is now part of a series bc I wrote a little extra piece that was originally going to be part of this fic but ultimately didn't fit. Shane spends some time doomscrolling on Twitter at the beginning of the chapter and I was inspired to do a little social media/multi media section at the beginning of the chapter but i got really into it, it was too long and detailed to fit so now it's its own thing! If that's something that interests you, you can read that work before you read this chapter (that's when it fits in the timeline) or whenever, but if you don't like twitter fics, don't worry, there are no plot points in it and nothing you will miss.

Oh, Yuna and David, you could be so great!

SPOILERS for the coming-out scene in the book: i was so disappointed by it. Maybe RR was going for casual acceptance, but after all of shane's desperation, i wanted so much more. I also absolutely fucking hated how David just walked out on Shane without a word, I thought that was so fucked up and they didn't treat it like it was. I hope Jacob Tierney does it differently in the show (and he's such a maestro, i'm pretty confident he will). This is for myself and what I wanted from that scene, and also an addendum to a missing scene in the show where Yuna and David react to Shane's injury (bc we should have gotten to see that!!!)

Anyway enjoy!

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

*May, 2017
Montreal, Quebec*

Shane slumped in an armchair next to Ilya's bed. His legs stuck out, knees bent, and his arms felt numb. His phone was propped listlessly on his chest, and he scrolled without really taking in the words.

Rumors. Rumors, rumors, rumors.

***HOLLANDER and ROZANOV DEPART ICE TOGETHER AFTER COLLISION,
SHARE AMBULANCE to Mont. GENERAL***

HOLLANDER AND BOSTON'S OWN ILYA ROZANOV INJURED

The 10-Year Bromance of Our Dreams Just Got Bloody!

Lip-reading Hollander and Rozanov post-check

ROZANOV IN CRITICAL CONDITION?? WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR

Why Shane Hollander Left the Rink with Ilya Rozanov: Friendship, or something more?

BREAKING: Shane Hollander Ilya Rozanov's Emergency Contact

They knew.

They were trending on Twitter. Of course they were.

And it was their own damn fault.

Well. Ilya had a concussion, he couldn't be held responsible for this mess.

Shane didn't have that excuse. He scrolled through the videos and comments, punishing himself for his idiocy. Two dozen angles of him collapsing on his knees next to Rozanov, reaching instinctively for his head before his hands stalled out in midair. His phone's volume was muted, but he could read his name on Ilya's lips, called desperately across the ice.

People were talking. A lot of people.

And it was Shane's fault.

God, and he knew it, too. That was part of the problem. His willful ignorance was almost ten years old, because there had always been rumors about them, hadn't there? Shitty, baseless rumors most of the time, but people had always been talking. Some of it was derogatory locker room bullshit, the kind of homophobic jokes that always got thrown around in the sports world when any two men dared to admit that they liked each other. When their shoulders brushed. When they sat too close. Some of it was fan speculation, and Shane knew that not all of it was hateful—he knew that some of it, maybe a lot of it, came from queer hockey fans who had never seen themselves represented in a sport that they loved, and so peered into their personal lives to look for clues, for evidence of their own existence.

And Shane could understand that, and so it should have hurt less, should have been less invasive, but maybe he was selfish, and he *was* a coward, because he hated it.

There were so many photos. So many videos. Lingering handshakes on the ice. Smiles that were maybe too friendly, given that they had been exchanged during face-offs. Genuine laughter in response to chirps that were a little too personal, a little too detailed. Phone camera footage and shaky paparazzi pictures of him and Ilya all over Boston and Montreal, getting coffee, going to bars and clubs, rumors of them sharing cabs and crashing at each other's homes.

It could have been normal, in another universe. Shane knew he wasn't delusional to think that there were men out there who were as close as he and Ilya without it being anything more than platonic. Objectively, on paper, it could have all been signs of a deep and abiding

friendship. Even love, really. Men could love each other. Shane understood logically, even if he didn't quite believe, that loving another man didn't make you gay.

Shane put his phone down.

Ilya was asleep on the hospital bed in front of him. All morning, he had been loopy from the pain meds. His concussion was mild, given how hard he had hit the ice, but he had only been unconscious and unresponsive for less than two minutes. His gloves had dropped and he'd broken two fingers in the fall. They sat on an elevated pillow on his stomach, splinted.

His beautiful fingers, twisted.

His perfect face, bruised.

His skull, almost split open.

God.

Shane covered his eyes.

The door opened, and he looked up frantically, already trying to straighten his face to something normal so that he could talk to another doctor, or another nurse, but no.

Yuna and David pushed into the room as Shane rose to his feet, arms spread wide to catch them both in a tight hug.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," he said in a quiet voice, because they had already exchanged phone calls and texts and he knew that, unlike him, his parents were not worried about Ilya Rozanov. They had been in Mexico during the game and had ended their trip two days early to fly back. Shane knew they'd booked the flights the second they had seen him go down on the ice. "Just stitches—don't even have a concussion.

"Oh, my god, my baby," Yuna said, holding him tight, and they sank into the chairs littered around Ilya's bed, left there by Bears who had taken turns piling into his room and laughing at a high Ilya while Shane paced the hallway nervously. "My baby, Shane, are you—"

"I'm okay," Shane repeated. "Just a knock to the head. Nothing bad." He jerked his chin, then looked away. "Ilya's worse off than me."

"Right," Yuna said, "right."

David had a tight grip on Shane's forearm. It almost hurt, but Shane wasn't going to shake his father off. Not right now.

"Well," Yuna said, a tremendous sigh of relief suddenly leaving her chest. "Oh my *god*, Shane."

"I know," he said.

"Kiddo," his dad muttered.

Shane let them hold on as tightly as they wanted. He knew how it felt, now, to see someone you loved go down and not get up right away.

“Well,” Yuna said a moment later, clearly trying to settle herself. She looked over Rozanov, eyes fluttering up and down his prone form. Shane had often heard people say that their loved ones looked smaller in hospital beds, lessened, sometimes, but the same was not true of Ilya. If anything, the thin bed made his broad-shouldered frame look even more massive, almost like he shouldn’t have fit. Even asleep, he seemed too big for the room. The pastel walls and white blankets made his pink skin glow, and his hair, though sticky with residual sweat, was golden. “How is—how is Ilya? The most recent updates said his prognosis was positive.”

“Very positive,” Shane agreed, unable to keep the relief out of his voice. He had to look away. He slowly pulled his hand out of his father’s grip. “Yeah, um, I’m his emergency contact now, so it worked out. I got all the updates. You know. His dad died.”

“Yes, I’d heard,” Yuna said softly. “It’s been a hard couple of weeks for him.” She paused. “This is nice. It’s nice that he has you here.”

Shane coughed, then tried to lower his voice, although Ilya seemed like he was out for the count. “Yes. Yes, of course. I mean, he’s my best friend.” His voice cracked. God, what was *wrong* with him?

“The prognosis?” his mom pressed.

“Mild concussion: he’ll be out for the play-offs,” Shane rattled off. “A few weeks of recovery. Nothing serious. Broken fingers. That’s it. No permanent damage, just, just got his bell rung. Could’ve been worse. Could’ve been a lot worse.”

“Good,” Yuna murmured. “That’s good. Did his teammates visit, or...?”

“They were here earlier, Cliff Marlow and a few of the other guys,” Shane said, nodding quickly and running his hands down the front of the jeans Hayden had brought him, along with his post-game duffel when Shane had spent the night, trying to sleep in this uncomfortable armchair. “I stepped out for about an hour. Ilya was awake then. Their return flight to Boston was at noon. One of the Bears’ medics stayed behind—he’s here somewhere—but the rest of them had to head back home. They have another game, so...”

“How long is Ilya in Montreal?” his mom asked carefully.

“Um.” Shane blinked. “He doesn’t have to be in the hospital for more than a few days. They said definitely forty-eight hours, and then they were going to make a call about holding him under observation for longer or turning him loose. He would probably be fit to travel, but, you know, flying with a concussion is ass, so... he might stay a little longer.”

“Stay,” Yuna said slowly, “with you.”

Shane ran his palms over the rough fabric at his knees. “Yes. Yeah, I guess. He’s always welcome.”

“Because you’re his emergency contact.”

“Yup.”

“Okay.” Yuna and David were staring at each other, but Shane still felt like he had the weight of their eyes on him. “He’s alright for now, yes? It’s okay that he’s sleeping?”

“Yeah, the doctors said he’s okay to sleep now. That it’s good, actually, because he’s pretty tired and loopy. They said he’d probably sleep for a while.”

“Okay.” Yuna put her hands on her thighs, palms up. Open. “Shane. Can we have a conversation? Your dad and I would love to have a conversation with you. An honest one.”

Shane swallowed. His throat felt tight. His eyes were burning. God, his head hurt. “Yeah,” he squeezed out, but he couldn’t think of anything to say.

Yuna started for him. “We love you,” she said, seriously, and Shane blinked, feeling tears tumble down his cheeks.

“Oh, buddy,” his dad murmured, reaching out and cupping his face gently. A thumb stroked under his eye, and Shane sniffled, feeling silly and humiliated, but he couldn’t help leaning into the grip. “We love you so much. How could you ever think anything could change that?”

Shane shrugged, helpless.

“You and Ilya,” his mom said slowly.

Shane managed a nod. “We’re together,” he choked out. “Uh... we’ve been together... for a long time.”

“And you’re...”

“I’m gay, Mom.” Shane closed his eyes. His dad kept stroking his cheek. “I’m gay.”

“And we love you,” David said. “And we’re sorry you didn’t feel you could tell us. And that something bad had to happen to Ilya, and if you felt like you didn’t have a choice in telling us right now...”

“It’s not that,” Shane sniffled, his voice thick. He pulled away a little, and his dad let him retreat, dropping his hand to Shane’s knee instead. “I wanted—I wanted to tell you, obviously. I thought... I know you guys are good people. I thought it would be fine, but... you know. It’s... it’s so much.”

“Yeah,” David said. “We can imagine.”

Shane shook his head shortly. “You can’t,” he said to his dad, and looked at his mom. “It’s just—it’s just so much fucking *pressure*, you know?”

“I do,” she murmured, leaning forward quickly and taking his hand. “I do, baby. I’m sorry some of that pressure came from me. I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m not trying to say—you never did anything wrong-”

“Well, that’s a relief to hear,” David murmured.

“But we wish we could have been there for you,” Yuna said. “Shane, to be honest, we have both suspected for a little while. We weren’t sure if it would be better to bring it up or let you come to us. It’s hard, obviously. It’s very hard, to have this conversation, and I wish we were having it under better circumstances. But we’ve wondered for a while, and it never, ever changed anything about how we feel about you. We are so, so proud of you and everything you do. That’s all that matters. *You* are all that matters. Okay?”

“Okay,” Shane blubbered. He squeezed his mom’s fingers and pressed his other hand to his mouth tightly, trying not to sob. He didn’t want to wake Ilya up.

“And,” Yuna said, exchanging a look with David, “even though we might not *understand* it, we are so grateful that you’ve had someone with you. That you weren’t alone all this time.”

Shane didn’t want to tell them about all the times he had felt alone. With and without Ilya. “Yeah.”

“Will you tell us a little about him?” she asked. “About your relationship? The things we don’t know? Shane, we want to know everything about you.”

“Not everything, probably,” Shane admitted, trying for a grin.

His dad shuddered theatrically. “No, maybe not *everything*. But seriously, kid, tell us. Tell us how it started. How long has this been—going on? Since the very beginning?”

“No, not the beginning. But... a long time.” He glanced between them. “Um, since before our rookie season, actually.” He watched their expressions shift, disappointment and pain flickering across their faces as they exchanged a look. “I’m sorry,” Shane said helplessly. “It’s just... it was casual, between us, for a long time. We weren’t... exclusive. We didn’t see each other all that often. It didn’t get serious until recently.”

“And it is?” Yuna asked. “Serious?”

Shane paused. He nodded. “I fucking love him,” he confessed. “I love him so fucking much. I’m sorry I lied-”

“Oh, baby,” Yuna said, finally standing out of her chair and pulling Shane into a hug. With him seated, it was like he was a kid again, and he could wrap his arms around her waist and bury his face into her stomach. She seemed so small in his arms, and it was hard to accept that it was because he had grown larger. “You didn’t lie. Not in a way that mattered.”

“How long have you suspected?”

She brushed her fingers through his hair. “I had... an inkling when he gave his MVP speech all those years ago. It takes a certain connection, I think, a certain amount of trust, to let someone speak for you like that. And you, baby, you were so focused, so careful with every word you were saying, trying to get it absolutely right—I had never heard you translate like

that, Shane. It was unbelievable. I thought you *might* have been just very good friends, but if it was friendship, then I knew it was a very deep, very meaningful one. The fact that you didn't want to introduce us made me suspect there was something more."

"I'm so obvious around him," Shane confessed. "I can't hide how much I—I love him. The whole internet is talking about it. Has been talking about it for years. I know you've seen."

"Just silly rumors," she said, brushing her fingers down his shoulders.

"No," Shane whispered. "Not really."

"Tell us," she said, pulling away to sit. She took his left hand, and his dad took his right. "Tell us about Ilya. Tell us about you."

Shane glanced at Ilya. His face was bruised, and there was a heart rate monitor affixed to his unbroken right finger, but he looked relaxed. He was just sleeping, Shane reminded himself. He was just tired. He was going to be okay.

"We almost got into a fight the first time we met," he admitted, and he tried to tell his story, their story. He had told it a thousand times before, in interviews and press conferences. But he had to tell it in a new way this time.

It had been almost ten years since he had met Ilya next to a no-smoking sign. Shane thought of his lighter, sputtering and then flaring to life the second Shane introduced himself. He remembered the way Ilya's expression had changed when Shane started cursing him out in Russian, and his own nerves about being surrounded by Team Russia. God, he had hated Ilya for a moment there, hadn't he? That cocky asshole who was always making a scene and always putting Shane at the center of it?

What had changed?

Nothing, not really. Shane had just gotten the chance to know the real Ilya. And then it didn't take any time at all.

There had been so much isolation in Shane's life. There was isolation that came from being better than everyone else, even if that sounded conceited to admit. But Shane had started in the NHL as the youngest and best skater on a team of veterans in the sport, with the media and the fans clamoring for his attention, and it had never made him any friends. Being an Asian man in that position, at the top of a game where people who looked like him, and anyone who wasn't white, were still vastly outnumbered, came with isolation. Unseen. Unrepresented. Compounded with the crushing isolation of being gay, of course, and then there was self-hatred, and the desperate wish that he could have been anything else.

But Shane didn't feel that last part so keenly anymore. He didn't want to be different, because then he wouldn't have Ilya.

It felt hard to tell his parents any of it, truly, any of it, because it all felt so private. So personal. Not just because Shane was in the habit of keeping it a secret, although that was part of it. But also because he and Ilya had always been private, even when they were in

public. It was as easy as... speaking another language. Changing their tongues, and suddenly, in almost any room, they could have total privacy.

Just them. Easy. Why was it so easy and so hard at the same time?

He made himself tell his parents anyway, the redacted timeline of their relationship, their friendship, their rivalry, and their romance.

"I wanted to tell you," Shane said after he confessed that he and Ilya had come to an understanding about how they felt about each other six months ago, over tuna melts and ginger ales. "But it was all so... precarious. Between the teams, and Ilya's family, and spending summers in Russia.... I didn't know how to tell you. Now, I obviously wish I had told you sooner, because anything would have been better than this."

"I don't know," his dad said, quietly playful. "This isn't so bad. It's almost romantic when you think about it."

"Hospitals can be very romantic," Yuna agreed. "But only because, Shane, Ilya is going to be *okay*. You said it yourself."

Shane nodded slowly. "Yeah, but... then what?" he asked. "You've... you've seen it, right? Everyone is talking about us."

Yuna's mouth tightened slightly, a familiar manager-mom expression coming over her face. "They are talking about it, and some people are being mean, and some people are being earnest, but in truth, it is all speculation, Shane. And it is easy to focus on the bad parts of speculation. I will tell you, earnestly, that from an actual overview of what is being said, very little is being made of your relationship. It's a vocal minority, but the people who care about that—positively or negatively—are few and far between. Yes, people know you are Ilya's emergency contact, but very few people are connecting those dots. It probably seems like more to you because you know the truth. But Shane, *they don't*. No one will know until you tell them. Honestly, and this is maybe a little messed up, but it helps that Ilya's father died recently. People understand he doesn't have much family left, and the two of you have been friends for so long." She patted his hand. "It is more okay than you think, I *promise* you."

That reassured Shane very slightly, although the jittery fear of knowing that strangers were out there, making guesses about his life and getting it right, still made him feel sick. "The doctors... there was an EMT—"

"They can't say anything, Shane," she soothed. "They won't."

"Okay," he said weakly, because there wasn't much else to say.

"And you don't have to say anything to anyone," Yuna said, "but if you want, I can draft up a message—something short, probably—for your Instagram about how Ilya is like family to you, or how important your friendship is, or..." She glanced at David. "Or whatever you want to say. Anything you want to say. We are with you one hundred percent."

His fingers spasmed tightly on her hand. “I don’t want to come out,” he said. “I’m not—I’m not ready.”

“Okay,” she soothed. “You don’t have to. You don’t owe anyone anything. You only owe it to yourself to try to be happy, and to Ilya to be a good partner. Those are the only things you have to do. Okay, baby?”

“Okay, Mom,” he choked. “What if—what if he wants to come out? Everyone is—everyone is already talking.”

“I’m not an expert,” she said, “but I think that’s something you need to ask him. But you don’t need to decide anything now. Do you want me to draft a statement for you?”

“Yes,” he said, feeling another wash of relief. “Yes, please, Mom.”

“Okay.” She had her game face back on. She gave his hand one last pat and stood up, pulling her phone from her pocket. Shane smiled a little. She always paced while she worked.

“God, kid, that’s a nasty cut,” his dad said, shuffling his chair closer to Shane’s.

“Yeah, it was blunt force,” Shane said. “Split the skin. Twenty-something stitches, I think.”

He made a disapproving sound. “I was worried about you, you know. We were watching the game.”

“I’m so sorry, Dad-”

“And there was a moment when you hit the ice and you didn’t get up and I thought, ‘It’s over.’” He put his hand back on Shane’s cheek. “It is the worst thing I’ve ever felt. Sending your kid out in the world, letting them do something dangerous, and watching them fall and not get up. I thought, ‘If that kid doesn’t get up, it’s over. It’s all over.’”

Another wave of tears welled in his eyes, which ached from how much he had been crying. “I’m sorry.”

“I should apologize to you,” David said. “You grew up in a family of hockey fanatics, no cousins, just generations of expectation. I know you felt it from all of us.”

“I love hockey,” Shane said. “I love everything about it.”

“Yeah, you were born into that, too.” He nodded, shortly. “My parents called me, asking if you were alright.”

“Oh,” Shane said, surprised. “Did you-”

“I hung up,” his dad said, turning to look at the bed. “It’s hard, sending your kids out into the world. It’s hard knowing they might not come back. But if you don’t make it known that they can always, always come home? You don’t deserve to be a parent. I never understood that more than at that moment.”

“I’m sorry, Dad,” Shane murmured, leaning forward. He put his head on his dad’s shoulder and had the same feeling, like he was a little kid again. “I love you.”

His dad put his hand on Shane’s back. Shane sniffled. His mom paced the room, muttering to herself as she typed fervently on her phone.

Shane closed his eyes.

+++

He woke up folded in an uncomfortable position. His neck hurt almost as much as his forehead did because while asleep, he had slumped forward, the crown of his head pressed to the side of Ilya’s thigh, face turned with his stitches up. One arm was slung out across Ilya’s sheets, but the other hung awkwardly in the space between his knees, the tips of his fingers tingling slightly from the odd position.

Fingers stroked gently through his hair.

“You look like a marionette that had its strings cut in the middle of a dance,” Ilya said, voice rumbling and easy.

Shane blinked. He pushed himself up with a groan, surreptitiously checking for a drool spot on the sheets. Ilya raised his hand with him, not letting his fingers slip away until the last moment. He grinned dopily up at Shane. Shane had to smile back, but he looked around the empty room.

“Your parents stepped out to get us good food for lunch,” Ilya said. *“I always forget that your mom speaks Russian, too—wow, her Russian is good. I thought you had a perfect accent, but no, nuh-uh, she sounds just like my mom,”* he said happily, and Shane melted. *“They asked if they should wake you, and I told them not to—I know you were up all night.”* Ilya lifted his hand again, like he wanted to touch the bruises under Shane’s eyes.

Shane caught his wrist. He controlled Ilya’s wobbly movements, his limbs uncoordinated, and pressed his palm flat to his cheek. Ilya’s hands were so big. He closed his eyes and sighed. *“I’m glad you’re alright. Did the doctor step in?”*

“The nurse,” he said. He snickered. *“She thought you were very funny too, but I told her not to laugh too loud or you would wake up. But I said it in Russian and she did not understand, and I’m pretty sure your mom was more polite than I was when she translated. Whatever. She should not have woken you. You still need more sleep.”*

Shane felt tension, not from his awkward sleeping position, creep up his spine. He was worried about how obvious he and Ilya were acting. He was worried about the EMT who had stared at their hands and might have recognized the Russian endearments they had spoken to each other—if not by their dictionary definitions, then at least by the tone of their voices.

“Moya lyubov.”

“Lyubimyy.”

Pretty fucking obvious.

“Hey.” Shane looked down and met Ilya’s eyes. His pupils were blown wide by the drugs in his system, but they were both the same size, not unevenly dilated. His face was bruised, but not scratched. His fingers were splinted, but they would heal. He was alright. *“My pretty boy,”* Ilya said, stroking his thumb over Shane’s mouth. His pointed finger tapped Shane’s temple. *“How are you feeling? They did not give you the good drugs, I don’t think.”*

Shane smiled. *“No, they did not.”*

Ilya huffed, frowning. *“Rude. I would share if I could. See how unselfish I am?”*

“Not selfish at all,” Shane agreed.

“Hey,” Ilya said again. *“Are you alright? What’s wrong?”*

Shane really didn’t want to cry again. *“I told my parents. Without asking you.”*

Ilya shrugged. It was a big, heavy roll of his powerful shoulders, a slump that took him deep into his pillows. *“I gathered. It’s okay. I think you would have told them soon, anyway.”*

“I wanted to,” Shane admitted.

“So now was a good moment,” he said, *“given you were crying beside my hospital bed and all.”*

“I wasn’t crying-”

“Yes, you are a crybaby, it’s okay. I love your tears. I love all of you. Cry for me some more, and I will still love you.”

“God, you asshole,” Shane said, earnestly fighting back tears. He pinched the bridge of his nose and breathed. “Are you okay?” he asked in English, trying to soothe the last of his worries. “You can still—you can still understand me, right?” Because if he couldn’t, that was bad.

Ilya groaned dramatically. *“Yes, fucking yes, you are just like the doctors and my fucking team, desperate to hear me speak your ugly fucking language, here you go—I am Ilya Rozanov, I am in Montreal, no I don’t know who the fucking prime minister is, why would I, but it is twenty-seventeen, and yes, my head hurts, yes, my accent was always this strong, but isn’t it sexy? Think my boyfriend will play nurse with me? I could get him cute little dress-”*

“Shut up,” Shane hissed. He glanced at the door, but Ilya’s suite was large and spacious. It was far away, and the bustle of a hospital and the whir of machinery would cover almost all conversation. “God, Ilya. Not here. We’ve already been obvious enough.”

Ilya wrinkled his brow. *“Can we speak in Russian?”* he asked, slightly plaintive. *“Please? I don’t want to speak English.”*

“Da, konechno,” Shane said. He wanted to grab his hand and squeeze. He was worried a nurse would walk in. He glanced at the door again.

“Hey,” Ilya said. Shane looked at him, his warm, soft eyes. *“It’s okay. They’re not allowed to say anything. They won’t say anything. We have all the privacy we want. I am a rich celebrity so they gave me a big room with nice windows that have blinds on them, see?”* He gestured a little with the arm that had an IV in it. Shane put his hand on his wrist and pressed it to the sheets. *“They don’t know, Shane,”* Ilya said. *“They won’t know unless we tell them.”*

God, he wasn’t going to fucking cry again. He wasn’t. *“I’m sorry.”*

“Why?”

“I want—I want to love you in front of the world,” Shane confessed. *“And I don’t want to act... like I’m ashamed of you, or like you need to be a secret. I don’t want that.”*

“It is so much more complicated than that,” Ilya said. *“You know I’m not ready either. I... ugh, okay, I-”*

“Wait, no.” Shane shook his head and closed his eyes. *“I’m not going to make you have this conversation right now. You’re hurt-”*

“Both of us are hurt-”

“And you are high. But you need to know that there are... rumors. Everyone knows I’m your emergency contact. And we... we both sort of freaked out, on the ice. So... there’s rumors.”

“If there are rumors,” Ilya said, *“let there be rumors. If our teammates make gay jokes, alright, whatever, I’ll fucking knock their teeth out and you can aim a puck up under their visors—I know you have the accuracy for it, you can break their jaws if they piss you off enough. I don’t fucking care about rumors, Shane. I just don’t care.”*

“Even if they’re true?”

“Especially,” Ilya said. *“I can’t tell the world that I love you, but if they figure it out?”* He shrugged, unconcerned, and Shane really hoped that it wasn’t just the drugs. *“Good. I want them to know. I’ve told you before, I’m a jealous, jealous, man.”*

Shane smiled, tenuously happy. *“Come to my cottage for the summer, as soon as they release you,”* he murmured. *“Don’t go back to Boston. Don’t go back to Russia.”*

“Okay,” Ilya said, grinning like a loon.

The door opened slowly. Yuna and David peeked in, either suspicious that they were interrupting an intimate moment or wary of waking Shane up. When they saw that they were both presentable and Shane was already sitting up, they stepped inside, carrying bags of take-out. *“Ilya, we spoke to your nurse, she said the soup would be fine for you,”* Yuna said, walking forward. *“Shane, I got your usual, but I figured you didn’t need to worry so much about your diet, so I got a soda and a ginger ale, whichever you prefer-”*

Ilya grinned sharply, head swinging to face Shane. *“That’s right!”* he cheered. *“Bears won! Fucking take that, Hollander! Boston is for winners, baby!”*

“It was after both you and I had already left, and I was ahead of you in points,” Shane said, accepting the food and drinks his mother handed him. His stomach rumbled loudly, and he blushed. *“Sorry.”*

Ilya said, *“You need to fucking eat, idiot,”* at the same time Yuna said, *“You shouldn’t be skipping meals, Shane.”*

The three of them laughed.

David sighed, settling down in the chair at the foot of Ilya’s bed. “I guess I’m going to actually need to learn Russian, now,” he said. “I was already outnumbered, but this is quickly growing unmanageable.”

“I will teach you the best swears,” Ilya said, happily tucked into his food. “And the young people slang. Shane speaks like old man, you know. His accent is good, but not so hot in bed.”

“Ilya!” Shane snapped, and Yuna laughed so hard she snorted and had to cover her mouth.

“This is payback for the many, many years when you didn’t bring anyone home,” David said dryly. He patted Ilya’s ankle through his blankets. Shane saw the flash of emotion that raced through Ilya’s eyes and set down his can of ginger ale to touch his elbow lightly. “Welcome to the fold, kid,” David said, voice soft.

“Anyone who makes Shane happy is always welcome in our home,” Yuna said gently.

Shane squeezed Ilya’s arm.

Ilya smiled. “Spasibo.”

David snapped. “I know that one!”

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June, 2017
Eastern Quebec

They drove to the cottage in Shane’s Jeep.

Ilya sneered at it as he swung himself into the passenger seat, sitting stiffly like he was afraid of catching an infectious disease from the faux-leather. “I hate this fucking car.”

Shane rolled his eyes and shut his door for him. Ilya immediately rolled down his window, as if he didn’t want to be trapped inside the Jeep. “It’s good in the snow!”

“You are millionaire,” Ilya said. “You can have ugly, stupid, bro-car for the winter and let it rot in your garage all summer while you drive something sexy with the rooftop down in the

summer. That is your right as professional athlete.”

“This car has better mileage and emissions ratings than any of your sports cars,” Shane said, climbing into the driver’s seat and slamming the door shut. He buckled his seatbelt and looked pointedly at Ilya until he did the same, rolling his eyes dramatically as if both of their faces weren’t already covered in bruises and cuts. They looked beat up, the pair of them. Worse for wear. Maybe a little pathetic, although Ilya was wearing sunglasses because he couldn’t resist the urge to try to look cool.

Shane's mom had taken a picture of them in the hospital room: Ilya reclined on the bed with a goofy grin on his face and Shane leaning against the wall, flashing a thumbs up at the camera. Casual. *Yeah*, Shane thought, *so fucking casual*.

‘This guy is my best friend,’ the caption, scripted by Yuna, fretted over by Shane, and ultimately approved by Ilya, had read. ‘We’ve been playing against each other for ten years, and every time we step on the ice, we know the risks. It’s hard to put into words the kind of bond you have with a person with whom you have been through so much. Today, we were both blessedly lucky to walk away. Thank you for all your concern, all your loving messages, and all your support. Thank you also for respecting our privacy, and thank you to the medical teams who responded so promptly and efficiently in the aftermath. We would also like to draw attention to the #dobetterNHL Movement as we request better access for players who do not speak English as a native or first language to interpreters, translators, and medical assistants they can communicate with in moments of crisis. @rozanov81 and I are sad to end the season like this, though endlessly grateful for our health, and we promise we’re coming back stronger than ever for the 2017-2018 season.’

Shane thought it was still too obvious. Yuna gently pointed out that everyone knew they were close, and unless they wanted to transform their lives, he would have to accept that. Ilya rolled his eyes so hard it gave him a headache, and Shane finally shut up and let her post it.

“*Ready?*” Shane asked in Russian.

Ilya flipped down the visor, checking himself out in the mirror. Then he turned it toward Shane. Shane looked over the bright purple bruises surrounding the visible stitches on his forehead. He had learned over the past few days not to move his eyebrows too much, or it would hurt, but he hoped the look he shot Ilya was expressive enough.

“What?” he asked, deadpan.

“Eh, I just thought I would show you,” Ilya said, shrugging, “that we are still hot.”

Shane closed his eyes. “Ya tebya lyublyu.”

“Bi chamd khairtai,” he said easily.

They drove.

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The cottage was so sacred to Shane that it almost made him nervous to show it to Ilya.

But, at the same time, he wanted Ilya there more than anything in the world.

“I don’t think this is cottage,” Ilya said as they stepped out of the car. “Is too big, too much glass.” He frowned. “Cottage is the English word for a Russian kottedzh isn’t it? Sounds the same. Or am I getting the definitions mixed up?”

Shane laughed, a little embarrassed. “No, that is definitely how I would translate it. Uh, yeah, I guess maybe it’s not super accurate, but I sort of named it that because we always called my parents’ house on the lake ‘the cottage,’ and this is supposed to be my version of that.”

“Hum,” Ilya said loudly. He crossed his arms and surveyed Shane’s home. Shane tried not to shuffle his feet. Ilya nodded. “This, this will do. This looks like millionaire’s home, Shane, good job! You are finally spending money on interesting things, I am so proud of you!”

Shane wasn’t expecting Ilya to suddenly turn, wrap his arms around his thighs and hoist him into the air, spinning him in circles like he was a bride being introduced to his new home. “Ilya!” Shane shouted in dismay when Ilya wobbled on the asphalt.

“Oof,” Ilya said, dropping Shane hard on the flats of his feet. Shane scrambled and caught him by the shoulders, steadying him. “Should not spin. I have just learned this. Spinning is very bad.” He pouted. “I thought it would make you laugh. Very romantic, no?”

“You are a fucking idiot,” Shane said, slapping his shoulder. “You’re going to kill yourself!”

“I am injured and he hits me!” Ilya shouted, ducking away and taking off at a run, still weaving on his feet. Shane bolted after him, at least having the advantage of speed and precision at the moment. “Ah, he has captured me! He had hit me over the head and dragged me to his sex cabin to have his way with me!” Ilya hollered.

“Ilya!” Shane hissed, arms wrapped around his waist, trying to hold him in place. “I—fuck, I have neighbors!”

“Whatever,” Ilya said loudly. “What, they call the cops? I tell them, ‘Do not worry, just jokes, I am not sex slave, bye-bye,’ and they leave. Boom.”

“Boom,” Shane repeated, incredulous.

“Boom.” Ilya turned around and patted his cheek condescendingly. “Are you going to make me stand around in bright sunshine while I have headache, or do I get to see inside?”

“I hate you,” Shane said, but the laughter was finally bubbling up from his chest, and it made his arms shake.

They were outside. In the sunlight, in Shane’s driveway. He was holding Ilya’s waist, and they were laughing in the sunshine.

“No,” Ilya said. “That is lie. I know it. You love me,” he said, drawing the words out.

He didn't even have to think about it. Shane kissed him. "I love you. All the time. Everywhere."

"In every language?" Ilya asked, grin widening slowly, hands slipping around Shane's waist. He tilted his chin back, showing the underside of his jaw, and turned his face to the sun as if he were thinking the same thing.

"That part's obvious," Shane said, rising on his toes to kiss Ilya's chin. "It goes unsaid."

He dragged Ilya inside, through all the rooms, nervous and exhilarated and so desperate to please. Ilya was not quite as exuberant as he might have been if he weren't injured, but Shane knew the house tour was also a good distraction for him, gave him something to do away from screens.

In the garage, Ilya's eyes widened. "Jet skis, Hollander," he gasped.

Shane laughed. "When you're fully cleared, Ilya, okay?"

"Jet skis!" he repeated. "That is millionaire behavior!"

They crawled into Shane's bed, which he had never shared with anyone. Ilya slid in over him, bodies pressed together, lips open.

He loved Ilya's lips. He loved his mouth. His tongue. His teeth. His throat. Every other piece of him, too, of course, but yeah. Shane had favorites. He was allowed.

"No sex for a week," Shane told him.

"What? Doctor did not fucking say that!"

"The doctor said, 'take it easy,' and we are physically incapable of doing that."

Ilya paused. "Okay, maybe fair." He grabbed Shane's ass and pulled his hips up into his. "But maybe we can learn?"

Shane cradled Ilya's head in his hands, holding him firmly with the gentlest grip he could manage. "My parents are coming to dinner," he said. "And then they're going to go home, and we're going to have two weeks all to ourselves. You and me. I'm going to have to keep you occupied since you're not allowed to read or watch anything."

"I have some ideas," Ilya said, nosing his way down the front of Shane's neck so he could mouth at his Adam's apple.

Shane kept a hold of his skull even as he gasped. "Later."

"Later is fine," Ilya said, words purring against Shane's vocal cords. "Later is good. Later is brilliant. But some things cannot wait until later. Must be," he smacked his lips, "prioritized."

Shane thought maybe Ilya meant this as a tease, or to mock him, but all he could do was grin. Hold Ilya against him and grin. "*It's unbelievable how much I love you,*" he whispered.

Ilya just shook his head. “No,” he whispered. *“I believe it. Always bringing me out of storms, Shane Hollander. Always bringing me into the warmth.”*

“Always,” and they both knew it was a promise.

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That stupid television special his mom forced Shane to record had called his cottage a “fortress of solitude.”

For a long time, it was true. But Shane didn’t want it to be. He didn’t want people to picture him as some superman, an alien from another world, powerful but alone in the cold. That wasn’t what he wanted.

Solitude had not always sounded bad, though. Could solitude include two? Even more than that? When was Shane going to admit to himself, or even realize at all, that he wasn’t alone anymore?

Svetlana stayed with them for a week. In some ways, she was better at keeping Ilya occupied than Shane, because most of Shane’s methods of distraction (exercise, swimming, hiking, and athletic sex) weren’t things Ilya could do in abundance right now. But Svetlana knew how to gossip in a way that drew Ilya in and kept him absolutely glued to stories about her rich clientele and her out-of-touch coworkers. They cooked Russian food together that made Ilya smile like a little kid, and Shane heroically abandoned his diet and tried not to feel too despondent about it. She also knew everything about hockey from a different perspective than they did, as a fan and family member. She was good at describing games for Ilya when he couldn’t watch the television for too long, and her commentary was sharp and witty in a way that kept him engaged.

Shane was surprised by how little their shared intimacy bothered him. Even when they cuddled together on the couch, Svetlana, all long legs and tiny boy shorts, with Ilya’s head on her thigh, he was struck by a sense of... ease. Trust, probably. It always came back to trust.

While Svetlana kept Ilya occupied, Shane kept an eye on his phone. Their injuries were still a big story a few weeks out, but not just because they were so dramatic on the ice. Mostly, he started to realize that most people were talking about regular hockey things. The concussion ended Ilya’s season, and some of the commentators were attributing Montreal’s loss for the wildcard spot in the playoffs to Shane’s absence in the second half of the game. The conversation reverted to what phenomenal players they were and their importance to their teams. People compared them to other iconic duos, rivalries, friends, and teammates, and the fanaticism over them dropped. People still talked about how they had both shouted each other’s names, but the story shifted away from their bond and back toward what had always mattered most on the ice: their indisputable skill.

That was all Shane ever wanted. It felt... nice.

Scott Hunter tagged them in a Tweet addressing the problematic language politics in the NHL, and because he was on a surefire track to win the Stanley Cup, it blew up. To Ilya and Svetlana, Shane relayed the complex discussions taking place online and in stadiums about

the lack of available translators for the NHL's athletes. When Ilya received an official email from the general manager of the Boston Bears, Shane read it aloud to them. The Bears' management apologized for the lack of translators in the aftermath of Ilya's concussion and promised that, from then on out, they would employ French and Russian interpreters certified to translate medical knowledge at every game, and would continue the policy in the future for all their players.

That felt even better.

"It's a start," Ilya said, but Shane could tell he was happy. "Is just the Bears making a promise, and not yet the league making a change, but it's a good start. I'll take it."

Maybe that was the answer for them as well. Small steps forward. Promises, made and kept.

Shane hugged Svetlana goodbye the day she left, surprised by how hard he wanted to hold on. She was Ilya's friend, first and foremost, but he had known her for years now. And she knew their secret. She was one of three people in the world who knew their secret (alongside a few more-than-suspicious doctors, nurses, and perhaps a Russian-speaking EMT, but Shane wasn't allowed to think about that). And Shane knew she would never tell.

"Your house is so beautiful," she told him, hugging him back, *"but Ilya is right. It's definitely not a cottage."*

"I can't change the name at this point," he huffed. Maybe she was comforting because she and Ilya were so alike. *"Thank you for coming. For staying with him."*

"We all need friends," she said simply, pulling away. She touched his shoulder lightly, then his forehead. The stitches had fallen out and some of the bruises had faded, but the cut was still prominent. It might scar. It might not. *"You need friends, too. Don't forget that, okay?"*

"Okay," he whispered.

"Goodbye, Jane," Svetlana purred, and Shane only blushed a little.

+++

The last game of the playoffs was on their TV. Ilya's head was better by now and he could watch screens without issues, but he was still lying down on the couch, head cradled on Shane's thigh. He claimed that it was in case the brightness started to bother him, so that he could turn and bury his face against Shane's stomach.

Shane stroked his fingers through Ilya's curls. It had become one of his favorite things to do. And, ever since his injury, he had become a little obsessed with cradling Ilya's head in his hands. Just to feel him. To know he was okay.

"What would it be like," Shane said softly, "if I... came out? Just to my team. My friends. Not to the world, and not about us. But if I... told people—some people—that I am... gay."

"Honestly," Ilya answered, picking his words in Russian carefully, *"I think... it would be okay."*

Shane glanced at him. *“Really?”*

“Yes. I do not think anyone would out you. I think probably some people would be assholes, and a lot of people would be uncomfortable around you for no reason, and some of your team would try to be supportive and go overboard. And some would be nice. And some wouldn’t care.”

Shane thought about it. He nodded. “Okay.”

“Can you deal with that?” Ilya asked. Neither of them was really paying attention to the game. It honestly wasn’t a very interesting match. The Admirals had gotten ahead in the first period and it had only grown wider. It was like waiting for the inevitable to happen. *“You didn’t like the rumors online.”*

“Well, I wouldn’t be telling people that you and I are together,” Shane said. He paused. *“Do you think... everyone would know? Would I be outing you?”*

“I think some people would assume,” Ilya said, but he sounded and looked unconcerned. *“But I don’t care. Besides, I am European, I can get away with a lot more flamboyancy than poor little sheltered Canadians.”*

“That’s true,” Shane murmured, leaning down to kiss him. Ilya cupped his face with his recently unsplinted, pale fingers, and it felt good to feel his skin again. “I’m jealous.”

“Are you?”

“Extremely,” Shane teased.

“So, maybe you come out...”

“Definitely to Hayden, which inevitably means Jackie as well. I think Rose already knows. She keeps trying to set me up with a friend of hers, Miles?”

“Oh, is my turn to be jealous now,” Ilya growled playfully.

Shane ignored him. “And, if that goes well... maybe my team.” He squeezed Ilya’s shoulders. “When I feel... ready.”

“Okay.” Ilya glanced at the screen. “My contract with Boston is up after next season.”

Shane blinked. “You’re not... there’s no way you’re retiring-”

“No, fuck that,” Ilya said. “I’m the best player in the league!”

“Second best.”

“Can’t leave the game in the hands of grandpa like Scott Hunter.”

“He’s so old,” Shane agreed, snickering. “But he is about to win the Stanley Cup, so...”

“I’ll win it next year,” Ilya said. “Go out on a high note. Become a free agent. Look for a team... maybe a Canadian team... hopefully in the Western Conference? We will have to play together less, but that’s less coverage. Less of the rivalry narrative. We can be....”

“Just friends?” Shane suggested.

“So much more than that.”

“And,” Shane whispered, “maybe, for the summers... I’ve been thinking about establishing a charity. A hockey camp or something. Proceeds could go—I was thinking proceeds could go to suicide prevention charities. Something like that.” Ilya stared at him, the TV ignored in the background as the final goal of the game was scored. “Maybe that’s something we could do together.”

Ilya turned his head and kissed Shane’s wrist. “Maybe. I love you.”

“I love you so much.”

“Is this us planning a future together?” Ilya asked. “Is this how we do it?”

“You’re my past,” Shane said in English. “*You’re my present,*” he said in French, confident that Ilya would understand. “*Do you... want to be my future?*” he asked, of course, in Russian. The language that had first bound them together, ten fucking years ago.

He couldn’t imagine a world where Ilya wasn’t still with him in another ten years, whatever they were doing, wherever they were.

“Why do you want to come out now?” Ilya asked him. “Because of the rumors...?”

“No, if anything, the rumors make me want to come out less, but...” He huffed. Shane wanted to say this carefully. They had so many words between them, and he wanted to get these ones right.

“Part of it is... that you and I really didn’t have to define what we shared for a long time. It didn’t always seem that complicated. We were always friends. Sometimes we slept together. We had to keep it a secret, but we didn’t really have to sneak around, and we didn’t have to hide ourselves—just the sex. And the... feelings, at least on my part.”

“On your part? You are saying I don’t have feelings for you?”

“No, idiot, I’m not. I’m saying... I don’t want to assume how long you’ve had feelings. Because for me...”

“The whole time.”

Shane swallowed. “Yeah,” he admitted.

“No,” Ilya said, shaking his head. “I am answering your question. The whole time, for me.”

“Oh,” Shane said, sighing, then grinning, helpless and teary. “Same.”

“I know,” Ilya said. “You were very obvious. And I am very easy to fall in love with.”

“Loving you has been the easiest part of it all,” Shane agreed, and felt Ilya relax even more into him. *“But I didn’t always really know where we stood. Or what we wanted. Now I do, and... I guess it’s making me greedy? It makes me want more. It makes—I don’t want to be embarrassed, or lonely, or hiding. I don’t want to lie. Or, I want to lie as little as possible, while still living a life that I love. I love my life with you. I want to see how big I can make it.”*

“You’re a poet, Shane Hollander,” Ilya said. They kissed, and across the living room, the television speakers exploded with raucous cheering.

“What-” Shane said, breaking away.

Scott Hunter was kissing a man on the ice. He had his arms around him in front of the world, and he was kissing him while grinning, because he had just won the Stanley Cup and now he was embracing a man and *kissing him*, and the world was cheering.

“Huh,” Ilya said, a little sedately. Shane couldn’t look away from the screen. “Well. I guess that’s what the future looks like, then? Is a good omen, I think.”

Shane looked back at him, mouth hanging open. Both their phones started buzzing on the coffee table, flooding with messages and calls and notifications, and they ignored them.

Ilya smiled slowly, rapturously. *“I think it looks bright.”*

Shane, feeling shocked numb and shaky, put a hand on Ilya’s face. He touched his lips with his thumb. *“The brightest.”*

Chapter End Notes

(Carrying forward the theme of sunshine/light from the show because again, JT is a genius) What a fucking ride! This was so delightful to write, and you guys had so much beautiful feedback and stories of your own in the comments - from the bottom of my heart, thank you. I am extremely happy with this ending. Frankly, I was kicking my feet and smiling while I wrote it, and I experienced the uniquely queer joy of writing the kind of coming-out-to-your-parents scene that we all dream about. I hope you enjoyed!

(and if you need a fic recommendation, my current obsession is “Home Ice Advantage” by taywrites11, show it some love if you’re looking for a new canon divergence au to enjoy!)

Works inspired by this one

[Can you stick with me? Maybe for life?](#) by [lexibug_1738](#)

[Cover for I'm Reading Your Lips \(You're Speaking My Language\) by some1_around](#) by [Strangemagpie](#)

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