

Half Agony, Half Hope

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Half Agony, Half Hope

by [CorvidCordelia](#)

Summary

“It’s Rozanov, they’re bringing on Rozanov,” he said in a rush.

For a long moment, Shane couldn’t hear or process anything. The world had narrowed then expanded too fast, like he was falling. At some point Hayden started talking again, but he couldn’t understand him. There was only the darkness overhead and the ringing in his ears.

“Shane? Shane, you still there?”

The words filtered through slow and muddy, echoing. Shane’s mouth was dry, his tongue thick, but he managed, “Yeah. I’m here.”

“Okay. You’re not gonna have a panic attack, right? Cause that would be bad probably, for your head I mean, and I just think—”

Shane stopped listening again.

Rozanov was coming to Montreal. He’d be in the same locker room, skating on the same ice, living in the same fucking city.

Three years after Shane broke it off (not that there was anything to break off), he gets a concussion and the Metros bring in Ilya to fill in for him. A breakup and makeup fic inspired by Jane Austen's Persuasion.

Notes

[Now available in Russian thanks to @Andian Panda and @lis_nastya!!!](#)

Chapter 1: Yet there it was not love. It was a little fever of admiration; but it might, probably must, end...

Shane decided that, upon reflection, concussions had to be the worst injury a hockey player could sustain. ACL tears, jaw fractures, labrum tears—these were all bad, no question.

But with a concussion, all you could do was lie there in the dark with nothing but your own thoughts, and that was not an experience he was handling very well. He'd tried audiobooks, but he couldn't focus. He'd tried listening to music, but he didn't really enjoy it, and anything with much of a beat produced sharp spikes behind his eyes. His mother offered to come read to him, but he couldn't imagine anything more pathetic than being 28 years old and having his mom sit beside his bed like he was a child with a fever.

What he was doing instead was probably even worse, though it was hardly the first time. It was what happened whenever he couldn't sleep, whenever the Metros had more than a day or two off and he had too much time on his hands, *especially* when the summer stretched long and lonely.

He was thinking about Rozanov.

It had been three years since he'd ended things that day in Boston. He'd walked out, leaving Rozanov on his couch, wearing his black t-shirt and sweatpants (now kept at the back of a drawer in the cottage. Shane never pulled them out, never looked at them, but he always knew they were there, folded neatly beneath his sweaters). It had been the right thing to do, the only thing to do, and Rozanov knew it. Staying the night, talking, eating a meal together? Those weren't things they did. They weren't *friends*, much less...anything else. They fucked, that was all. It was convenient. How had Rozanov put it, that day? Someone regular to keep around.

That was all they ever were, and they could never have been anything else; Shane knew that, even if Rozanov had started to forget it. It wasn't worth imagining how it might have been different between them...how it would feel to talk with him, laugh with him, see him smile, feel his heartbeat even after it had slowed down and come to rest.

Shane knew himself too well: if he took even one step over the lines he'd drawn, he'd fall, and it would ruin everything.

And yet he still thought about it. He thought about the sex, of course, usually at night, or in the morning, or in the shower, or an afternoon when he had nothing to do. That wasn't ideal, but he could jerk off and—if he had time—pull out his trusty dildo, and he would feel better. It was useful, sort of, to have a string of pornographic memories to choose from.

The other thoughts were harder. He could close his eyes (or, like now, stare at a dark ceiling) and see Rozanov sprawled across a hotel bed, watching with heavy-lidded eyes as Shane got dressed, a too-soft smile curving his mouth. The pestering texts he would send—Shane didn't even like texting, never thought he could miss it so fucking much. His smell—he wore too

much cologne, and usually Shane hated that, but Rozanov smelled like cedar and leather and sharp sweat, and sometimes he would still catch a phantom waft of it, like a ghost. And the way Rozanov counted when he stood in front of his refrigerator, one with a pinkie, two with a ring finger. Shane didn't know anyone else who counted like that, was it a Slavic thing? He'd have to ask Miitka, if he ever got to hang with anyone from the team ever again.

That was self-pitying. Shane shifted against his pillows and immediately regretted it as the room tilted slightly, his stomach lurching along with it. He closed his eyes and waited for it to pass.

His phone rang, the vibration of the nightstand like a drill through his skull, and he lifted it to check, wincing away from the light. There was no real reason to look; the only people that ever called him were his parents or Hayden. And so it was.

"Hey man, how are you feeling?"

"Fine."

"Are you sure? How's your head?"

"It hurts," Shane admitted, dutifully honest. "And there's some nausea."

"Shit. Did you try that tea Jackie sent over? It works wonders, I swear."

"Yeah, it helped, thanks." It was a lie. The tea had tasted like someone had soaked pickled ginger in water, and he hadn't been able to finish it. "Also, please thank the twins for the drawing. I love how most of my head is a bandage."

"That's just accurate representation, bro. They miss you—they were asking when they could see you, but I figured..."

"Probably not the best idea," Shane agreed. He loved those girls dearly, but they had a tendency to jump on him whenever they saw him, and he didn't want to throw up on them.

"Yeah. Um." Hayden cleared his throat, uncomfortable, and Shane tensed. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"What is it? Is Jackie okay?"

"Totally, she's fine, I promise, it's nothing like that. But, uh. I was walking about Coach's office today—we didn't have practice, but you know how sometimes I like to go in anyway, get a chance to work out away from the kids..."

"Yeah...?"

"Anyway, the door was open. I guess he probably figured nobody was around, so he wasn't as careful as he might have been otherwise. But, uh, you know how the trade deadline is coming up?"

Ah. Well, it was hardly a surprise. The Metros would have to bring in someone to fill in for him, since it sure didn't seem like he was going to be back on the ice anytime soon. Six to eight weeks minimum, the doctor had said. Maybe longer, depending on how the symptoms progressed. He'd assumed they'd bring someone up from the AHL, but maybe it did make more sense to trade. "It's okay, I get it. It happens, right? I'm sure whoever it is will be great, and I'll be back out there soon enough."

"Riiight." Shane could hear Hayden shifting in his seat; it sounded like he was in his car, probably sitting in the arena parking lot. "I mean, yeah, definitely. It's just..."

Shane sighed. Sometimes Hayden acted like he was made of glass. "What is it?"

"It's Rozanov, they're bringing in Rozanov," he said in a rush.

For a long moment, Shane couldn't hear or process anything. The world had narrowed and then expanded too fast, like he was falling out of a tunnel. At some point Hayden started talking again, but he couldn't understand him. There was only the darkness overhead and the ringing in his ears.

"Shane? Shane, you still there?"

The words filtered through slow and muddy, echoing. Shane's mouth was dry, his tongue thick, but he managed, "Yeah. I'm here."

"Okay. You're not gonna have a panic attack, right? Cause that would be bad probably, for your head I mean, and I just think—"

Shane stopped listening again.

Rozanov was coming to Montreal. He'd be in the same locker room, skating on the same ice, living in the same fucking city. *Why?* Rozanov was beloved in Boston, making a shit-ton of money, playing incredible hockey—28 goals and 42 assists so far this season, Shane knew, because he'd checked last week in a moment of weakness. Sure, the Raiders hadn't won the Cup in years, but they made it to the playoffs almost every season. It was only a matter of time before Rozanov won it for them again.

"How can the team even afford him?"

"Like, no one's gonna want to hang with him, he's completely going to mess up the vibe, and...wait, what? Oh. I don't know, it's not like Coach was talking cap specifics, but..." he sighed. "I heard him say they're moving Taylor and Laine to clear the space, bringing up some guys from Laval to replace them."

Under normal circumstances, that would be a gut punch, but Shane was well beyond his capacity for devastation. Taylor and Laine had been with the Metros since before Shane was drafted, and while they weren't playing as well as they used to—age catching up with their legs, their shot accuracy declining—they were still solid players, and mentors to the younger guys.

He supposed they were expensive, though, and dumping both their contracts would free up enough cap space to bring in Rozanov. But why would Montreal's GM want to spend that much money on *two* star Centers?

"Does..." he swallowed hard, forced the words out past the tightness in his throat, "does Theriault think I'm not going to recover?"

"No way," Hayden said instantly. "Everyone's got your back, man, I promise. We'll miss you while you're gone, but you're our Captain. He's just the understudy."

Some fucking understudy, Shane thought.

A part of him knew he ought to be glad that the Metros would be in such excellent hands. Nobody played like Rozanov—fast and brutal and creative, literally the kind of player you built a franchise around. But a larger, more selfish part was terrified at the idea of having to see him every day.

"He'll be great," he made himself say. "I know you don't like him—"

"Cause he's an asshole. Nobody likes him. He's got the personality of a...I don't know. A really smug cactus."

"But," Shane went on doggedly, "he's about to be our asshole. He'll be an incredible addition to the team. With him on the line, we'll make the playoffs for sure."

"Christ, Holly." Hayden blew a frustrated breath into the phone. "You don't have to be Captain right now, all right? I know you hate him. You can take a minute to be pissed, it's just you and me right now."

Shane's eyes watered, and he blinked to clear them, doing his best to keep his voice steady. "I don't hate him. I never have, not really. It was just, you know, everybody always liked to make such a big thing about our, uh, rivalry or whatever. He's fine. It'll be fine."

"Uh-huh." Hayden still sounded dubious, but Shane didn't have it in him to be any more persuasive than that—which was ironic, since it was the simple truth. He'd never hated Rozanov. He didn't know if he could.

His phone buzzed, and he pulled it away from his ear to look at it. "Shit, it's Coach."

"You didn't hear this from me," Hayden said quickly. "Act surprised, okay?"

Shane didn't really hear much of the conversation with Theriault. He caught some phrases, like "you'll always be our Captain," and "best player available," and "exactly what we need for a Cup run." And, possibly worst of all, "I know you two have history, but I'm counting on you to make him feel welcome."

"Of course," he said, reflexive, dependable. "Whatever the team needs."

"I knew we could rely on you. This is why you're the best." Theriault paused long enough for Shane to wonder just how long he'd stay the best, with Rozanov on the Metros. They were a

better team than Boston; who knew what Rozanov could do with them? “He arrives Friday,” Theriault went on. “Press conference at two, and then he’ll practice with the team. I don’t expect you to attend—you focus on getting healthy—but I wanted you to know.”

Friday was only three days away.

“Got it,” he managed. “Thanks for keeping me in the loop.”

“Of course. You take care of yourself, all right? We need you back.”

When the call finally ended, Shane dropped the phone on the mattress, allowing the darkness to press in close. His throat ached, his head ached, his chest, fucking *everything* hurt. It had been three years since they’d last slept together, three years since they’d exchanged more than a cursory chirp or an insincere hand clasp at the end of a game. Rozanov treated Shane like he barely existed.

Shane, he’d said as he came, like it hurt to let it out. That was the last real conversation they’d ever had.

He ought to reach out, text him maybe, make an effort to welcome him—but what would he even say?

Heard you’re coming to Montreal, congrats on joining the winning team.

Hope the trade is what you wanted?

Or maybe, I’m sorry I’m sorry I’ve been thinking about you every day for three years and I don’t know how to stop.

In the end, he said nothing at all. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep, knowing he would fail.

Chapter 2: I always deserve the best treatment, because I never put up with any other

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya was fucking furious.

He stared at his agent across the table. Outside the windows of Legal Sea Foods, Boston Harbor was gray and choppy, unpleasant, as if the weather had matched itself to his mood (Boston was almost always gray and unpleasant).

“Montreal,” he said flatly. “Of all the teams on the list, it’s Montreal.”

“They offered the best package.” John was maddeningly calm as he cracked his lobster, somehow not splashing crustacean all over his silk tie. Ilya hated lobster, couldn’t understand why everyone liked it so much. “Taylor and Laine’s contracts come off the books after this season, plus they get a first-round pick and two prospects. Boston needs to rebuild, and—”

“I don’t care about Boston,” Ilya said dismissively. It was a lie; he loved his team. But he was tired of losing. “I gave you four teams. Four. Colorado, Dallas, Minnesota...” He stabbed a fry into ketchup. “Montreal was only on the list because you said I had to give you four. I was trying to seem like reasonable person. I don’t want to go to fucking Montreal.”

“They were the ones who could make the cap work and had the desperation to pay Boston’s asking price.” John took a sip of his wine, unbothered. “Montreal is making a playoff push, but Shane Hollander just went down with a concussion—nasty hit from behind into the boards, you probably saw it—and they’re willing to spend whatever they need to. They have the pieces Boston wanted, and Boston has what they need—you.”

Every single time he heard Hollander’s name it landed like a fist to his sternum, but Ilya kept his face blank. He knew the hit John was talking about; he’d watched the replay a dozen times the night it happened, watched Hollander’s head snap back, watched him crumple. “How bad is concussion?” he asked, then immediately regretted it. “I need to know what team looks like,” he added quickly. “What am I walking into?”

“He’ll be down to six to eight weeks, from what I’ve heard.” John wiped his mouth, gave Ilya a look he’d long since grown familiar with. “He’s staying team captain.”

“I know,” Ilya said, annoyed. “He’s Shane fucking Hollander, he’s perfect. He could lose both legs and they’d still give him the C.”

“I got you the A of course, but the C—”

“I *know*. ”

John set down his fork, leaned forward slightly. “Are you going to be able to work with him?”

It was an unfair question, Ilya thought. He’d never once been unable to work with someone on his team—he was a fucking professional, and had played through personality conflicts and locker room drama that would make a reality tv producer weep with joy. “I will say ‘pass puck,’ he pass puck. It’s not hard.” Ilya drained his water glass, wished it was vodka.

“Ilya—”

“I want the Cup,” he said shortly. “That’s why we did this, yes? Boston is not winning. The past four years, we get to the second round *maybe*, usually miss the playoffs entirely. I came here to win.” Two of those years, the Cup had gone to Montreal, but he didn’t mention that, and John didn’t either, which he appreciated. The truth was that Montreal was the best of his list of four—though that was mostly due to Hollander.

It was a dream, really, the perfect place for him, and once Hollander was back, the team would be unstoppable. He should be on his knees thanking God for all the unlikely pieces that had come together to make this happen for him.

He took another drink of water, took his time finishing his burger. John waited patiently, long since familiar with the admittedly rare moments when Ilya wanted to think before he spoke.

Then finally, “When do I leave?”

“Friday. Press conference at two, then you’ll practice with the team.” John signaled for the check, eyeing him a little too carefully. “You good?”

“Is perfect.” Ilya smiled wide enough to show his teeth. “Is exactly what I want.”

That night, alone in his Boston apartment—soon to be his former apartment—Ilya sat on his couch and stared at his phone. He should call Svetlana, probably, let her know he was leaving. She’d be thrilled for him, would probably be glad to see the back of him if it meant he’d start winning again. He should make his goodbyes to his teammates, start packing, look at apartments in Montreal.

Instead, he scrolled through his texts to a conversation he’d had with “Jane” three years ago.

-The only cup you’ll have next year is the one I’ll take off with my mouth. ;)

-Ready to lose in like 4 days?

-See you soon.

And then, a year later, when Montreal had their championship stolen from them by a shitty call and a miracle shot from Detroit, Ilya had watched from his couch—already in summer mode, already bitter—as Hollander sat on the ice after the goal, helmet off to reveal a devastated expression the cameras zoomed in on with perfect high-definition.

In a 2 am moment of weakness he’d written,

-Bad luck. You played well.

Hollander had never bothered to respond.

He tossed his phone on the coffee table so hard it skidded across and fell onto the floor. It buzzed on the way down, and for one stupid, impossible moment his heart jumped—as if maybe Hollander had somehow been thinking about him, too, and had reached out. But when he leaned off the edge of the couch to pick it up, it was a message from John.

-The Metros' PR wants you at noon Friday for media prep before the presser. I'll get your flight time changed.

Ilya took a deep breath and reminded himself that Hollander was injured, and that even if he was a мудаk, Ilya was a professional. He typed,

-See you Friday.

And then deleted it. Tried,

-I look forward to playing with you.

Definitely deleted that.

-I had hoped never to have to talk to you again in my entire fucking life.

Fuck it. He changed the contact name to "Hollander" and deleted every message they'd ever sent each other, then he dropped the phone on his chest and leaned back, letting his head fall against the couch cushions. He was sitting right where he'd been when Hollander had walked out on him, and now, as then, he pressed his palms against his eyes.

The only times Ilya had touched Hollander in the past three years had been cool, indifferent slaps in the handshake line, and yet he could still remember what his come tasted like.

Montreal's public relations manager introduced himself with a firm handshake and a too-wide smile. "Marcel Fontaine," he said in accented English, because nothing about this could ever be easy for Ilya. "Please, sit, sit."

The office was aggressively Canadian, with hand-drawn maple leaves stuck all over the walls—probably done by a local youth hockey league. Ilya struggled to parse exactly what the man was saying, though he could probably guess the gist: Montreal, used to the reliably bland sound bites Hollander could cough out on command, wanted to make sure that Ilya would behave.

"—and of course, we're so thrilled to have you. But I wanted to talk strategy for the press conference, yes?"

Ilya shifted in his seat. He was tired; he'd landed in Montreal only two hours before, had barely had time to drop his bags at the hotel before being shuttled over to Bell Centre. Also he was a little hungover. "I have done many of these before."

"Of course you have, but this will be a little unusual for you, I think. So much has been made of your rivalry with Shane Hollander—honestly, we think it's a boon for the team. Everyone is going to be curious about how well you play together, what your chemistry is like—"

"We play the same position," Ilya pointed out gruffly. "We won't be on the ice at the same time."

"True," Marcel admitted, "except for power plays. Then you'll be a force to reckon with! Still, I thought it might be a good idea to go over some talking points before the presser, because obviously you're going to be asked about it. What are you thinking about saying?"

Ilya knew what the man wanted. *It is all about the hockey, he is an incredible player and I'm looking forward to sharing the ice with him. The rivalry was just competition, nothing personal. I have great respect for him and I'm honored to be his teammate.*

Hell, he'd jerked Hollander's dick for him plenty of times before, why stop now?

But he couldn't bring himself to.

"I will say what is true," he said finally. "That I come here to win. That Montreal has a good team, good chance."

"Yes, yes, of course," Marcel said, nodding eagerly. "But about Shane specifically—"

"He is good player."

"Right, but perhaps you could elaborate? Talk about how you're looking forward to—"

"To what?" Ilya snapped. "To braiding his hair? Holding his hand?" He could feel his accent getting thicker, the way it always did when he was angry or stressed. "He is good player, I am good player. We will both play hockey."

Marcel's smile had vanished completely, replaced by something more calculating. "I understand there has been some...tension between you two over the years. The physicality when you've played against each other, and of course some of the comments in the media—"

"I don't talk about him to the press," Ilya said sharply. It was true; in the early days, he'd enjoyed ribbing Hollander, but now he just shrugged whenever his name came up.

"That's true. But Shane has been asked about you a few times, and he's always very diplomatic. You're a talented player, the rivalry is healthy competition, that sort of thing."

Ilya's heel began to bounce against the floor. Of course Hollander was "diplomatic" about it.

"I think," Marcel continued carefully, "it would be good if you could match that energy. Make sure the fans know that you and Shane are on the same page."

“We are on same page,” Ilya said flatly. “The page that says ‘win hockey games.’”

Needless to say, the press conference did not go all that well. Ilya did his best, but he simply could not pretend that he and Hollander were suddenly going to be best friends. It would have been the smart thing to do for all sorts of reasons, not least because it would probably really piss off his new captain. But he couldn’t manage more than terse professionalism, and even that felt like pulling his own teeth.

Still, he held up his new jersey, smiled and kept his eyes wide against the flashing cameras. It was Coach Theriault who finally called a stop to it, saying he was excited to meet with his new superstar. And he seemed it, though the meeting wasn’t long. He gave Ilya a quick tour—Bell Centre was much like any other arena, and he’d been there many times before—and then Theriault had clapped him on the back and said he’d see him at practice.

Ilya shrugged; it wasn’t like he needed his coaches to be warm and friendly, either.

Because the press conference had wrapped up early, no one else was in the locker room yet. He found his stall easily enough—and directly across from it, because the universe had such a delightful sense of humor, 24 HOLLANDER.

He stood in the empty room for a long moment, staring at the nameplate, and then, before he could talk himself out of it, he crossed the room. Hollander’s stall was meticulously organized, as he’d expected: skates lined up just so, sticks arranged by flex, tape and accessories in neat little bins. His heart gave a traitorous little twist, and he reached out, fingers hovering over the edge of Hollander’s practice jersey—but he pulled back before he could touch it.

“Rozanov.”

Ilya jerked backward and whirled around, sending Hollander’s tidily arranged sticks clattering to the floor. “Ну ёбана,” he muttered, and bent to pick them up, shoving them haphazardly into the stall—he certainly wasn’t going to organize them. When he looked up, Hayden Pike was watching him, a confused little smirk on his face.

“Everything all right there?”

“Fine,” Ilya said tightly.

“Cool.” Hayden dropped his bag at his own stall—next to Hollander’s naturally—and turned to face Ilya with his arms crossed. “Look, I’m gonna be straight with you. I know you and Shane have a history.”

Ilya froze, felt his heart move up toward the vicinity his throat and cutting off his air supply. “...What?” he choked out.

“You’ve gotten under each other’s skin for years,” Pike said, and such was Ilya’s panic that he couldn’t translate the idiom.

“Under our...skin?”

Pike's face softened a little in that humiliating way everyone's did when they thought Ilya could barely understand English. "You irritate each other. Annoy each other?"

Ilya nodded tightly. "Yes. I understand. And yes."

"But that's over now, right?" Pike—tiny, unimpressive, not very talented Pike—was standing with his arms crossed, like he was delivering a scolding to one of his many, many children. "We're a team here, and Shane's our captain. So whatever bullshit you've got going on, whatever pissing contest you've been having with him, it stays off the ice and out of this room. Right?"

Ilya missed the days when he could slam Pike so hard his ribs would ache for weeks. "Yes," he managed.

Pike studied him for a long moment, then seemed to decide Ilya had been sufficiently chastised and turned to his stall to start pulling out his gear. *Fucking Hayden Pike, unbelievable.*

The locker room door banged open, and Ilya turned away with snort of amused frustration he couldn't quite manage to keep in. The rest of the team filtered in, glancing at him but not approaching him, clearly wary.

He straightened his shoulders. Fuck this. Fuck Pike's self-important bullshit, fuck being nervous, and fuck Shane Hollander most of all. Ilya Rozanov was a two-time Art Ross winner. He'd led the league in points three of the last five years (for all the good it did him). He was here because Montreal needed *him*, not the other way around.

He pasted on his usual confident grin and sauntered across the room to his stall, stripping off his suit jacket and tie. Miitka, the goalie, had the stall next to him, and he clapped Ilya on the shoulder. "Roz! Holy shit, man! Crazy to have you here."

Well, at least someone was friendly.

"It's crazy to be here," Ilya admitted. "But uh..." he looked around. "You all seem like a bunch of assholes, so probably I will fit right in?"

Miitka laughed, and so did a couple of the other guys. "Nobody's an asshole like you, Rozanov—but we're happy to have you."

Ilya tugged off his shirt and tossed it on the floor of his stall. "Of course you are, I make everywhere better." He waited for the expected sally of fuck offs and you wishes, then added, "You have a good core here, I'm excited to play with you all. Good defense, good goaltending," he added, since Miitka had been nice to him. "You just needed—" he gestured at himself, cocked a hip. "A little more firepower."

Laughter, which was good, and then someone—the backup goalie maybe?—said something in rapid French that Ilya couldn't understand at all, but it sounded approving.

"Your French any good?" This was from Gagnon, a defenseman.

“Not at all,” Ilya said cheerfully. “But I will learn. I am very good with my tongue.”

The room erupted in more laughter, mixed with groans and some gentle ribbing directed at a kid he didn’t know, probably somebody new brought up from the AHL. Ilya grinned wider, enjoying himself now.

“You gonna save any ladies for the rest of us, Rozanov?”

He shrugged, magnanimous. “I can only fuck so many in one night. I need to rest up, stay strong—so there will probably still be a handful left in Montreal when I am done.”

That same younger player actually raised his fucking hand, like this was grade school. “So, uh, what’s the deal with you and the captain? You guys really hate each other or is that just media bullshit?”

The room got quiet again, and Ilya could feel Pike’s attention snap back to him from across the way. He made a show of considering the question as he pulled off his dress pants, standing in his boxer briefs. “We are competitors,” he said. “Now we compete together, for same goal. Is simple.”

“Yeah, but like—you’ve thrown some pretty big hits on each other over the years—”

“And now I throw hits on other teams, for him.” Ilya tugged on his new practice jersey, felt the scratchiness of the unworn material against his skin. “Hollander is...” he paused to choose his words carefully, knowing that everything he said would get repeated back to their captain. “He is best man I have ever played against. So now I get to play with him instead. Montreal is lucky. *I am lucky.*”

It was the answer he should have given at the press conference, but the stakes hadn’t felt high enough then for him to choke them out. Now, with these men, his new team, staring at him with expressions ranging from hope to admiration to mild skepticism—this was his job. He might not be team captain anymore (and wasn’t that still a bitter fucking pill) but he knew what a team needed to come together, to gel, to *win*. And by God, he was going to make it happen.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, there’s quite of bit of establishing to get through, but I’ll have them meet next chapter, I promise.

Also I don’t speak Russian but I’m looking stuff up and doing my best:
Hy ёбана: for fuck’s sake

мудак: asshole

Chapter 3: They had no conversation together, no intercourse but what the commonest civility required.

Chapter Notes

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

Rozanov had been playing for Montreal for two weeks, but Shane still hadn't seen him face to face. He hadn't seen anyone except his parents, his doctors, Hayden, and Jackie. He hadn't been able to watch any of the games yet, but he'd listened...and Rozanov was playing *beautifully*. He'd eased right in to the Metros' rhythms and chemistry like he'd been with the team for years. Two goals, four assists in six games. And Shane was so grateful for it: they would be lost without him.

That didn't make it any easier to get out of the car.

"You okay, dude? Sure you're up for this?"

Hayden was eyeing him warily; Shane had dark glasses and a hat on and ordinarily he hated wearing both, they made it feel like he couldn't see, but the late January light was too bright to go without—and they had the added benefit of making it impossible for Hayden to read his expression.

"Absolutely," he said, and shut the door.

It felt surreal being back at the arena, though he wasn't technically back at all. Dr. Herrera had cleared him for a short visit, just a drop in on morning skate, but even that felt like a fucking gift. Just being able to see the ice would help him feel more like himself.

Hayden swiped his card, and as soon as he pushed the door open Shane was hit with that distinct combination of stale sweat and rubber and industrial cleaner—the smell of hockey, of home.

"Lights okay?" Hayden asked as they made their way down the hallway.

"Yeah." In truth, they weren't great; Shane never liked fluorescents but they seemed even harsher now. He could feel them vibrating ominously overhead, but he'd been stuck in a dark room for three weeks and wasn't about to back out now.

"You wanna come to the locker room?"

Shane thought about it. He missed the camaraderie, and it would be great to see all the guys—but on the other hand, it would probably be better if his first encounter with Ilya Rozanov happened when the man wasn't half naked. "I'll meet you at the rink."

He took a seat a few rows back from the bench, tucked his hands into his jacket pocket, and closed his eyes. The cold air burned in his nose, crisp and familiar with the faint scent of

Zamboni exhaust. He could hear some of the guys already making their way down the tunnel, but right then it was just him and the ice and he wanted it to last forever.

“And so I said, listen, if you want to go to Paris with your sister, that’s great, baby, do it, but why do I have to be the one to figure out what to do with the dog? I didn’t even want the dog!”

Shane smiled, and without opening his eyes, he called out, “Gagnon, how could you not want a dog?”

And then his heart stopped, because at the same time, a very familiar Russian voice said, “You are a monster, Gagnon. You have the heart of Satan. Bring your dog—”

“My *girlfriend’s* dog—”

“Bring him to me, I will show him what love is. Bring your girlfriend to me, too.”

“Wow, dude. That’s low even for you.”

“What? You obviously do not love her, you—”

The voice stopped, and Shane opened his eyes to find Rozanov standing on the edge of the ice, one skate on the rink and the other still on the rubber mat, staring at him. He was frozen with that intense stillness he sometimes had, and Shane felt Rozanov’s gaze move through his body like a tide, sweeping in and then out again. For a moment, the world was only the two of them—and then something in Rozanov shifted, and Shane could breathe again.

Gagnon hadn’t seen Shane yet and was still talking about dog-sitting rates, but his voice seemed to come from very far away. Shane watched as Rozanov skated over, gliding easy, his edges throwing up tiny sprays of ice. He was broader than Shane remembered, his practice jersey stretched tight across his chest, but perhaps it had just been too long since he’d seen him without his gear. “Hollander.”

“Rozanov.” Shane’s voice was hoarse.

“You look like shit.”

Despite everything—the headaches, the vertigo, the fact that he hadn’t been cleared to do so much as a push-up—Shane almost laughed. “Nice to see you, too.”

Rozanov cocked his head, his expression unreadable. “Is it.”

“Cap! Holy shit, I didn’t know you were coming in today!” Gagnon and Mitty hurried over, thankfully stopping short of climbing over the wall and tackling him. “How you feeling, man?”

“Better,” he said, smiling. “Enough to get out of the house, at least. You guys are killing it out there.” His eyes flicked over to Rozanov, who ducked his head in acknowledgment before pushing off backward in a lazy arc. Yes, it was thanks to him. Yes, he knew it.

“We can’t wait to have you back,” a new kid—shit, Shane should really know his name—said, his face earnest beneath his helmet. “Shane, I mean, Mr. Hollander—”

Rozanov snorted, circling back. “*Mr. Hollander* sounds like someone’s grandpa. This is a good name for him. Yes, Mr. Hollander?”

“Just Shane is fine,” Shane said, saving the kid—Bissonette, he remembered now, just up from the AHL—from further embarrassment.

“Yes, just Shane,” Rozanov said, but there was an edge to his voice that made Shane’s throat hurt. “Come, Biss, we have drills. Standing around will not make him heal faster.”

Rozanov was electric—there was no other word for it. Shane had watched him for years, studied tape until he could predict his patterns in his sleep, but it was different seeing him with the team, feeding tape-to-tape passes to Hayden, tapping his stick against Gagnon’s shin guards in encouragement after a blocked shot, and the way he skated, *Jesus*, the way he skated, so fucking fast it was like the ice moved beneath him.

Ashford, the assistant coach, had them running a neutral zone regroup drill, and Shane watched Rozanov take a pass from the defenseman, pivot at the blue line, and accelerate through the middle. His head was up the entire time, scanning, and he threaded a pass between two defenders to hit Hayden in stride. The puck barely touched Hayden’s stick before it was in the net.

“Looking good out there!” Shane called out when they paused for water.

Most of the guys grinned and waved, their faces flushed and dripping. Rozanov took a long drink, his throat working, and didn’t look up.

The drills continued, light but deliberate, and Shane found himself leaning forward despite his aching head, mentally skating with them.

“All right, let’s run some five-on-five,” Ashford, the assistant coach, called. “First and third lines versus second and fourth. Hollander, you want to call it? Help these benders figure out what they’re doing wrong?”

Shane’s heart jumped. “Yeah. Yeah, definitely.”

For the next twenty minutes, he lost himself in it—calling out positioning, pointing out missed opportunities, praising good plays. It felt so good to be useful again, to be a part of it even if only from the stands. The guys were responsive, chirping back at him good-naturedly when he got on their case.

Rozanov was predictably dominant; he scored twice in fifteen minutes, but he also shared the ice, setting up Hayden for a gorgeous one-timer, drawing two defenders away to create space. He was playing team hockey, with Shane’s team.

“Nice pass, Roz!” Shane called after a particularly slick no-look feed to Bissonette.

Rozanov glanced over, his expression flat. “Yes, I know.”

When Ashford finally blew the whistle, the guys skated over to Shane on their way off the ice, sweaty and grinning.

“You need to come to more practices, Cap,” JJ said. “Even if you’re just chirping from the stands.”

“I was hardly chirping,” Shane said drily. “You needed to be tighter on that turn.”

“Yeah, yeah. You coming to the meeting?”

Shane checked with himself; his head hurt and he thought if he stood up he would probably get a little dizzy, but it wasn’t too bad. “Yeah. I’ll see you in there.”

“Good to have you back, man.”

The others echoed the sentiment as they headed for the locker room, their gear clanking, the smell of fresh sweat mixing with the cold, and Shane felt something loosen in his chest.

Rozanov was the last one off the ice, and he paused as he passed Shane’s seat; for a moment, Shane thought he might say something, but he only shook his head slightly like he’d thought better of it, and kept walking, the sound of his skates scraping against the rubber mat fading as he disappeared into the tunnel.

The conference room was packed, players sprawled in chairs with that restless pre-game energy thrumming through them—Rozanov was at the front and talking near constantly. Shane stayed in the back and kept quiet, eyes closed and listening. It was enough just to be there, to feel like he was getting ready for a game even if he wasn’t going to be playing.

“You ready to go home?” He opened his eyes to find Hayden standing in front of him, looked past him to see Rozanov still rewinding the tape and replaying it, checking Boston’s defense again and again. It would be his first game against the Raiders, Shane realized.

“Can you give me a sec?”

Hayden looked over his shoulder, taking in Rozanov bent forward in his chair, elbows on his knees, and shrugged. “Sure. Take your time, I’ll go shower.”

He walked out and the last few stragglers followed. The door swung shut behind them, leaving Shane alone in a room with Ilya Rozanov for the first time three years. “Hey. I just wanted to say—I’m excited. To play with you, I mean, when I’m cleared.” His heart was hammering against his ribs, but he was proud of how steady he sounded.

Rozanov’s shoulders stiffened but he didn’t turn around, so Shane pushed himself up from his chair and crossed the room. He lifted a chair and angled it so it faced Rozanov and not the

screen, close enough to see the stubble along his jaw. “I always wondered what it would be like to play on the same team.”

Rozanov’s eyes flicked up to his face and then away. “Now you will find out.”

“Soon,” Shane acknowledged. “So. Playing against Boston, huh? How are you feeling about that?”

His shoulders moved in a shrug, fluid and indifferent. “It’s normal. It’s hockey, doesn’t matter who is playing.”

“Right, okay.” Shane felt the pain in his head spike. “Look, I should have reached out earlier, to welcome you to the team. I’m sorry I didn’t. I know we haven’t been...”

“Haven’t been what?” Rozanov rewound the tape a few seconds, played it again.

“Um. Friendly, I guess? In a while?”

Rozanov’s laugh was short and harsh. “Friendly. Okay.”

“But—”

“So, what?” He twisted around in his seat, and suddenly those blue-green eyes were sweeping up and down, assessing and aggressively sexual. “You want to be *friendly* again? That’s what you want?”

Shane’s entire body prickled, and he could almost feel it, Rozanov’s skin pressed against his, the weight of him, the heat of his breath on Shane’s shoulder blades. “No! That’s not...”

“Right, so.” Rozanov nodded like he hadn’t expected anything different, and looked away again. “Then what do you want?”

“I...I don’t know. We’re on the same team now. We’re going to be playing together. It would be easier if we could at least—”

“Easier for who?”

Shane blinked. “For both of us?”

“Is easy for me already.” Rozanov finally shut off the television, stood up, and suddenly he was so close they were almost touching, and Shane felt like he couldn’t breathe. “You, what, you want us to be friends now?”

“I—”

“We’re not going to be friends, Hollander. We play hockey together, and that’s all.” The worst part of it was that he didn’t even sound annoyed, the way he used to whenever Shane had tried to be practical. He was just cold.

Shane didn't know why he'd expected anything different; they'd never been friendly, had barely even talked during the few—so very few, in the end—times that they'd slept together. And yet he felt a familiar burning behind his eyes, and all he could do was hope the tears behind it would hold off.

“If that's what you want,” he managed. He needed to be out of this room, away from Rozanov, ideally away from himself. He stood up too quickly and was hit with a wave of dizziness; he swayed, and Rozanov's hand shot out, steadying his arm, though he released him as soon as Shane found his footing.

“You should go home,” Rozanov said. “I'll tell Pike you're ready to leave.” He walked toward the door and paused with his hand on the knob, though he didn't turn around. “Get some rest. You really do look like shit.”

The Metros were on the road for the next several games, and by the time they got back Shane had been deemed well enough to attend a game.

He had to watch from one of the boxes rather than down on the bench because the doctors had insisted on it, though honestly he was just grateful to be there at all. They were playing Detroit, and from the opening face-off, Shane could feel the energy in the building. Midway through the first period, Rozanov picked up the puck behind the net, faked a wrap-around that both defenders bought, then slid a pass through the slot to Hayden who buried it glove-side. The lamp lit, the horn sounded, and Shane was on his feet, his chest tight.

I should be out there with him.

The first period ended 1-0, and the arena grew steadily louder over the course of the second. Gagnon won a board battle and chipped it up to Rozanov. The goal horn blared and the crowd surged to their feet, roaring. Shane stood with them, but the volume was starting to press against his skull. He blinked hard, trying to focus on the ice, and the game continued. Detroit scored on a power play to make it 2-1, and the arena got louder, more frantic. Every hit seemed to reverberate through Shane's head, and he realized he was squinting, his vision blurring at the edges.

He stood carefully, testing his balance, and slipped out of the box as quietly as he could, trying not to draw anyone's attention. The hallway was cooler and quieter, and he leaned against the wall for a moment, willing his head to stop spinning. Through the concrete, he could still hear the muffled roar of the crowd, feel the vibration of twenty thousand people on their feet.

He made his way slowly over to the offices, and had to try a few knobs before he could find one that was unlocked. There was a desk, a filing cabinet, and best of all, a leather couch pushed against the wall. He left the lights off and pressed the heels of his hands against his closed eyes, trying not to think about how badly he wanted to be down there on the ice.

Shane woke to silence, and after a disorienting moment during which he couldn't remember where he was, he sat up slowly, testing his head. The pounding was gone, replaced by the much more familiar and manageable dull ache. Through the window he could see that the parking lot was mostly empty now, with only a few scattered cars beneath the yellow lights.

He pulled out his phone and swore softly. He'd missed a bunch of texts from Hayden.

-you good?

-where'd you go

-cap???

-did you go home? text me back man

-k i'm heading out. hope ur ok

Shane sighed and typed out a reply:

-Sorry. Fell asleep in an office. I'm fine, heading home now.

He got to his feet and rubbed at his face. He could feel the lines left by the stitching on the couch, and his eyes were dry and irritated. He was exhausted, it was almost midnight, and he should absolutely do what he'd said he would and call a cab to take him home.

He went down to ice level instead.

Most of the lights in the locker room were off, but a few were still on over the stalls, casting long shadows across the empty room. He walked over to his own stall; it was dark but he knew it too well to need light. He ran his hands over his sticks, his skates, promising them silently that he'd be back soon, that he missed them, too.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Hollander."

Shane spun around to find Rozanov in the doorway, one hand still on the door, his gym bag halfway off his shoulder. He was in joggers and a Metros hoodie, his hair still damp from his shower and he was staring at Shane like he was going to have a heart attack.

"Sorry. I didn't think anyone would still be here."

Rozanov let out a breath. "What are you doing here? I thought—everyone thought you went home."

"I fell asleep in one of the offices upstairs," he explained. "I'm heading home in a minute. Um...?"

“We won,” Rozanov said. “4-2.”

“Good. That’s good.” It was better than *good*, but that was all the enthusiasm Shane had the energy to summon just then.

Rozanov studied him for a long moment, and Shane wondered if the marks from the leather couch had faded. “You look like shit still,” Rozanov said finally.

“Fuck off,” Shane snapped, because he was tired and lonely and sick of Rozanov’s shit. “I’m doing my best, all right? I haven’t even been cleared to go running yet.”

“Obviously not,” Rozanov said drily, and Shane glared at him. “Because you can barely stand,” he added with a twitch of his lips. “Come. I will drive you.”

“You don’t have to—I can call a cab.”

“Don’t be boring, Hollander.” Rozanov jerked his head toward the door. “Come.”

He sighed, anticipating a blood-curdling ride in one of Rozanov’s sports cars, made worse because the roads were probably icing again, but he didn’t argue. When Rozanov’s key clicked open an SUV, Shane looked at him quizzically. “Going to pick up some kids from soccer?”

Rozanov’s stare turned from blank to outraged. “It’s a *Mercedes*, Hollander. A G63.”

“Okay.”

“It’s not for fucking soccer moms.”

“I don’t know anything about cars.”

“You don’t have to know about cars to know—” He cut himself off, blew out a breath. “Just get the fuck in already.”

The silence stretched between them as Rozanov pulled out of the garage and onto the empty streets. Shane stared out the window to avoid watching Rozanov’s hands moving on the wheel, even though the lights hurt his eyes as they flashed past.

“You shouldn’t have come tonight.”

“I wanted to see the game.”

“Yes, and you ended up unconscious in an office Very smart.”

“I just fell asleep. I’m fine.”

“You are so fucking—” He cut himself off and Shane turned to look at him, instantly annoyed again.

“*What*. What am I, Rozanov?”

Rozanov inhaled slowly, his fingers tapping on the steering wheel. “If you rush, you will be no good to us in the playoffs.”

“I *know* that. I was cleared, okay? I have to start coming back sometime.”

Rozanov muttered something in Russian, shaking his head, but he let it go. They turned onto Shane’s street, and Rozanov pulled up to a stop at the front door and shut off the engine. He looked at the glass doors, lit and glowing. “Your building is nicer from this side.”

Shane flushed, remembered all the times they’d met in the back alley. He’d thought about moving, selling his apartment and the one next to it, but he didn’t. He never used the back door anymore, though.

He tried to think of something to say and absolutely failed. He should probably just get out of the car, be grateful that this exchange had at least been less hostile than any of the times they’d spoken previously—but he couldn’t quite manage it. “Rozanov...”

But he just shook his head. “Go inside, Hollander. Get some rest.”

So Shane got out of the car, then leaned down to peer back inside. “Thanks. For the ride.”

“It’s nothing.”

He could feel Rozanov watching him as he walked to the entrance, as he punched in the code, pulled open the door, and stepped inside; only then did he hear the engine start again and the car pull away.

Chapter End Notes

“but on the other hand, it would probably be better if his first encounter with Ilya Rozanov happened when the man wasn’t half naked.” — look I really thought about doing this but decided Concussed Shane simply would not go in that locker room.

Chapter 4: Now they were as strangers; nay, worse than strangers, for they could never become acquainted. It was a perpetual estrangement.

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya watched Hollander skate out of the corner of his eye. He still needed time to get his strength back—he was slower, couldn't push as hard, his edges not quite as sharp as they had been—but he was so graceful, every movement precise and calculated, no more or less than he needed. The lights overhead caught his mouth as he glided through a lazy crossover, and the look of cautious delight on his face made Ilya's heart thud a little harder than it ought to during a simple warm-up.

Theriault called Hollander over, and they chatted for a bit, the coach's hand on his shoulder, before he sent them out for break-out drills. "Shane's going to take center, but take it easy on him, guys."

Unsurprisingly, all of them, even Pike, chimed in with some gentle ribbing—yeah, they'd take it easy on the pretty boy all right, what did Coach think this was, field hockey? and so forth. Hollander's smile was quick and bright, there and gone. Ilya didn't join in; he took his position at right wing, adjusting his gloves, didn't meet Hollander's eyes when he felt him glance over.

The puck dropped. Hollander scooped it up clean despite Gagnon's pressure, pivoted on his inside edge—still smooth, still beautiful—and Ilya knew exactly where he was supposed to be, was already there receiving the pass as it came in hard and flat—perfect, almost elegant. Ilya cut toward the boards to draw the defense and knew without looking that Hollander was already pushing hard toward the net. Soon, in a real game together, Hollander would be so much faster, but even so Ilya had only a moment to set up the pass: Hollander one-timed it, and the goalie kicked out his pad but the rebound bounced right back to Hollander's wheelhouse and he buried it short-side.

It was as automatic as breathing, being on the ice with him.

"Nice," Hollander said, and skated back for the next rep. His cheeks were flushed.

They ran it again and then again, switching positions—Ilya taking center for a rush, Hollander on the wing—and each time there was that same wordless conversation in movement, the same awareness of where they each were in time and space.

But by the third rush, Hollander was breathing harder than he should be and his edges were getting a fraction sloppier. "You good?" Ilya asked before he could stop himself.

Hollander's eyes flicked up, guarded. There was sweat dripping down beneath his ear. "Fine."

Theriault wasn't a fool, and he wasn't reckless. "All right, Shane, that'll do you for today. Looking great out there."

Hollander nodded, not arguing, which told Ilya exactly how tired he really was. The rest of practice continued without him, and it was good because this was a good team, even a great one (Hayden Pike excepted) but that little spark of joy he'd felt faded away down the tunnel with Hollander's slow, careful steps.

He wasn't in the locker room when practice was over, which was a relief—it had been hard enough standing across from him, not turning around to look at him, to see if he would be looking back. Ilya had always been at ease in locker rooms, comfortable with his body—hell, more than comfortable. And while he might on occasion have appreciated another player's body, it had never been something that he brought with him into that room.

He was afraid he wouldn't be able to quite manage that with Hollander, and so he hadn't allowed himself even a glance.

Now Ilya stripped off his gear, stacking it in his stall, wincing as his hip flexor protested. He rubbed at it absentmindedly. He'd meant to go home to his new apartment—nice enough, lots of windows, a real fireplace instead of this electric shit—but now he wondered if maybe he ought to stretch out first, work through it a little.

The training room was quiet apart from the hum of the ice machine in the corner. Ilya dropped down onto one of the mats, the vinyl cool and a little sticky on his skin, and rolled over to his side. He pulled his foot back toward his ass, breathing through the stretch. He was switching sides when he heard it, the slightly muffled but forever recognizable voice coming from the equipment room next door.

"It was great just being out there. I mean, I've got a lot of rebuilding to do, but..." There was a pause; presumably whoever Hollander was talking to was saying something on the other end of the line. "It was...God, I don't know how to explain it. It was perfect, and I guess that's not a surprise, considering who we're talking about. He's the best."

Since he was alone and no one could see him, Ilya smiled. He knew should probably make some noise, let Hollander know he was being overheard, but Ilya had never been one to resist listening to people sing his praises.

"Shut the fuck up," Hollander said affectionately. "I'm not...*no*. No! You know I'm not—" There was another pause, longer this time, and then Hollander said, more seriously, "It's fine. It's not, like, *fun* having him here, but it's fine. We do what we have to, right?"

Ilya's smile vanished.

"Rose, come on. It's just...it's complicated, okay? But today was really good. Obviously I wish..." He stopped speaking, and in the quiet Ilya could hear him moving around, pacing a little maybe, the shuffle of feet on concrete. "Yeah, I know. You're right." He sighed heavily. "Listen, I gotta go, okay? Coach wants to talk timeline." A pause, and then Hollander said warmly, "I miss you too. I'll call you later, okay? Love you."

Ilya stayed very still, afraid to move lest Hollander hear him, but the door to the equipment room opened and closed, and he heard Hollander's footsteps echoing down the hallway toward Theriault's office.

Rose fucking Landry. He thought they'd broken up. There weren't as many articles about the two of them anymore, though neither she nor Hollander had ever made any sort of announcement one way or the other.

Ilya pressed his thumb hard into his hip flexor just to feel that sharp bite of pain, feel something other than the hollow widening in his chest—which was so fucking stupid, because what did it matter if Hollander was still with Rose Landry? It wasn't as though Ilya had been celibate the last three years—very fucking far from it, in fact—and Hollander was more than welcome to fuck whoever he wanted. Hell, he was probably going to marry her any day now, get some spread in *Better Homes & Gardens* featuring their life together in his perfect fucking cottage with their matching dogs and beautiful children.

He shoved himself to his feet, ignoring the pain in his abused hip, and stalked off back to the locker room, stripping off his shirt and pants and throwing them on the floor because everyone else had already left anyway. He went into the showers, turned the water as hot as he could stand it, stood under the spray and let it beat down on his shoulders, and tried very hard not to think about anything at all.

"Mitty, you still here? Coach wants to—"

Ilya turned, water streaming into his eyes, to find Hollander frozen in the doorway. He was fully dressed in his jeans and a bright blue button-down, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows, and his mouth had open, his eyes gone wide and staring. Ilya watched his eyes track down from Ilya's face to his chest, his abs, lower, before jerking back up.

"Sorry. I was looking for..." Hollander trailed off, looked at the ceiling, the floor, the corner—but his eyes always came back to Ilya, as if he couldn't help himself.

Something cruel and reckless unfurled in Ilya's chest.

He dipped his head back under the spray, arched his back so that the water sluiced down his throat, his chest. "It's okay," he said lightly. "It's just a shower. Nothing you haven't see before, yes?" He ran a hand down his chest, grazing past a nipple. He circled it with his thumb, tugged at it gently. He couldn't hear it over the sound of the shower, but he saw Hollander's mouth move as he inhaled sharply.

He should stop there—nothing good could come of this, it was the worst of ideas, especially here where anyone could see them, where JJ or Gagnon or fucking Hayden Pike could wander in—and yet he couldn't help remembering Hollander's voice, saying it was *fine* having Ilya here, that it *wasn't fun*. Three years ago, Ilya had been very, very fun, if he remembered correctly, so much so that Hollander kept coming back for more, kept showing up at his hotel room door.

Ilya was apparently no wiser than he'd been at eighteen.

He let his hand drift lower, trailing over the sharp cut of his hipbone. “You need something?”

“I...” Hollander’s hands twitched at his sides, then clenched, knuckles white.

Ilya took hold of his cock, tugged gently at the foreskin, pulling it back. He was hard already, just from the weight of Hollander’s gaze, and he took his time running his fingers up and down, so slowly, base to tip and back again.

Fuck.

It wasn’t even his hand on his cock that felt so good, it was the look on Hollander’s face. His eyes flicked back and forth from Ilya’s cock to his face, unable to settle, and his mouth had fallen soft and open, his lower lip shining wet. Hollander hadn’t moved from the doorway, but Ilya could see the tent in his jeans from here.

Ilya moved faster, tightening his grip, his other hand running over his neck, his chest, his ass, making Hollander stare, making him want, as Ilya wanted—all the fucking time he wanted him, wanted his mouth and his cock and his ass and most of all the desperate, undone look on his face.

“Please,” Hollander said, and Ilya shuddered.

“Anybody seen Mitty?”

JJ’s voice came from the locker room, and Hollander jumped and practically ran away. Ilya spun around so his back was to the door and cranked the temperature as cold as it would go. Icy water hit him like a slap and he bit down hard on his lip to keep from gasping.

“What?” Hollander sounded strangled.

“Coach is looking for Miitka,” JJ said.

“Oh. No, I haven’t seen him.”

“Who’s in the showers?”

“Uh—”

“That Rozy?” JJ stuck his head in the shower room. “Rozanov, you seen Mitty?”

“No,” Ilya said, his head down and water pouring over his face and into his eyes. He didn’t turn around.

“Shit, okay, he probably left already. Whatever, not my problem. See you tomorrow.”

“See you.”

Ilya heard JJ leave, heard Hollander walk out with him, but he stayed in the shower for a long, long time, until his teeth were chattering and his cock was soft. He got dressed, got in his car, drove around until he found a bar he’d never been to before, all dark wood and neon

beer signs in the window, the kind of place that catered to the after-work crowd looking to blow off steam.

Inside it was warm and loud, classic rock playing over the speakers, the air thick with the smell of fried food and spilled beer. Ilya ordered a vodka neat, downed it in one swallow, ordered another. There were plenty of pretty women there, women who probably didn't give a shit about hockey but were down to fuck anybody with an accent and a handsome face.

He left with a woman named Jennifer, or maybe it was Jessica. She was in marketing. Loved her job, loved this city, loved the cold. They went back to her apartment and she poured them wine he didn't drink. When they moved to her bedroom, she pulled off her dress, and Ilya told her she was beautiful, meant it.

He fucked her thoroughly, attentively, made her come twice before he did. When it was over she curled into his side and pressed her face into his neck. "That was amazing."

"Mm." Ilya stared at the ceiling, at the play of shadows from the streetlight outside.

When Jessica-or-Jennifer's breathing went slow and even, he carefully extracted himself, found his clothes in the dark, got dressed as quietly as he could. He left a note on her kitchen counter.

-Had to go, early practice. You're lovely.

He didn't leave his number. His apartment was dark and empty when he got there, all those nice windows just black squares reflecting his own tired face back at him. He showered again, quick and efficient, and when he finally climbed into bed he lay there in the dark and thought about Hollander's face, the tremble of his mouth when he gasped, that glorious, helpless *please*.

Chapter End Notes

shower jerk 2.0: even worse idea

Chapter 5: He had an affectionate heart. He must love somebody.

Chapter Notes

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

Shane parked his car on a side street, carefully angled the wheels toward the curb, and sat there with the heater on while he waited for Rose to pick up the phone. Through the windshield he could see Ilya's building; it was one of those converted warehouses with big industrial windows and exposed brick. There were already several cars he recognized parked on the street—Coach's Audi, Mitty's Cybertruck that the team regularly spray-painted dicks on.

Shane was going to have to go inside eventually.

"Are you there?" Rose sounded breathless, like she'd run to grab her phone. "What did you end up getting?"

Shane looked down at the large gift box resting on the passenger seat. "Vodka, like you told me. Something safe, not too personal."

"Awesome, what kind?"

"Uh." He tugged the package box open and peered inside, pushing the tissue paper aside. "I'm not sure, I can't see a label. The bottle is a fabergé egg?"

Rose made a choking sound. "A *what*? What the fuck?"

"It's from Russia," Shane said defensively. "It's nice. The store owner said it was the best vodka they had, and it's fancy."

"Shane." Rose's voice was dangerously low. "How much was it?"

He had to pull out his wallet to look at his receipt; he hadn't cared, he'd just paid. "\$1,800." There was a brief pause, plenty long enough for him to start panicking. "That's too much, isn't it? Fuck, it's too much. I'll go back, get another bottle—"

"Breathe," Rose said firmly. "It's fine."

"It feels like I'm trying too hard."

"Oh, you definitely are, but you always are, with everything you do. This won't be that weird, coming from you."

Shane thunked his head back against the car seat. "Great. That's just...great."

"How you doing?" Her voice turned sympathetic, warm and comforting.

“I don’t know,” he sighed. “Like I’m going insane, maybe? It’s been three weeks since... since the shower thing, and it’s like it never happened. I’m practicing with the team whenever they’re at home, going to games.”

“You gonna be ready for the playoffs?” she interrupted. “Looks like you guys are going for sure.”

He smiled. “Yes. I’ll be playing by then.”

“Okay good. Sorry, please continue. Is he still treating you like shit?”

“I wouldn’t say he ever was,” Shane hedged, “but no. He’s...fine. He treats me like any other teammate, teases me about my haircut, my slapstick, my car. He’s got everyone calling me ‘boring’ now.” His mouth twisted, and he had to swallow past the lump of inexplicable grief in his throat. There used to be something in the way Rozanov said it that was different from what it felt like when other people found him boring, which of course Shane knew he *was*. He’d wondered sometimes whether when Rozanov had called him *boring*, he’d really meant something else, but—well. Clearly he’d been wrong.

“That sounds confusing as hell.”

He’d told Rose everything about his relationship with Rozanov years ago, back when they’d decided they were better off as friends, and he’d called her from his car after he’d run out of the locker room, his hands still shaking. Rose had listened without judgment, the way she always did, though Shane knew it had to be weird to hear about his fucked up sexual history in quite so much detail.

“I’m assuming you still haven’t talked to him about it?”

“What would I even say? ‘Hey, sorry I walked in on you jerking off and then just stood there watching like a total fucking creep?’”

“I’m not entirely sure you were the creep in that situation,” she said drily. “Or at least there’s plenty of wacky behavior to go around. I’m just saying—”

“Nope. Not gonna happen. We’ve talked about this.”

“He’s obviously still attracted to you!”

Shane took a breath and then another, remembering the way Rozanov hadn’t looked away from him, but stared in that same all-consuming, covetous way that he had always looked at Shane. “Yes,” he said at last, his voice soft. “But I can’t go back to that. I...” he swiped a thumb under his eye, stuck it on his lower lip so he could taste the salt. “I can’t go back to just fucking him, especially not now when I have to see him every day.”

“I know,” she said gently, “but are you so sure that’s all he wants? You told me you were the one who broke it off, because he was maybe trying to take things further.”

“*Maybe*. But even if he was, that was a long time ago, and it’s not like...it’s not like we ever hung out or...there’s no reason we should be anything other than what we are—which isn’t

anything. Except teammates,” he added hurriedly. “And I can’t risk fucking that up.”

Rose gave a long sigh. “I know. I just...you’ve been really unhappy for a really long time.” The silence after she spoke felt pointed, since Shane could hardly argue.

“I’ll be happy when we win the Cup?” he tried, and she humored him with a laugh.

“Sure. And, you know, maybe consider getting laid? Now and again?”

“I get laid!”

“Oh, really. You’re just having alllllll this sex you’re not telling me about. I hear about what you have for breakfast, Shane, and it’s the same fucking thing every day.”

“Because you ask! And, like, there are variations on the smoothies. And I wouldn’t say I’m having a *lot* of sex,” he admitted. “But some.”

Twice. He’d had sex twice since ending things with Rozanov—once with a librarian who’d had no clue who he was, and another time in Tampa when he’d gotten drunk off his ass after the All-Star game and walked into a club and let a stranger fuck him in the bathroom. The librarian had been sweet but he’d wanted to vomit after, and the club had been so dangerous (and so painful and generally unpleasant) he hadn’t dared try to find anyone since.

“If you say so,” she said, still dubious. “All right, you’d better get in there.”

“But I want to hear about Iceland! What’s this movie about again?”

“Fuck if I know. And no you don’t, you just want an excuse not to go to the party.”

“That’s only like seventy percent true.”

But he did need to go to the party, so they said their goodbyes, he grabbed the stupid fucking vodka egg because it was too late to get anything else, and locked his car behind him. He pressed the intercom and the door buzzed open almost immediately; Shane climbed the three flights of stairs slowly.

The door was propped open, music and voices spilling out into the hallway. Shane hesitated at the threshold, stepped inside—and immediately forgot to be anxious because holy shit Rozanov’s apartment was incredible. The ceilings had to be fourteen feet high, with the original wooden beams still in place. There was exposed brick set with more sconces and lamps than Shane had ever seen in one place, and actual fire burned merrily in the hearth. There were thick, colorful rugs on the floor, a bookshelf with a few books scattered here and there between the trophies, and the art on the walls was large and interesting, nothing like Shane’s own boring black and white landscapes that his interior designer had picked out.

The kitchen was open to the living space, and Shane could see Rozanov laughing at something Mitty was saying as he pulled a tray of something that smelled amazing out of the oven.

“Capitaine!” JJ called from the couch. “You’re late!”

Shane waved, but before he could make his way over, Rozanov was there in front of him, wiping his hands on a dish towel. It was warm enough in the room that he wore only jeans and his usual black tank top, his cross hidden beneath the neckline.

“Come on in,” Rozanov said, and his expression was friendly, open—nothing like the intensity from three weeks ago. “Here, give me jacket.”

Shane shrugged out of his coat and handed it to Rozanov; their hands did not brush. “Thanks for inviting me. Your place is...wow. It’s really nice.”

“It’s okay,” Rozanov said with a shrug, but Shane caught the pleased quirk of his mouth.

“Here...” Shane awkwardly shoved the gift box into Rozanov’s hands. “It’s, uh. Vodka.”

Rozanov peered inside the box and let out a laugh Shane was very familiar with, the one that sort of spilled out of him, like he’d had no idea it was coming. “What the fuck is this?” He lifted the enormous golden egg, his eyes lit with laughter and for a moment Shane couldn’t breathe. “This is vodka?”

“Um,” Shane managed, “yes?”

Rozanov sat down on the floor beside the door and opened the egg, revealing the Venetian glass decanter nestled inside, along with the accompanying gold-painted glasses that caught the light. Still laughing, he opened the bottle right then and there and poured himself a glass, his eyes widening in surprised pleasure at the taste.

Shane looked down at him and thought, *Fuck, I’ll never get over him, will I? I’ll feel this way for the rest of my life.* And when Rozanov looked back up at him, beaming in amused delight, he thought, *Good. I never want to stop.*

“Do you want a glass?”

Shane shook his head, sure that his face was doing things he didn’t want it to. “No. It’s for you.”

“Fuck yes it is.” Rozanov busied himself with packing the bottle and glasses back inside the ridiculous egg, and the egg back in the box. “I’m not sharing it with anyone else.” He got to his feet, and suddenly they were standing very close. “You are sure you don’t want?”

Shane shook his head, smiling helplessly. “No, thanks.”

“Okay. There is ginger ale in the refrigerator. If you want.”

This was possibly more than Shane could take, and his eyes widened. “You—”

Rozanov seemed to hear himself, to remember the last time he’d offered Shane ginger ale, and stepped back, putting more space between them. “There is Coke also, and beer. Help yourself.” He clapped Shane on the on the shoulder and turned away, taking the box with him, disappearing into what must have been his bedroom.

Shane got himself a beer—*not* a ginger ale—and let himself be drawn into a debate with Biss and Stedlund about who they'd be better off playing against in the first round of the playoffs. (Short answer: Neither. It was going to be either Detroit or Toronto, and they were both going to be tough to beat).

He looked up when Rozanov came out of his bedroom and froze mid-sentence, because there was a woman with him. They were talking in low voices, heads close together to be heard over the noise of the party, and she was stylish and confident—beautiful.

Shane quickly looked away, tried to refocus on what Biss was saying about Detroit's defense, but he couldn't hear anything over the rushing in his ears.

"—right, Cap?"

"What?" Shane blinked. "Sorry, yeah. Definitely."

Stedlund gave him a look but didn't call him out on obviously not listening. Out of the corner of his eye, Shane watched as the woman shook her head, then pulled Rozanov down so that she could kiss him at the corner of his mouth. She walked into the kitchen with the ease of someone who had spent plenty of time in it, and then paused, looking directly at Shane.

Shane took a hurried sip of his beer, put a smile on his face, muttered something probably very inane and possibly not even about hockey, considering the way Biss's eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

He didn't watch her cross the room, but he smelled her perfume and knew that she was there. "Shane Hollander?" She had a thick Russian accent, and her tone was hard to read—not warm, certainly.

He placed his beer on the coffee table and stood up. She was even prettier close up, and the smile she gave him was assessing. "I am Svetlana Petrova. Ilya's friend from Russia. And Boston," she added.

Svetlana, of course. Rozanov's longtime girlfriend, who knew everything about hockey and was perfect for him.

"I have looked forward to meeting you. You are an amazing player, better than him even."

They both looked over to where Rozanov was standing by the kitchen island, laughing with Mitty and Coach, his head thrown back in laughter and his hand gesturing as he told some story. He must have felt their eyes on him because he glanced over, something complicated flitting across his face when he saw them talking together, but it was there and gone too quickly for Shane to parse.

"I don't know about that," Shane said.

"No, perhaps not," Svetlana allowed. "You are very different." She cocked her head, scanned him up and down. "As players and as people, I think."

Shane didn't know what to say to that. It was true, certainly—he and Rozanov were opposites in almost every way. “I think we will play well together. I certainly look forward to getting on the ice with him.”

Svetlana picked up Shane's beer from the coffee table, took a sip without asking, handed it back to him. “Yes, I think we all want to see that. Ilya is a very good friend to me, you know.”

“Yes. He, uh, he's mentioned you.”

“Did he. He likes people, likes...” she gestured at the party, everyone laughing and enjoying themselves in Rozanov's gorgeous apartment. “He likes to take care of everything. But sometimes he needs care, too, yes?”

Shane drank from his beer. It was almost gone; if he finished it he could go get another, have an excuse to leave this conversation. “Sure. Everyone does.”

“Mm,” she acknowledged. “I give that to him, when I can. But I am not enough.”

Shane had no idea what she wanted from him; it wasn't like he was in any position to be a support to Rozanov, at least not outside of hockey. Rozanov wouldn't want that from him, anyway. “Well, I'm sure it's harder, since he's in Montreal now.”

Her eyes gave a little flicker of annoyance, as if he was being deliberately stupid or obtuse. “Even if he was still in Boston, I am not what he wants.”

She walked away before Shane could reply, and after a moment spent staring after her in confusion he downed his beer and went to get another, opening it and immediately drinking a third of it in one pull.

“Uncle Shane!”

Shane grunted as Hayden's twin daughters hurled themselves at him. Ordinarily he was not so unsteady that he could be sacked by two pre-teen girls, but he was a little tipsy and Ruby and Jade were hockey daughters: they knew how to target his center of gravity.

“Jesus,” he muttered as he went down hard, his beer sloshing over his hand as he tried not to crush either of them. He landed on his back with both girls giggling triumphantly on top of him.

“Got you,” Jade said smugly, straddling his chest with a grin.

“Yeah,” Shane managed. “Yeah, you sure did. You want to maybe let me up now?”

Ruby considered this from her perch atop his bladder—which was decidedly unhappy with the situation—and shook her head. “No.”

“This is very bad defense, Hollander. Cannot even stop two little girls.”

Shane flushed, craned his neck to see Rozanov smirking down at him. “They’re ringers. Hayden’s been training them.”

“Excuses.” Rozanov bent down and scooped Jade up by the waist, flipping her upside down so she shrieked with laughter. “Into the penalty box with you.”

Ruby scrambled off of Shane, but Rozanov caught her too, so that he had a girl tucked under each arm, both of them giggling so hard they could barely breathe.

Shane accepted Biss’ offered hand and got to his feet.

“Should we throw them out the window?” Rozanov asked Shane seriously. “Maybe they will land in snow, maybe not.”

Shane’s mouth twitched. “Kind of frowned upon to throw children from the three-story building.”

Rozanov shrugged. “Then maybe I will hang them from the ceiling. We can beat them like...” He frowned. “What is that thing you hit at parties?”

“A piñata?”

“Yes, we will hit them like a piñata and they will spill out candy.”

The girls shrieked and Hayden shouted from across the room, “No beating my children. Even if they deserve it.”

“Fine,” Rozanov said dramatically, and set them down—only to let out an *oof* when Ruby head-butted him in the gut. Jade ducked her head to do the same to Shane, but he side-stepped out of the way, catching her by the forehead with his palm.

“You will both be very good hockey players,” Rozanov said. “Much better than your father. But stop that, because Uncle Shane and Uncle Ilya—”

“You are not an uncle to my children, Rozanov!”

“—we are too easily hurt by you. Especially Uncle Shane. He has a concussion, you know.”

“I’m going to be cleared next week!” Shane protested. “I’m fine.”

“Oh, okay. In that case, tackle him again.”

Shane laughed despite himself, and Ruby turned a calculating eye on him before Rozanov tugged her back around.

“Or if you want, there are cupcakes in the kitchen. Chocolate and peanut butter.”

This was sufficient distraction, and the twins took off at a run, darting between players and wags, none of whom were fazed, just stepping aside with practiced ease.

“I’m not sure sugar is the way to help them calm down,” Shane pointed out.

Rozanov rolled his eyes, as Shane had known he would. It was why he’d said it. “It’s a party. They are kids. Don’t be boring.”

Shane’s heart gave an unhelpful little flip, and he couldn’t stop the smile that spread across his face. “Can’t help it.”

The corner of Rozanov’s mouth curved up in answer, and he shook his head. Then his gaze dropped, scanning down Shane’s chest, and his eyebrows lifted. “Your shirt is all wet.”

Shane glanced down and felt heat crawl up his neck. The beer had soaked through completely, the fabric clinging to his chest and stomach, gone nearly translucent against his skin. He felt a twinge as his nipples hardened under Rozanov’s intent gaze, visible through the wet fabric. “Uh, yeah. Guess so.”

“Holy shit, party foul,” Mitty said, shouldering his way between them and slapping Shane on the back, hard enough to make him stumble forward a step. “Roz, you got another shirt that will fit this guy?”

The change in Rozanov was not pronounced—Mitty certainly didn’t see it, and probably no one else would have been able to, either. But Shane saw him blink once, twice, and then the sparkle in his eyes was gone. He was unreachable again; not cold or cruel, just...cordial.

“It will dry,” he said with a shrug, and clapped Mitty on the shoulder as he stepped away, calling something about saving him a cupcake.

Shane stood there, his wet shirt cold against his skin now that Rozanov had looked away from him. His fingers curled around his empty beer, watching Rozanov’s back as left, and even though it was such a little thing, such a brief moment of good humor between them, he ached at its loss.

He forced a smile for Mitty, tossed his bottle in the recycling bin near the kitchen, and made his way to the bathroom to try to dry his shirt with a towel. He peed, splashed some water on his face, looked at his reflection in the mirror. His eyes were too bright, his mouth too tight. He looked broken, but then he always did when Rozanov walked away.

I can’t do this, he thought, gripping the edges of the sink. *I don’t know how to be this, with him.*

He stayed at the party for one more hour, nursing another beer and trying to keep up with the conversations going on around him. Mostly he watched Rozanov, watched Svetlana, saw her disappear into his bedroom and come out again, easy as anything.

When at last his beer was gone, Shane said his goodbyes to everyone, shaking hands, accepting back slaps. He forced himself to kiss Svetlana on the cheek and tell her how nice it was to meet her.

She gave him a long look. “It was good to meet you, too, Shane. Finally.”

With her accent, it sounded almost like she'd said *Jane*.

"Ilya," she called, not looking away from Shane. "Come say goodbye."

Rozanov appeared at her side, smiling politely. "Leaving already?"

"Yeah, I should get going." He forced himself to meet Rozanov's eyes and immediately regretted it; there was nothing there at all.

"Thank you for the egg. It was very expensive."

"I just—I wanted to get you something nice."

"You did." Rozanov stepped closer, ostensibly to reach for Shane's coat from the rack set up by the door, but it brought them nearly chest to chest. Shane could feel the heat radiating off of him. "Always so generous, Hollander."

It should have sounded warm; it didn't.

"Here." Rozanov handed him his coat, and this time their fingers did brush. Shane's breath caught, and he saw Rozanov's jaw tighten, watched his throat move as he swallowed.

Shane pulled the coat on quickly, fumbling with the zipper. "Thanks for having me. It was a great party. And a great apartment."

"Yes."

"Goodnight."

Rozanov stepped back to open the door for him. "Goodnight, Captain."

Shane took the stairs slowly, and when he emerged onto the street, the raw March air hit his face, helped him blink and breathe. As he walked to his car, he looked back up at the windows, glowing in the darkness. He saw Rozanov silhouetted, watching him—but then Svetlana appeared at his side, took his arm, and pulled him away.

Shane's fabergé egg vodka: <https://faberge.vodka/>

Chapter 6: He had imagined himself indifferent, when he had only been angry

Chapter Notes

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

The season was over, the Metros were in the playoffs, and for the first time in six years, Ilya had a real chance to win the Stanley Cup. The team was cohesive and strong, with good communication, attentiveness, and most importantly the absolute powerhouse that was Shane Hollander.

Which was of course why Ilya was absolutely fucked.

Hollander was magnificent on the ice, he'd always known it—but *playing* with him was breathtaking in ways he could never have imagined. They weren't on the same line often; Coach switched them back and forth between first and second from game to game, but every once in a while one of them would play wing to the other's center, and it was so perfect Ilya's heart would soar.

Their styles shouldn't have worked together; Ilya played like a freight train, all north-south aggression and relentless pressure, and Shane was more calculated and precise, the kind of player who'd make three passes before trying for a goal himself. But somehow, impossibly, they fit, because they always knew what they were each going to do at any given moment, creating chaos or quiet pockets for one another, always aware, always ready.

He lived for the way Shane's face lit up when they scored, the way he'd throw his arms up and yell that stupid "*Let's go!*"—and every time, Ilya would crash into him, pressing their foreheads together, grinning like he'd just been handed the fucking world. Being the one that Shane skated to was addicting.

And then the game would end, and Ilya would sit at his own stall in the locker room, carefully not looking over as he untaped his shin pads and remembered with nauseating clarity that what they had between them lived and died on the ice.

They had beaten Toronto for the First Round, and now they were facing the Penguins in Round Two—a faster, more dangerous team that had pushed them to the brink in every game. Game Seven was at home, the arena packed and deafening, the series tied at 3-3, and it was a battle from the opening face-off. Pittsburgh came out flying, their defense collapsing hard on any Metro forward who dared enter the slot, clogging shooting lanes and making every inch of the ice feel hard-earned.

Ilya's line was buzzing. He and Shane had started on opposite lines tonight, but midway through the second period Coach double-shifted them together, and it was like flipping a switch. Shane won a board battle in the defensive zone and chipped it up to Ilya at the red line; Ilya carried it across the blue, pulled up at the top of the circle to freeze the defense, then

slid a backhand pass through traffic to Shane cutting toward the far post. His one-timer beat the goalie stick-side, and the building *erupted*.

“Let’s fucking go!” Shane screamed, wheeling toward Ilya with his arms already up, and Ilya barely had time to brace before Shane crashed into him, grabbing his jersey, their helmets knocking together. Shane was laughing, breathless and wild, and Ilya wanted to live in this moment forever.

1-0 Metros.

Pittsburgh answered three minutes later on a power play, and the game settled into a tense, grinding affair. Every shift mattered, every puck battle was war. With four minutes left, Shane made a ridiculous defensive play, diving to break up a two-on-one, then scrambling to his feet and racing up ice for the counter-attack. Ilya picked up the loose puck and sent it to him at center; Hollander sent it back over to Pike—Ilya held his breath—but the shot rang off the post.

Two minutes left, and it was still 1-1.

Ilya found space at the top of the circle for a slapshot, and Pittsburgh’s defender bought it, sliding to block the shooting lane. Ilya pulled the puck to his forehand and fed it to Shane crashing toward the net—Shane took it wide, dragging the goalie with him, and then slipped a beautiful pass back to Ilya.

The net was *right there*. The goalie was out of position, sprawling to recover, and all he had to do was knock it in.

But Shane had turned to look at him, and there was something in his expression that made Ilya’s breath catch, and for half a second Ilya couldn’t move, couldn’t think about anything except, *Does he feel this too?*

Because sometimes Shane would look at him, holding his gaze, eyes wide or soft or dark, but always looking at Ilya—and he would lie awake at night trying to understand what it could mean, that Shane never seemed to be able to look away either.

Ilya’s shot caught the heel of his stick. The puck fluttered weakly toward the net, wobbling end of end, and the goalie had just enough time to reach back and snag it with his glove.

Ilya heard the groan of 40,000 people watching a sure goal turn into nothing, and then everything went silent except for his own breath rasping in his helmet.

The Metros won in overtime. *Shane* won in overtime, when he stripped the puck off a defender, through a mess of traffic, and somehow the puck bounced to Ilya at the edge of the crease. This time, he didn’t think, he just buried it.

The red light flashed, the building exploded, and his teammates mobbed him, Shane's arms around his neck—but Ilya pulled away from him, shaking his head, and skated off the ice. They were going to the Third Round, but they nearly lost it, and it would have been his fault.

In the chaos of the locker room, Ilya sat at his stall and methodically untaped his stick, the black tape coming off in long strips that he would wrap around his fingers before tossing in the trash, letting the music and the shouting and the jumping wash over him. Eventually Shane stood up, still in his pads, his hair plastered to his forehead with sweat, and Pike called for quiet.

"Hell of a win," Shane said, ever the earnest team captain. "Hell of a game. We're heading to Tampa day after tomorrow, and they're going to come out flying—they'll be desperate, they'll be fast, and they're going to throw everything at us." He swept his gaze around the room, making sure he looked directly at every single player. "But we've fucking got this. We play our game, we stay disciplined, we don't give them anything cheap, and we take this series."

A few guys whooped, banging their sticks on the floor in agreement, the sound echoing off the concrete walls. Shane's smile widened, and he looked so young, almost as young as he had been when Ilya first met him. "Enjoy tonight, rest up tomorrow—and then we go to work. We're three wins away from the Stanley Cup Finals. Just three wins and we're there. Let's fucking get it done!"

The room erupted again—more cheers, guys banging their sticks on the floor, and Shane's bright eyes found Ilya's across the room, and it was the same as always—as if they were the only two people in the room, in the world, maybe, and that was how it ought to be because they were Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, something better together than they were apart.

Ilya looked away.

By the time Ilya finished showering and changing, most of the guys had already cleared out. He was pulling on his jacket when Hollander appeared beside him, hair still damp, dressed in dark jeans and a collared shirt.

"You are still here?" Ilya took a step backward, defensive. "I thought you went to Mitty's."

"I usually don't celebrate with the guys during the playoffs," Hollander admitted, which made no sense, because Ilya had been celebrating with him and the others every single time they'd won. "I was just going to go home, but..." He ducked his head, and a flush crept up along his neck, his face, beneath his freckles. "I saw you were still here and I wondered..."

He stopped, and Ilya couldn't help himself. "You wondered what?"

Hollander lifted his head, and there it was again, that raw look in his eyes, that in years past meant he wanted Ilya to touch him, to kiss him. Ilya's hand lifted of its own accord, to cup Hollander's jaw, brush a thumb across his lip—but Hollander said in a breathless rush, "Can I buy you a beer?"

Ilya's hand froze, hovering awkwardly just above his hip, then dropped. *Why?* He wanted to ask, but that would be too aggressive, too honest, and Ilya was trying so fucking hard to be a good teammate to him. So instead he said casually, "Sure, why not?"

Hollander took them to a bar tucked away on a side street not too far from his apartment, the kind of place you'd walk past without noticing if you weren't looking for it. Inside it could easily have been taken for a coffee shop instead—mismatched armchairs alongside floor lamps bright enough to read by, Edison bulbs hanging over small tables scattered far enough apart that conversations stayed private. The bartender nodded at Hollander like he knew him well enough to no longer need to offer him drinks for free.

They got their beers and carried them over to a pair of worn leather chairs in the back, half-hidden behind a column. and Hollander cupped both hands around his glass, not drinking it. "Good game tonight."

Ilya snorted and took a large gulp, rinsed the beer around his mouth before swallowing. "Not really."

"We won. We're going to the Third Round."

"No thanks to me."

"*Yes* thanks to you. You got the team here when I couldn't, you were directly responsible for both points scored tonight. The assist in second, the overtime goal—"

So that's what this was, Ilya realized. Hollander was being Team Captain, talking him up after a mistake, making sure he wasn't spiraling. "You don't need to do this."

"Do what?"

"This." Ilya gestured between them with his glass. "Your little pep talk. I am fine."

Hollander blew out a frustrated breath and finally took a sip of his beer, his throat working as he swallowed. When he set the glass down, there was a thin line of foam on his upper lip that he wiped away with the back of his hand. "Okay. I mean, sure, why would you need one? You're playing incredibly well."

"I said stop."

"I'm not... Look, I'm trying to tell you something, okay? And maybe it doesn't need to be said, because I'm sure it's really fucking obvious but... I *love* playing with you."

In fact it was obvious: of course he did, they were electric together. And yet Hollander said it so earnestly, like he needed the simplest thing said out loud—and then once he did, it became not so simple anymore.

Ilya looked down at his glass. “I know. I love it, too.”

“It makes me wonder, sort of, how things might have been different if we hadn’t had this whole arch-rival thing going on the whole time. Maybe if we’d been in different conferences, or...”

“Then we wouldn’t have played each other very often,” Ilya pointed out.

“Yeah. And so we wouldn’t have seen each other, gotten to know each other.” Hollander’s eyes were glinting in the warm light, reflecting gold and amber, unreadable.

“Right.”

Hollander leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees, his nearly full glass dangling between them, gripping with both hands. The brown of his eyes was visible again, and while he looked nervous, he was also open, determined. “It’s good to spend so much time with you. We never got to have that.”

Why the *fuck* was Hollander so determined to talk about the past? *They did not talk about it.* It hadn’t happened. That was the only way this could work, and Ilya was giving everything he had to make this work. “It is good playing with you. As you say.”

“Jesus Christ, Rozanov.” Hollander ran a hand through his hair, and Ilya watched jealously, knowing how soft it was. “I’m not talking about hockey.”

“Everything with you is about hockey.”

“That’s not fair. Just—can you just let me get this out? Because I can’t keep doing this, pretending like we were never anything to each other.”

Ilya shrugged, drained the rest of his beer. “We weren’t.”

He expected Hollander to back down, to agree, because Ilya had only spoken the truth: they had fucked. They had barely ever talked, before or after. They hardly knew each other.

“Yes, we were.” He said it as if it was the simple truth—and perhaps it was. Perhaps both things could be true: that they hadn’t been anything, and that they had been everything.

Ilya couldn’t answer him, wasn’t sure if he could even speak, and so they sat in silence for several minutes, looking at each other and then away again, the noises of the bar louder over their quiet.

And then Shane said, “I’m sorry for the way I ended things. I was...I felt so overwhelmed, because it was nice, wasn’t it? Could have been better than nice, maybe. And I didn’t think we could have that, so—”

“We *can’t* have that,” Ilya said harshly. The words came out too loud in the quiet corner, and he saw someone at a nearby table glance over. “We *can’t*,” he added, softer now.

Shane’s eyes were wide and brown and so beautiful. “I know. I’m still sorry.”

Ilya eyed his empty glass and then Shane's, hanging nearly untouched in his hands. He reached out to take it from him, deliberately let his fingers drag across Shane's, warm and electric. It wasn't an invitation, just...an acknowledgment, maybe? Ilya didn't know, but he didn't look away from Shane as he lifted the glass to his lips and took a long, slow drink of his beer.

"Why are you telling me this now?" Ilya asked, wiping the his mouth with the back of his wrist.

"I'm not sure. I thought if I said it out loud, maybe it would hurt less?"

Ilya laughed around the ache in his chest, that apparently permanent weight that had lodged there years ago—when precisely he wasn't quite sure, but it was long before Shane had left him that day. "And did it work?"

"No." Shane gave a little answering laugh. "Not really."

Ilya leaned back in his chair, suddenly exhausted. "I don't know what you want from me."

"Nothing. I just wanted to be honest, for once."

Ilya put the glass down on the table, felt his heel start to bounce and pressed a palm hard on his knee to still it. "I missed you," he said finally, a little rough. "I missed you and I hated that I missed you."

Shane's breath caught audibly, his whole body going still. "Ilya—"

Ilya had to close his eyes, and he held up a hand to stop him from saying his name, from saying anything else. "I'm not—I'm just being honest, too."

"Okay." Shane's voice barely above a whisper. "Okay."

They sat there a while longer as Ilya finished Shane's beer, and it was a little awful, awkward and painful and lonely, even though they were in the silence together. But it was better, a little, to have said some of it out loud.

When Ilya finally stood to leave, Shane stood with him, shoved his hands in his pockets. Ilya gathered their glasses and left them on the bar; the bartender waved goodbye. It was raining outside, unpleasant, and Ilya hunched his shoulders and ducked his head. "Thank you," he said, his breath fogging the cool air. "For the beer."

"Thank *you*," Shane said. He smiled, blinking as the rain splashed into his eyes, across his cheeks, on his lips. "See you in Tampa."

Following Jacob Tierney I also am not doing playoff beards or really any sort of rituals/focus bc then when would the fucking happen. Fake hockey writer here.

Chapter 7: that season which has drawn from every poet worthy of being read some attempt at description, or some lines of feeling

Chapter Notes

i know two in one day is rushed but my god it was either this or watch the whole thing from the beginning and the television has been stolen for fucking stranger things

The team charter hummed steadily through the midday sky, engines droning in that particular frequency that made Shane's teeth ache, and the recycled air smelled of the lingering smell of the breakfast sandwiches they'd downed after boarding. Shane sat in a window seat about midway down the plane, Hayden beside him in the aisle, talking animatedly about something. Shane wasn't really listening: the vast majority of his attention was focused on the back of Ilya's Rozanov's head, tilted to the side, headphones over his ears.

Had he made everything worse, bringing it all out into the open like that? Because nothing had changed, not really—they still weren't anything, couldn't be anything. Becoming teammates had made that *more* true, not less. So what had been the point, really, in dredging it all up?

“—so I told her we should just do it, you know?” Hayden was saying, his voice bright with excitement. “Because it's not like we get these chances very often, and the kids would be fine with her mom for a few days.”

“Mm.” Shane watched Ilya shift in his seat, stretch an arm over the back of his head.

“She's going to fly down tonight, I can't wait. She hasn't been to a playoff game since—I don't even know, maybe since before Amber was born? She's so excited. *I'm* so excited. I never get laid when we're on the road.”

Shane dragged his eyes away from Ilya's curls and put on a smile. Hayden and Jackie were one of those couples that actually worked, that had figured out how to balance hockey and family and still be so in love. “That's great. I'm really happy for you, man.”

“Me too, buddy. Me fucking too. So I got us a separate hotel room, for me and Jackie, I mean, so you'll have the room all to yourself. You can jerk off as much as you want, it'll be fantastic.”

“Thanks,” Shane said drily. “What a treat for me.”

“Oh, I've given up on trying to get you to go out and get laid, you're a lost fucking cause, but I *know* you tickle your pickle, I can hear you in the shower, you know...”

“Hayden, for fuck’s sake.”

“I’m just saying! The walls are thin, and you get a very distinctive rhythm going—”

“I’m going to ask Coach to trade you,” Shane muttered, slumping down until his knees hit the seat in front of him.

Hayden laughed, loud and unrepentant, and clapped him on the shoulder. “I’m just fucking with you. But seriously, enjoy having the space to yourself. Order room service, spread out, live a little.”

It would be nice, Shane admitted to himself. He loved Hayden, was used to him, comforted by him—but he could also use a little space to focus, rest, do what he needed to do to win this series.

And, given that he was going to be in the same vicinity as Ilya Rozanov, he probably was going to be jerking off at some point.

They touched down in Tampa just after noon, the Florida heat hitting them like a wall as soon as they stepped off the plane, thick and humid, so different from home. They shuffled aboard the team bus, most of the guys still half-asleep or plugged into music.

Shane stared out the window as they drove through Tampa, past palm trees and billboards advertising beach resorts, personal injury lawyers, seafood restaurants. Ilya was sitting a few rows back with Biss, his head resting against the window, eyes closed. Shane watched him for a moment—the rise and fall of his chest, the way the sunlight caught his hair—then turned resolutely forward and shut his eyes.

The hotel was one of those massive places downtown, all glass and steel, and the team filed in through a side entrance to avoid any fans. Shane grabbed his suitcase from the luggage cart and wheeled it toward the check-in desk where their equipment manager, Art, was distributing room keys.

“Hollander,” Art said, checking his clipboard. “You’re in...1247 with Comeau.”

“I thought I was rooming with Hayden.” As in, *I thought I’d be by myself*.

“Yeah, there was a switch. Comeau was supposed to be with Rozanov, but then he asked for a room change, so now you’re with Comeau and Roz is with...” Art checked his list again, frowning. “Actually, it looks like Rozanov’s supposed to be solo now? But we’re short a room because the hotel fucked up our block reservation.” He looked harassed, running a hand through his thinning hair. “Honestly, it’s a mess. Just take 1247 for now and we’ll sort it out.”

“Sure, no problem,” Shane said, taking the key card. Behind him, guys were collecting their keys and heading toward the elevators, the lobby filling with the sounds of suitcase wheels and shit-talking. He made his way to the elevator bank and rode up to the twelfth floor; Room 1247 was halfway down a long hallway, the carpets brighter at the edges than in the center, worn down by countless rolling suitcases and shuffling feet.

Comeau was already inside, sprawled across one of the two queen beds, his suitcase open on the floor and clothes already spilling out of it. “Hey, roomie,” he said. “Fair warning, I snore like a chainsaw.”

“Great,” Shane said, wheeling his suitcase inside and closing the door behind him. “Looking forward to it.”

The room was standard hotel fare, nice enough—a flat-screen TV, photographs of seahorses in clear blue water, and a view of downtown Tampa through the floor-to-ceiling windows. Shane claimed the bed next to them and started unpacking, placing his clothes in the dresser and arranging his toiletries in the bathroom. He plugged his phone in to charge and was just pulling out his laptop when someone knocked at the door.

Comeau rolled off the bed with a groan. “I’ve got it.”

He opened the door to reveal Art standing there, looking even more harassed than before, with Ilya Rozanov beside him, his expression dark and closed-off, his duffel bag slung over one shoulder.

Shane’s stomach dropped.

“Sorry guys,” Art said, not sounding sorry at all, only exhausted. “Hotel completely screwed up our reservation, and they’re fully booked up. We’re two rooms short, and with Pike taking that extra room for his wife, we need to consolidate somehow. Comeau, you’re moving in with Martinez and Tremblay in 906. They’ve got a suite with a pullout couch. Hollander, you’re staying here with Rozanov.”

There was a beat of frozen silence.

“You’re kidding,” Shane said.

“Do I look like I’m kidding?” Art said, exasperated. “I’ve been yelling at the hotel manager for the past twenty minutes. This is what we’ve got. If you have a problem with it, take it up with Coach, but I’m telling you right now he’s not going to give a shit so long as everyone has a bed. Get focused, bus leaves at the rink at four.”

Comeau was already grabbing his stuff, shoving clothes back into his suitcase with the efficiency of someone who’d been doing this for years. “It’s all good, no worries. Martinez and Tremblay are fun, we’ll have a party.” He zipped up his bag and clapped Shane on the shoulder as he passed. “Have fun, you two.”

And then he was gone, Art trailing after him, leaving Shane and Ilya standing on opposite sides of the hotel door, staring at each other.

Ilya broke eye contact first, stepping fully into the room and letting the door swing shut behind him. He dropped his duffel on the unclaimed bed, dropped himself alongside it, kicking his shoes off and then leaning back, crossing his heels at the ankles.

“This is fine,” he said, speaking to the room in general, not looking at Shane. “Is just sleeping. We are adults, not kids anymore.”

“Sure,” Shane said, dry-mouthed. “Totally fine.”

Ilya pulled out his phone and Shane sat down on his own bed with his laptop in his lap. He put on headphones and watched a movie, and when it was done he couldn’t have said a single thing that had happened in it.

They didn’t talk to each other as they got ready to leave for the arena, didn’t sit next to each other on the bus, didn’t say anything as they got ready for warm-ups. In the locker room, Shane went through his pre-game routine on autopilot, but his eyes kept drifting across the room to where Ilya sat at his stall. Every so often, their eyes would meet, and one or the other of them would instantly look away.

“You good?” Hayden asked.

“Ready.”

“Sweet. Let’s rip off their heads and shit down their necks.”

Shane chuckled a little, and tapped his helmet against his friend’s.

The game started badly and got worse. Tampa came out flying, as they’d expected, their crowd deafening and their forecheck relentless. And Shane was *slow*, just a step behind everything—slow to pass, slow to skate, slow to recover. Tampa capitalized early with a quick strike off the rush, leaving them 1-0 Tampa, four minutes in.

Ilya’s line came over the boards for their first shift, and Shane watched anxiously, stick tapping against the boards. Ilya wasn’t slow, probably didn’t know how to be, but he was sloppy, rushing passes, getting into it with Tampa’s defense. Tampa was clogging up the middle, forcing everything to the outside, and the Metros couldn’t generate anything clean.

Midway through the second, Coach put Ilya on wing and centered Shane, sending them out together, and Shane felt his pulse spike—*this* should work, they were each at their best when they played together, when they found their rhythm.

Instead, it was like skating through mud. Shane won the draw and sent it back to Gagnon, headed up the ice, calling for it, and when the pass came he tried to hit Ilya streaking down the right wing—but the pass was a foot behind him, and Ilya had to slam on the brakes; by the time he’d corralled the puck a Tampa defenseman was on him, separating him from it with a heavy check that sent him stumbling.

The next shift didn’t get better. Ilya had the puck in the offensive zone and tried to feed Shane cutting to the net, but Shane had hesitated, second-guessing, and by the time he drove

the net the pass had already been intercepted. Tampa broke out the other way, and Shane had to backcheck in a desperate attempt to break up the rush.

They just couldn't find each other. Every pass was a half-second off, every play just slightly out of sync. Shane was thinking too much, analyzing instead of reacting, and he could tell Ilya was doing the same thing.

Tampa scored again early in the third, a too-easy goal that deflected off someone's skate and fluttered past Mitty. 2-0.

The Metros pushed back desperately. Hayden scored on a scramble in front to make it 2-1, and for a moment Shane thought maybe they could turn it around, claw their way back.

They didn't. Shane fumbled another pass that really could have been something, and Ilya spent most of the final minutes of the game in the penalty box after an angry, frustrated slash.

The locker room after was cold and silent, and Shane felt that everyone was blaming him—possibly also Rozanov, but mostly him, and they were right, because he'd fucking lost this game for them.

Coach came in after the media had gotten their quotes and gave a terse speech about staying focused, how he wanted everyone there for morning skate tomorrow, that they'd better get some rest and get their heads right. Shane tried to look attentive, tried not to let his eyes glaze over. Across the room, Ilya was sitting with his head in his hands, still in full gear except for his gloves and helmet. Shane wanted to go over there, figured it was his job to say something like, *I'm sorry*, or *we'll get them next game*—but the distance between them felt impossible to cross.

The ride back to the hotel was excruciating. His phone buzzed with texts from his mom, from Rose, but he didn't have it in him to respond. He just stared at his hands and tried not to think about how badly he'd played, how badly *they'd* played together. When the bus pulled up to the hotel, everyone filed off in tired silence. Shane headed straight for the elevators, not waiting to see if Ilya would follow.

He was just getting out of the shower when he heard him come in, the hotel room door slamming behind him. He dried off hurriedly, grateful that he'd thought to bring a t-shirt and underwear into the bathroom with him. He pulled them on while still damp, his shirt sticking to his shoulders.

He emerged in a cloud of steam to find Ilya sitting on the edge of his bed, unlacing his shoes. He didn't look up.

"Shower's free," Shane said, awkward.

Ilya just nodded and grabbed his toiletry bag, brushing past Shane close enough that he could smell the sweat and arena air still clinging to him. The bathroom door clicked shut—not quite a slam, but not gentle either.

Shane sat on his own bed and pulled out his phone, dutifully responding to his parents and to Rose, letting them know he was okay, that he'd turn it around tomorrow, not to worry about him. In the bathroom, the shower turned on, and Shane tried not to picture Ilya in there, the water hitting his shoulders, droplets running down his sides and legs.

When Ilya finally emerged, he was wearing black sweatpants and nothing else, his curls hanging longer and darker with moisture, dripping onto his bare shoulders. Shane kept his eyes on his phone as Ilya moved around the room quietly, efficiently, turned on the television, lay back on his bed and clicked to one channel after another, rhythmic.

"You want to order room service?" Shane finally asked, because one of them had to say something.

"No."

"You should eat something."

"I'm fine."

The television flashed bright and then dark as the channel changed and then changed again. Shane gave up on his phone and pulled out a book, fumbled for his glasses from the nightstand. It was one he'd read before—he always read it during the play-offs, the familiar words comforting and inspiring at the same time.

Or at least, they usually were. He cast the book aside and looked up to find that Ilya had stopped channel-surfing, was staring at him with his lips parted and his eyes dark. "What?"

"You wear glasses."

Shane flushed and tugged them off. "Only for reading. They don't impact my play."

Ilya swallowed, opened his mouth like he was going to say something, then closed it again. "Okay."

The television flashed as he went back to changing the channels again.

At some point, Shane decided he should just try to get some sleep. He went into the bathroom and flossed, making sure to go down along the sides of each tooth. He put toothpaste on his toothbrush, then remembered he'd forgotten his phone; he went to grab it to set a timer and started brushing there in the room, holding the tip so he didn't brush too hard. When the timer went off, he looked up to find Ilya watching him.

"What was that for?"

Shane reddened, gestured at his mouth full of foam, and went into the bathroom to spit. "You're supposed to brush for two minutes," he called through the open door.

There was a sound a little like a laugh, and then Ilya was there in the doorway, a small smile on his face. "And you need a timer for this."

Shane shrugged. "I want to get it right."

Ilya shook his head, his smile widening just a fraction, and reached past Shane to get his own toothbrush from the toiletry bag sitting on the counter. He rooted around for toothpaste before giving up and reaching for Shane's. "Sensitive tartar control," he read, and squeezed some onto his brush. Shane had to brush against him to squeeze past and out of the bathroom, his hips pressing against Ilya's ass, and he felt Ilya tense, the toothbrush pausing in his mouth.

"Sorry," Shane muttered, and fled.

He was in bed, his t-shirt put away and the covers pulled up by the time Ilya came out of the bathroom. Ilya glanced at him and then shut the television off. The sudden absence of noise and light made the room feel smaller somehow.

"You can leave it on," Shane said. "I've got an eye mask and earplugs."

"It's fine. I should also try to sleep." Ilya turned off the lamp on the dresser, got into bed and turned off the one on the nightstand, leaving the room in complete darkness except for the strip of orange light between the curtains. The bed creaked as Ilya got comfortable, and Shane rolled onto his side, facing the wall, and tried to will himself to sleep. But his mind wouldn't quiet. He kept replaying the game, every sloppy pass, every failure to read the ice, every moment where he and Ilya had just been out of sync.

He heard Ilya moving beside him, restless, then, "Shane?"

"Yeah?"

"It's okay. We will be better tomorrow."

Shane huffed. "We have to be. Sure can't play like that again. I'm sorry, I know I was...off."

"We were both off."

"Yeah, but—"

"Shane." Ilya's voice was firm in the darkness. "We were both off."

Shane swallowed hard, whispered, "Okay. Yeah."

"Go to sleep."

"You too."

But he didn't, neither of them did. Shane lay awake listening to Ilya breathe, the slide of fabric against skin when he shifted, a quiet sigh. Shane rolled over to face him, curled up on his side with the blankets pulled tight, and across the narrow space between their beds, he could just make out Ilya's shape in the darkness.

Chapter 8: None of us want to be in calm waters all our lives.

Ilya was not doing very well. He was furious with himself for how he'd played yesterday, for how he was blowing his first shot at the Cup in years, for being distracted and confused and generally fucked up to all hell. He was bone-deep exhausted from spending an entire night in the same room with Shane Hollander—the first time they'd ever done so—listening to him toss and turn just a few feet away, his breathing, the little snort-huff he gave when he would doze off only to wake up again fifteen minutes later. Ilya had been hard for most of the night, because he couldn't imagine a time when he wouldn't be hard alone in a room with Shane, and he thought about jerking off, seeing if that would help, but he couldn't do it with Shane awake and listening, that just being in proximity turned Ilya into this pathetic, wanting thing. Instead he just lay there, his skin too tight for his body, staring up into the darkness.

So yes: Ilya Rozanov was not doing very well. He was, however, doing much better than Shane Hollander.

Shane was a fucking mess. He clattered around putting his phone charger in one place, only to forget where it was a moment later and tear the place apart looking for it. His eyes were bloodshot and shadowed, and he'd put his shirt on inside out. When Ilya gently pointed it out, he'd muttered a soft “fuck” and yanked it off, revealing his bare torso, a little thin from the grind of the playoffs, but still soft and hard all at once: the curve of his spine, the line of muscle down his sides, his dark nipples, the scar on the back of his left shoulder.

In the hotel restaurant, Ilya poured himself a second cup of coffee and grabbed a handful of danishes from the buffet, watched out of the corner of his eye as Shane stared numbly at the breakfast spread before Pike steered him over to the yogurt, helped him heap it with fruit and granola. (Ilya could begrudgingly admit that Hayden was a good friend to Shane, even if he wasn't good for much of anything else).

Morning skate wasn't bad; Ilya's speed was steady despite his weariness, and Shane was as graceful and precise as ever. But he was quiet, even more so than usual, keeping his head down—and the Metros' spirits stayed down with him. He perked up a bit during the video sessions afterward, calling out plays and strategies, serious and focused. Ilya tried to help, as did Pike, to bring a little more camaraderie into the room, and soon enough the guys were laughing and trash-talking. Shane smiled, but it was the one he pasted on, that looked stuck on his face and didn't reach his eyes.

The team ate a big meal together and split off for naps or whatever else they each did to prep. Ilya couldn't stand the idea of lying in that bed alongside Shane for even another moment, so he went to Mitty's room (Mitty never napped, was always too wired) and watched some nonsensical Tom Cruise shit for a couple of hours.

When they lined up to get on the bus, he tried to determine whether or not Shane had gotten some rest, couldn't be sure—he didn't look any better, but he didn't look worse, either—and decided he couldn't take it anymore. Shane slid into his usual window seat, and when Hayden made a move to sit beside him, Ilya jerked his head. Hayden narrowed his eyes, but Ilya

wasn't about to budge. Finally, with a shrug, Hayden went to sit with Biss, who looked like he was possibly about to throw up, and Ilya dropped into the seat beside Shane.

"You look like shit again," he said conversationally.

Shane did not look up from his phone. "Thanks. That's really helpful."

"Turn camera on, you can see yourself. You look like...what is it..." He made a gesture near his own eye. "Like raccoon."

"Fuck off, Rozanov," Shane snapped, quick to anger as ever. Sometimes Ilya wondered whether only he knew what an asshole Shane could be, and the thought filled him with something like pride.

Ilya slouched lower in his seat, spread his legs, deliberately let his knee press against Shane's. "When is the last time you got some sleep? Real sleep, not thing—" he made a restless tossing motion with his hand "whatever you were doing last night. That was not sleep. That was you being a, what, a rotisserie chicken."

Shane's mouth twitched despite himself. "Rotisserie chicken?"

"Yes. Is that wrong? What Mitty gets from Costco, turning turning all night on the little spit. Very annoying when I am trying to sleep."

"Jesus Christ." Shane scrubbed a hand over his face. "Can you just—can we not, please?"

"I am not allowed to be concerned about my teammate?"

It was the wrong choice of words—a cowardly choice—and Ilya wanted to kick himself when he saw Shane's shoulders roll inward. "I'm *fine*. I've played on less sleep than this. We all have. I'm handling it."

"You are handling it," Ilya agreed. "Like someone handling a bomb. Very careful, very stressed, probably going to explode."

"I'm not going to explode."

"No? Then why are you shaking?"

Shane looked down at his hands like he was surprised to find them trembling slightly, immediately shoved them under his thighs, trapping them against the seat. "I'm not."

"Okay. You are not shaking. You are not exhausted. You are not stressed. Everything is perfect. Shane Hollander is perfect, always."

"Please fuck off," Shane said, only now the fight was gone, his voice small and tired. He shifted away so that they were no longer touching, and Ilya thumped his head back against the seat, wishing he knew how to talk to him.

"I am just asking if you are okay," he said quietly. "This is allowed, yes?"

Shane's breath went out of him in a little shudder, and he released his hands from his thighs to rub at his eyes. "I don't know."

"You don't know if it is allowed, or you don't know if you are okay?"

"Both. Either. Can we just—can we not talk right now? I need to focus on the game."

He was hopeless. Ilya looked at Shane and felt a surge of almost giddy affection for this prickly, anxious, defensive little shit—so much that the warmth of it spread from his chest and throughout his entire body, so that he was smiling with it even though everything was terrible, they were never going to win a game like this. But just then, Ilya didn't really care, because he was sitting beside Shane Hollander, and he didn't think he ever wanted to be anywhere else.

"Okay," he said gently. "Close your eyes, I will wake you when we get there."

"I'm not going to be able to sleep."

"Then pretend." Ilya settled back into his seat, angling himself slightly so Shane could lean against him if he needed to. "It will be good practice for later, when you are pretending to have energy for hockey."

Shane's response was lost in the rumble of the bus engine, but he did lean his head back against the seat, allowed his eyes to drift closed. Within minutes his breath evened out, and Ilya kept very still beside him, watching the city lights wash over Shane's face as it softened with sleep, wanting, wanting, wanting—and Ilya thought, the clarity of it almost shocking even though it wasn't new, not at all: *I love you.*

The energy in the locker room was high but tense, and they could hear the crowd, feel it through the walls. Shane sat in his stall, already in full gear, but he kept adjusting his gloves, taking them off, putting them back on, flexing his fingers like he couldn't get them to sit right. On, off, on, off, the velcro ripping each time.

Ilya watched him from across the room as Theriault gave his final speech, fist pounding against the whiteboard. "This is what we came for! This is what we worked for!"

"Let's fucking go!" someone shouted, JJ maybe, and then they were moving, Pike banging his helmet against Ilya's, against Shane's, a surge of bodies toward the tunnel. The noise of the crowd grew louder, a wall of sound that hit them as soon as they pushed through the doors. Shane's face was set in that blank, focused expression, tension in every line of his body, and Ilya followed behind him, heart pounding, moving more on instinct than thought.

His hand shot out and caught Shane's arm.

Shane turned, surprised, and Ilya yanked him sideways into a small alcove just before the tunnel opened onto the ice—a maintenance space, barely big enough for the two of them. Players flowed past—Biss, Mitty, Gagnon, JJ—but no one looked back, too focused on the game ahead.

“What—” Shane started, but Ilya cut him off.

He grabbed the front of Shane’s jersey, knocked off his helmet and his own, and sure it would probably hurt later, but Ilya was hurting now, had *been* hurting for so long and what if he stopped just for a second—and he pulled Shane in close and kissed him.

For half a second Shane went rigid with shock, and Ilya worried that he’d fucked it up for good this time—but then Shane made a small, desperate sound, his mouth opening in surprise and then immediate responsiveness. Ilya swept in, tasting him, tasting *Shane*, one hand cupping his jaw, the other fisting in his jersey and keeping him close.

It was hard and wet and messy, teeth clicking together, too brief but still perfect. Ilya pulled back, breathing hard, and grinned—wild and reckless and more alive than he had felt in years, probably.

“Don’t worry about beating Tampa,” he said against Shane’s lips, his accent thickened by adrenaline and want. “Worry about beating *me*, because I am going to score three points in the first period.”

Shane’s eyes were huge and dark, and his lips were red and wet and slightly swollen. Ilya straightened Shane’s jersey, bent to pick up his helmet and set it atop Shane’s head, buckling it in place for him. Then he winked and put on his own and skated out of the tunnel and into the bright lights of the rink.

They won 5-2. Ilya got his three points—two goals and an assist—and Shane got four, playing with a kind of gleeful joy that outshone anything they had shared together on the ice up to this moment. Every shift was perfect, every pass crisp—as if the entire team felt it, soared with it. The locker room was chaos afterward, music blaring, and Shane was smiling widely, laughing with his head thrown back when Pike dumped a cooler of ice water over him—he looked younger, lighter, as if someone had cut the strings that had been tethering him.

Though when their gazes caught across the room, his smile faltered, became something else entirely.

Eventually they showered—Ilya made sure he was nowhere close to Shane, didn’t even glance at him—made it through the media scrum and the celebrations. On the bus ride back, Shane sat next to Pike, and Ilya sat in front of them so he wouldn’t spend the whole time staring at him—but he felt his presence like heat at his back, like a hot wire that stretched and tightened as they orbited each other.

They walked to the elevator in a group, Hayden screeching about how he was going to go down on his wife like a scuba diver, Shane standing in one corner and Ilya in the other, vibrating with tension. They got off on the twelfth floor making their own separate excuses about not going out with the team, about the early flight in the morning, about being too exhausted, good night, good night, incredible game, love you—until Ilya thought he was going to scream.

Shane's hands were shaking as he unlocked the door with the keycard, Ilya trying not to crowd him, shoving his hands in his pockets to keep from touching him.

When at last he got the door open, they stumbled inside and stood there, a few feet apart, staring at each other. Shane's eyes were very wide and very dark, a little terrified. "Maybe we shouldn't—" he began, and Ilya shoved him up against the wall and kissed him.

He kissed his mouth, his jaw, the corner of his eye, his freckled cheeks, his nose—it wasn't sexual, or not *just* sexual. He wanted to feel him, consume him maybe, keep him close so that Shane would never leave him, not ever again. He couldn't say that, couldn't say any of it—nothing about what he wanted, what he felt—not out loud, but he could tell him like this, with his mouth and his shaking hands and the desperate press of his body.

Shane moaned into his mouth, and all thoughts of this being pure and loving and sweet left the room, taking Ilya's self-control with them. He wanted to kneel for Shane, to sink to the floor and suck him, make him plead so beautifully. Shane was fumbling at his belt, so fucking desperate it made Ilya crazy, and Ilya was trying to get his shirt off but couldn't stop kissing him. It tore at the neckline, and Shane pulled his mouth away, frowning at his collar.

"I liked this shirt."

"Shut up," Ilya rasped, and ripped it the rest of the way.

Somehow Shane got his hand around Ilya's cock, which was neither right nor fair because Ilya wanted to touch him, wanted to undo him, unravel him, but it had been so fucking long that he was afraid he'd come in minutes, just from Shane's hand on him.

He shoved him away, tugged on his belt, unclasping it and pulling him toward the nearest bed at once. They separated for just long enough to get everything off, stumbling a little before crashing down onto the mattress.

Ilya covered Shane's body with his own, and the sensation of skin against skin made him gasp into Shane's mouth. He stretched Shane's arms up high, pinning his wrists above his head, and Shane went soft and pliant beneath him. Ilya sucked at his neck, his nipples, taking one between his teeth so that Shane arched up with a cry. "Stay like that," he ordered, releasing Shane's wrists, and gripped the base of his cock tight to keep himself from coming as he swallowed Shane down.

Fuck, it was like nothing else, the way he cried out and panted, the way he leaked and thrashed but didn't move his arms from where Ilya had placed them, his chest heaving and sweat gathering at the base of his throat. His cock was full and thick, so sweet, and Ilya took

it as far back as he could, until it cut off his air, the muscles of his throat working around it, and Shane's strong legs came up around him, holding his shoulders tight.

"Stop, stop, wait—" he cried. "Wait."

Ilya swallowed once before pulling off, gasping. "What?" He crawled up Shane's body, dragging his teeth up his ribcage. "Tell me. Tell me what you need."

"You know," Shane panted, turning his head to the side, exposing the long line of his throat. "You already know."

"*Tell me.*" Ilya bit down on the join of Shane's neck and shoulder, almost hard enough to leave a mark.

Shane fucking *whimpered*. "I need you in me. Please—I need you, I've missed you so fucking much, I can't—please—"

Ilya hissed out a curse in Russian and had to forcibly shove himself off of him, stumbling into the bathroom. He dumped his toiletry bag out into the sink, found his lube and condoms, and when he came out Shane was lying on the bed, cheeks and chest red, his legs spread wide and his knees bent, his cock hard against his belly.

"Fuck," Ilya said, and had to fight a wave of dizziness. Shane was going to be the fucking death of him.

He climbed onto the bed and knelt between Shane's thighs, slicking his fingers. Shane watched him with blown-out eyes, his chest heaving, and when Ilya pressed the first finger inside him, his head fell back with a gasp.

"More," he breathed, "I can take it—"

He was so fucking tight. He'd always been that way—knowing him, he probably hadn't been fucking any other men the whole time they'd been together, a thought that had always made Ilya feel more than a little insane, even though he hadn't been either. But Shane was even tighter than he'd remembered, and so Ilya forced himself to go slow, working him open methodically, adding a second finger when the first slid in easily, scissoring gently while Shane writhed beneath him, letting out desperate little gasps and bitten-off moans and Ilya had to keep his hips angled away to keep from thrusting into the mattress like a fucking kid.

"Please," Shane begged, trying to rock down harder. "Please, I'm ready, I need—"

"Not yet." Ilya crooked his fingers, finding that spot inside him, and Shane's chest came off the bed with a cry. "There. Yes?"

"Fuck—yes—Ilya—"

He did it again, could have done just this for hours despite his increasingly painful hard-on, but Shane was tugging at him, clutching at his arms, pleading. Ilya pulled his fingers out, fumbled the condom wrapper with sticky hands. Shane snatched it from him and tore it open

with his teeth, rolling it down onto Ilya's cock, gripping him sure and possessive as he slicked him with lube, and Ilya had to grab his wrist to stop him.

"You want me to come before I even get inside you?" he gritted out.

Shane's eyes cleared, just a little, and his smile was somehow playful and fierce at the same time. "Maybe."

"*Hollander—*"

"Rozanov," Shane mimicked, and pulled Ilya down into a kiss, lifted his knees up to his shoulders. "Come on. It's okay."

It gutted him, a little—because it *wasn't* okay, this was going to wreck Ilya forever, already had, but there wasn't any way he was going to be able to stop. He pushed inside slowly, and *God*, Shane was so fucking tight Ilya thought he might pass out.

"Good?" he managed shakily.

Shane nodded, his mouth open and panting, dragging wet along Ilya's jaw, his throat. Ilya pulled out and thrust back in, tried to go gently to give him time to get used to it—but Shane wouldn't let him, fucked himself up onto Ilya's cock, his own caught between them, smearing precome across Ilya's belly.

"Stay," Ilya ordered, and pressed down on his chest with one hand while he smeared lube all over Shane's cock. He stroked him once, twice, then leaned forward, fucking him deep, pulling out only a little each time before thrusting back in again, jerking him in rhythm with his thrusts, making him cry out.

"Look at me," Ilya demanded, panting, and Shane's eyes opened, wet and dark. "Want to see you fall apart."

"I'm already—fuck—falling apart," Shane gasped. "Ilya, I—"

Ilya angled his hips, hitting that spot inside Shane again and again, imagined he could feel it with his dick, going harder and faster. He felt Shane start to come in the arching of his spine, the clenching around Ilya's cock. His face was contorted, wrecked, and Ilya loved him so much he almost couldn't bear it. He came with a broken moan, spilling hot over Ilya's hand, over his own stomach, then sagged back onto the bed, boneless and spent.

Ilya thrust into him roughly, again and again and again, until he came so hard his arms gave out and he collapsed onto Shane, burying his face in his neck, murmuring Russian nonsense about how he'd missed him, he didn't want to be without him, he just wanted time, he just wanted *Shane*.

Я скучал по тебе. Я люблю тебя. Пожалуйста, останься. I missed you. I love you.
Please stay.

Chapter 9: I have loved none but you

Chapter Notes

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

Shane woke up with Ilya Rozanov's head nestled on his chest and had a very small panic attack.

They'd moved to the other bed, Shane sparing a horrified thought for the maids who would have to clean up after them, and Ilya had tossed a handful of twenties over the come- and lube-stained sheets and told him to shut his pretty mouth and go to sleep for fuck's sake. And he had, because he was beyond exhausted, every muscle in his body aching from either sex or hockey or both, and he'd had an equally worn out Russian in his arms and would get to keep him there for an entire night.

The clock on the nightstand read sometime after two, and Shane tried to lie very still, kept his breathing even, resisted the almost painful desire to run his fingers through Ilya's curls.

What would it be like to wake up like this every morning, or at least *some* mornings? They were teammates now; surely they could transition to friends, to guys who would bunk together on road trips (though Shane would have to figure out how to square that with Hayden). No one would question it, and then they could just *have this*.

Shane didn't know if Ilya would even want it, didn't know what any of last night meant except that Ilya still liked fucking him, and frankly Shane had guessed that much.

His throat felt tight. Because even if he did, even if Ilya did want this, nothing had fundamentally changed. Being on the same team would make it easier, in some ways, to sneak around, but so much worse in others because Shane couldn't imagine being with Ilya, really *with him*, and keeping it a secret. He was a bad liar, even if he'd lied to everyone in his life—including himself—for so many years. He didn't want to go back to that.

He knew that he would, though, if Ilya wanted him to. Because Shane had spent three years without Ilya Rozanov in his life, and nothing could be worse than that.

Ilya made a soft sound and shifted, his hand sliding down Shane's stomach, splaying warm and possessive against his hip. "You are thinking too loud," Ilya mumbled against his skin, rough with sleep. "I can hear it."

"I'm not—"

"Always the same with you." Ilya pressed his lips to Shane's chest, right over his racing heart. "You think and think and think, and you make problem where there is not problem."

Shane gave in and ran his hand through Ilya's hair, scratching gently at his scalp. "I'm pretty sure there is a problem, actually. I mean...I don't want to do what we did last time, where we never talked about anything."

Ilya groaned and rolled off of him, flopping onto his back. "Now? Now is when you want to talk? It's the middle of the night, Hollander."

"I just...what happens now? With us?"

Ilya's hand went to his necklace, and Shane watched him fiddle with it, silhouetted in the dark. "You tell me."

"I don't feel like it's only up to me."

Ilya sat up, tucked up his knees and draped the sheet over them. He tapped his fingers together, the way he did when he was wishing for a cigarette. "Really. Of course it's up to you. It's always been up to you."

Shane felt very strongly that this wasn't true, that Ilya had pushed him away time and again, that just because Shane had been the one to end things didn't mean he had ever once felt in control of their...whatever it was. He sat up, so that they were both leaning against the padded headboard, not looking at each other. "That's not fair. You never—you were never willing to—" He stopped, took a breath. "I wanted more. I always wanted more, and I knew I could never have it. That's why I broke it off."

"I know." Ilya's voice was quiet. "I know this, Shane. I...I did, too, but not enough to stop. I would have taken whatever I could from you, forever probably." The admission hung between them in the dark, and Shane wished he could have seen Ilya's face when he said it. "But I know it is impossible. Nothing is different now."

"Do you want to go back to what we were?" Shane asked hesitantly. "I think...it could happen more often, now. Being in the same city, road trips, all that. It could be better."

Ilya blew out a breath, didn't answer for a long time, and Shane felt the prickles of shame and heartache behind his eyes.

"Or not. Probably not. You're right. We should just...leave it at this."

Ilya turned to look at him, and Shane finally caught the planes of his face in the dim light streaming in from between the curtains. "Probably," Ilya whispered, but his voice was aching, and Shane reached out into the space between them, stroked a thumb across Ilya's cheekbone. Ilya captured his hand and kissed his palm, and with a little surrendering moan, Shane rolled over on top of him, straddling his hips and pressing their mouths together.

Shane touched his lips to Ilya's temple and thought, *I love you*. He bit gently at his earlobe, felt Ilya shiver beneath him, and thought, *I love you*. He made his way slowly down his chest, nuzzling into his arms, his sides, pressed tiny kisses across his belly, felt the muscles jump and contract. He made Ilya spread his legs so Shane could lie between them, kissing into the tender place where his hips met his groin.

His cock was already hard, bumping against the side of Shane's face, and Ilya's thighs were starting to tremble with need—but Shane wasn't about to be hurried, not when he'd gone so long without this. Ilya's hands came down to thread through Shane's hair, and Shane glanced up to see Ilya watching him with dark, desperate eyes.

I love you, Shane thought, and took Ilya's cock in his mouth.

There were so many things he'd missed, but sometimes he thought he missed this most of all. He rose up slowly, sucking gently, pulling a droplet of precome out, and he moaned at the familiar taste before sinking back down. Shane loved being filled up with Ilya, the way it made him feel like he couldn't think of anything else, that all that mattered was this—the way he could make Ilya twitch and strain, one hand still in Shane's hair, the other gripping at his face, thumb running along Shane's mouth to feel where it stretched around his cock.

Shane had never been able to deep-throat like Ilya could, but he knew what Ilya liked: he looked up at him, held his gaze as he opened his mouth wide and dragged his tongue slowly up the underside, root to tip, then swirling it around the head and sucking at the slit to drink another droplet. Ilya's hips jerked and he made a broken sound that went straight to Shane's own aching cock.

"Fuck," Ilya moaned. "Your mouth, Shane, God, your mouth—"

Shane hummed around him and dropped down and up again, finding his rhythm, his tongue working steadily at the underside. He used his hand on what couldn't fit in his mouth, letting it get sloppy and wet, twisting on the upstroke in the way that used to make Ilya start to shake.

Ilya made a wounded sound and his hips stuttered up before stilling, his hands leaving Shane's hair and jaw to fist in the sheets. Shane pulled off with a wet pop and grabbed those hands, brought them to his face and sucked Ilya's fingers into his mouth, making him swear before placing them firmly back on his head.

"Fuck my mouth," he said. "Come on, I want it, please."

Shane watched Ilya's face as he took him back in, let his mouth hang open, wet and filthy. Ilya muttered something in Russian that sounded like a curse, started lifting his hips in shallow thrusts that had Shane choking a little but God, he loved it, loved the way Ilya filled him, the stretch and ache of his jaw, the way his eyes watered and blurred but he could still see Ilya staring at him, still feel his hands on him, hear his ragged breathing, the sounds he made.

"So good," Ilya gasped, his fingers tight in Shane's hair. "So fucking good for me," and Shane moaned around him, the praise making him dizzy, made him take his cock deeper, and Ilya swore again.

Shane pulled back to breathe, strings of spit connecting his lips to Ilya's cock, and he didn't wipe them away—he wanted to be messy for him, wanted Ilya to see how much he wanted this.

“Shane—fuck—look at you. So pretty like this—*Christ—*”

I love you, Shane thought as he worked him, *I love you, I love you*. He could feel Ilya getting close, could taste it, feel his cock swell and his muscles go taught.

“Shane, I’m—” Ilya’s warning came out strangled. “I’m going to come, you—”

Shane sucked hard, moaning in encouragement, and Ilya’s control shattered. His hips jerked up as he spilled hot and bitter into his mouth, and Shane thought he could come just from this, was so close just from the overwhelming power and intimacy of making Ilya feel this way.

Shane pulled off slowly, pressed a kiss to the tip, then another to Ilya’s still-trembling thigh. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, his lips swollen and buzzing, and when he looked up, Ilya was staring at him, raw and unguarded.

“Come here,” he said hoarsely, and Shane crawled back up his body. Ilya immediately pulled him into a deep, filthy kiss, licking into his mouth, tasting himself on Shane’s tongue.

He rolled them so Shane was on his back, licked his own palm and wrapped it around Shane’s aching cock, still kissing him. Shane had to pull away with a gasp, he was already so close, and Ilya kissed his cheek, his jaw, the corner of his mouth. “Shh, I have you. That’s it.”

Shane’s orgasm hit after only a few strokes, and he shuddered in Ilya’s arms, spilled hot onto his hips, cried out against his mouth.

“Shh,” Ilya murmured again. “That’s good. You’re so good.” He grabbed a corner of the sheet and cleaned them both up, pulled Shane against his chest, cradling him close.

Shane buried his face in Ilya’s neck, breathing him in, his hands roving across his chest, and his fingers found the gold cross on its chain, warm from Ilya’s skin. He’d always loved it, had watched Ilya fiddle with it countless times, had watched with glazed eyes as it dangled and swayed in his face when Ilya fucked him. Without really thinking about it, Shane lifted the cross and brought it to his mouth, closed his lips around it and held it on his tongue.

Ilya went very still, and Shane flushed with embarrassment, took it out. “Sorry—”

Ilya stroked his fingers through Shane’s hair, pressed a kiss to the top of his head. “It’s okay,” he said thickly. He lifted the cross, pressed it gently to Shane’s lips, and his hands were shaking a little as he brushed it back and forth across his mouth.

It felt like a promise Shane couldn’t make. It felt like *this is yours and I’m yours and I don’t know how to let you go*.

In the morning they took turns in the shower; Shane went first, standing under the spray and letting all traces of Ilya's touch wash away. When he emerged, towel wrapped around his waist, Ilya brushed past him without a word. They moved around each other at the sink, Shane shaving while Ilya showered, wiping away the steam every so often, Ilya brushing his teeth while Shane combed his hair. at the sink, got dressed, got packed. It was all very like getting ready to leave a hotel room Shane had shared with Hayden a thousand times before, except that when Shane got to the door Ilya pressed him back into it, kissed him sweetly, desperately, one hand cupping Shane's jaw while the other braced against the door beside his head.

"Ilya—" Shane started when they broke apart, but Ilya just shook his head.

"Don't," he said quietly. "Just...don't."

Shane nodded, swallowed past the lump in his throat, and Ilya stepped back, shouldered his bag, and opened the door.

The breakfast buffet was chaos, with half of the team wearing sunglasses indoors and nursing their coffees. Hayden, meanwhile, was beaming, glowing like a virgin on the morning after.

"Jackie and I have *got* to get away more often. That vasectomy was the best thing that ever happened to me, I know I was nervous about it, but Jesus Christ—and by the way, drunk sex is so underrated. Like if you're both into it and you're not going to, like, get sick or anything —"

Shane stopped listening, watched Ilya sit down three tables over, not looking at him.

JJ dropped down into the chair beside him, his head in his hands. "Capitaine, you didn't want to celebrate at all? Usually you come for one beer at least."

"I, uh—" Shane grabbed a piece of bacon from Hayden's plate, bought himself a second. "Just wasn't feeling it, I guess."

"You are smart," JJ said gloomily, reaching blindly for his water glass and nearly knocking it over. "I think I am still drunk."

Shane sat next to Hayden on the plane like he always did; Hayden fell asleep before they had finished taxing, and so Shane had nothing to do but stare at the back of the seat in front of him and try not to think about how three rows back Ilya was sitting with his headphones on and his hoodie pulled over his head, ignoring Gagnon's too-loud teasing about what he'd gotten up to last night that had made him so tired.

They landed in the early afternoon, and Shane walked to his car, watched Ilya walk to his, watched him drive away.

They had two days off before the home game against Tampa. Shane worked out even though it was supposed to be a rest day, running until his lungs burned, then went back to his apartment and stood in the shower until the hot water ran out.

When he came out, he'd received a text from Ilya, and he dropped his towel on the floor and stood there dripping to check it.

Ilya: did you see Mitty's instagram

Shane never looked at Instagram, and certainly wasn't interested in it now.

Shane: no

His phone buzzed again with a picture of JJ looking absolutely miserable on the plane, mouth open, drool on his chin.

Shane stared at it, baffled. This was the sort of thing he might have expected from Hayden, or from JJ himself, but... Ilya was just texting him just to *chat*, to talk shit about their teammates, just as if...

He put his phone down, forced himself to dry off, rubbing roughly at his arms and chest. He got dressed then typed,

Shane: Gagnon's got a death wish

Ilya: is true. JJ says he will put Gagnon's skates in toilet

Shane: he won't

Shane found himself almost smiling, and sat on the edge of his bed to wait and see if Ilya would say anything else. The three dots appeared, then disappeared, and then finally:

Ilya: no probably not. ok I am making dinner. talk later.

Shane stared down at his phone for another minute, then shoved it in his pocket and went to figure out what he was going to eat, though he wasn't hungry at all.

The next day was actually worse. Shane woke up hard from a dream he couldn't quite remember, and took care of it in the shower, one hand braced against the tile wall, thinking about Ilya's hands, his mouth, his voice.

Over breakfast he opened Instagram just to scroll through it for pictures of Ilya, as he'd used to do years ago when he was at his loneliest. There were new ones from the road trip—Ilya at dinner with some of the guys, a picture of a Floridian sunset. Shane scrolled back further, going back and back to before Ilya even came to Montreal, snapshots of his life in Boston—pictures of his teammates, of Svetlana.

Ilya: should I get a dog

Shane's heart jumped, and he had to go back several times to erase typos as he typed a reply.

Shane: it would be hard, wouldn't it, with road trips and all?

Ilya: yes this is why I don't already have one. but I want one.

Shane: you could get a dog walker for when you're gone

Ilya: yes but is not same. dog would be lonely

Ilya: maybe I should just get a cat instead

Shane: do you even like cats?

Ilya: who does not like cats? Why is it always one or the other, dogs or cats?

Ilya: although the cat would also be lonely.

Shane tried to think of what to say in response, what would keep Ilya talking to him, how to be interesting enough that he wouldn't get bored and go do something else. But before he had a chance, his phone buzzed again.

Ilya: if you got a dog what kind would you get

Shane: I don't know. Something low maintenance I guess.

Ilya: boring answer hollander

Ilya: I think you would get golden retriever. very friendly, very loyal, very american

Shane: I'm Canadian!!

Ilya: same thing

Shane: it's really not

Ilya: ok fine very canadian then. you would get golden retriever and name it something boring like buddy

Shane: I don't think golden retrievers are low maintenance. And that's a terrible name. I would not name a dog Buddy

Ilya: yes you would. or champ.

Ilya: I would name my dog something cool like viper or maverick

Shane: those are also terrible

Ilya: you are terrible

Shane smiled down at his phone, felt his cheeks hurt with it. He put his phone down in self-defense, headed for his living room to watch television or something, then raced back to pick it up when it buzzed again, his socked feet sliding on the hardwood.

Ilya: ok i looked at shelter website and now i am sad. all the dogs need homes.

Ilya: this is your fault for encouraging me

Shane: I didn't encourage you

Ilya: you said get a dog walker

Shane tried to think how it could work, whether there were services where you could maybe have a dog part-time, whether Ilya would want that.

Ilya: ok i need to stop looking. it's too depressing. see you at game tomorrow.

Shane's heart dropped, but he made himself answer right away, so it wouldn't seem like he didn't care, or that he cared too much.

Shane: See you.

Chapter End Notes

thunks you over the head with subtext

Chapter 10: I can listen no longer in silence

Chapter Notes

sorry this took a bit, this chapter is a beast!

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

For the first time in ten years, Ilya was certain about what he wanted. He had absolutely no idea how to go about getting it, but that wasn't immediately important—what mattered was, he wanted Shane. He wanted to kiss him and fuck him and annoy him, to wake up with him and laugh with him, to sit quietly beside him and beat the shit out of him in goals scored, and he wanted to do it for the rest of his fucking life.

Ilya had spent the better part of a decade avoiding certainty, and he wasn't sure what to do with it now that he had it. Should he just walk up to Shane and say, *I love you, I think it's not outside the realm of possibility that you love me, how about we just do that. How about we just love each other.*

Okay, he probably wasn't going to say anything at all like that, but he'd woken up this morning determined to say *something*. After the game, probably, when they'd beaten Tampa like the gods they were, when they were heading to the Stanley Cup Finals and nothing in the world could stop them.

He pulled into the player's lot early. He was never early, but Shane always was, and Ilya just wanted to see him. It had been smart, he thought, to take a couple of days off from each other, even though Shane was *right there* in the same fucking city and all Ilya had to do was get in his car and knock on his door. He hadn't, because he was trying to be smart this time.

(Being smart was terrible and Ilya hated it).

He'd brought Shane some coffee, the way he'd seen him make it at the hotel: too much cream, too much sugar, as if he didn't like coffee at all. They could sit together to review the tapes, talk strategy, and drink coffee, and eventually the rest of the team would arrive and it would seem like nothing at all, even though to Ilya it was everything.

At first he didn't even notice the other car pulling up; it wasn't Shane's boring fucking jeep, so Ilya wasn't predisposed to care. It was one of those big black SUVs that American football players and movie stars were driven around in, ostentatious in a dull sort of way. He glanced over, half-curious, and then froze.

The rear passenger door opened, and Shane Hollander stepped out.

He was laughing. His head was tilted back, his shoulders loose—happy, comfortable. He bent down to say something through the still-open door, leaning in with the easy intimacy of

familiarity—something Ilya had never once seen Shane direct at him.

Shane stepped back, and—Ilya knew who it would be before he saw her—Rose Landry climbed out of the car.

She was smiling, what looked from here like a real smile, not the polished one she wore in interviews. Shane said something that made her laugh, made her throw her arms around him and kiss him, bright and open and affectionate.

It wasn't a *kiss*, Ilya told himself. Rose Landry wasn't kissing Shane the way Ilya could, she wasn't making him want to drop to his knees—and that was a relief, of course, but it was also a little bit worse, because Ilya had never kissed Shane easily, absently, without worrying what anyone else—and particularly Shane—might think about it.

They began to turn toward the arena, and Ilya ducked back behind his Mercedes. He watched as Rose kissed Shane once more, a simple peck on the cheek, and ducked back into her movie star SUV. Shane patted the roof of the car before he closed the door, casual and see-you-later.

Ilya's hand tightened around Shane's coffee cup; the lid popped off and hot coffee sloshed over his knuckles, scalding and sticky-sweet, but he barely noticed. Shane walked into the arena without seeing him, a small smile on his face, a swing in his step.

Ilya wanted to know what they'd been laughing about. He wanted to know if Shane had spent the night with her, if that's why he was being dropped off instead of driving himself. He wanted to know if Shane had fucked her last night, this morning, if he'd touched her the way he'd touched Ilya three days ago.

Logically, Ilya knew the answer: almost certainly not. He knew Shane, knew that his variety of focus—the focus that made him such an incredible hockey player—did not allow him to feel things for more than one person, and Ilya wasn't wrong—couldn't be wrong—about what Shane felt for him.

He had spent three days building a future in his head that Shane had never agreed to, *but that didn't mean Shane didn't also want it*.

This was Shane getting a ride from a friend, probably, and all Ilya had to do was go inside and ask him about it.

Hey, I brought you coffee, also I saw you with Rose Landry, what's going on with that, because three days ago you had your mouth on my cock and I'd like to know if that meant anything to you or if this is just—

Ilya took a breath, glanced down at the squashed coffee cup, at his sticky, milky hand. He threw it away, and his own black coffee, too, and went inside to wash up, scrubbing his hands in the little kitchenette by Theriault's office. He could hear his own footsteps echoing as he walked toward the locker room, and Shane chatting with one of the equipment guys. He looked up when Ilya walked in, and his face opened up, warm and pleased.

“You’re here early,” he said.

“Yes.” It came out flat, dismissive, and he watched Shane’s smile falter. A horrible part of Ilya felt a little glad about it.

“Uh, do you want to go over the Tampa footage together? That game—the bad one, I mean—I think they could try to pull something together with their offense, and I had this idea that—”

“I saw it already.” Ilya tossed his bag in his stall, stripped off his jacket and sat down to unlace his shoes.

“Oh. Okay. I just thought—”

“I said I saw it.”

Ilya could feel Shane looking at him, could feel the confusion and hurt radiating off of him, but he couldn’t make himself look back.

“Ilya—”

There was a coughing sound in the doorway, and Ilya glanced over to see Fontaine, the Metros’ PR manager, watching them with narrowed eyes. “Sorry to interrupt,” he said. “Shane, I need you for a minute. Pre-game media availability.”

“Yeah, okay.” He stood, still in his street clothes, and started toward the door before pausing next to where Ilya was still untying his shoes, taking forever with it. “We can talk after?”

“Sure,” Ilya said, but he didn’t look up.

Shane left with Fontaine, and Ilya was left in the locker room with the very familiar sensation that he’d just made everything worse. He sat there for a long moment, staring at his half-unlaced shoes, before he finally finished the job and kicked them off, one of them hitting the back of his stall with a dull thud.

He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes until he saw stars.

The game wasn’t going as horribly as might have, but no one could call it *good* either. Ilya was playing like shit, and Shane wasn’t much better—and together, they were actually worse. The rest of the team did what they could—Pike scored a goal basically all on his own, a fact that would irritate Ilya for the rest of his career—but Tampa was taking full advantage of the Rozanov-Hollander flame-out, and by the end of the first period it was 1-1.

Theriault was decidedly unhappy.

“Hollander, Rozanov, I don’t know what the hell is going on with the two of you, if it’s a lover’s quarrel or—” Half-hearted chuckles went around the locker room, and Ilya considered whether he might simply die on the spot. “But figure it the fuck out, all right? Hollander, you’re on first line, Rozanov is on second. Fucking get it done.”

Separated, they each found their rhythm again—not the transcendent, telepathic connection they’d shared, but at least they achieved competent professional hockey. Ilya scored early in the second period, a wrister from the slot that beat the Tampa goalie glove-side. Shane answered five minutes later with a tip-in from Biss that showcased the patience that made him the best player in the league.

But Tampa wouldn’t go away. They tied it in the third, then the Metros went ahead, then Tampa tied it again with four minutes left on a garbage goal that bounced off someone’s skate and slid past the goal line. Theriault put them back together for the final shift, and Ilya skated out with Shane with his heart in his throat. Shane would never forgive him if Ilya lost this for them.

Ilya won the face-off, got it back to the defense, passed it over to Pike before driving hard to the net. The puck cycled around, came to Ilya at the blue line, and he saw Shane exactly where he needed to be, saw the lane open up for half a second. He fired it through traffic and Shane got his stick on it, redirected it past the goalie’s blocker—and the arena exploded.

The team poured over the boards in a chaotic mass of celebration, everyone screaming and hugging and piling on top of each other. Ilya let himself get swept up in it, because he did love this—he loved winning, he loved being good at hockey, he loved being a part of something. Gagnon lifted him off of his feet, Biss was sobbing uncontrollably, and Pike was shouting something like, “How do you like me now, Rozanov?”

Shane was nowhere near him. He was near the blue line, getting his helmet knocked around by JJ and Mitty, and he was bright-eyed and beautiful, mouth open in laughter. Ilya shoved Gagnon off of him, pushed through the celebrating mass of bodies toward Shane, because there was no one else he wanted to share this moment with—because they had both had big wins before, but they’d never had them together.

But Gagnon shouted, “Yo, Hollander! Your girl’s here!” and Ilya crashed to a halt.

He’d looked for Rose Landry throughout the game, but he hadn’t seen her. He’d thought she wasn’t coming—but there she was on her feet in one of the premium boxes, wearing her blue Hollander jersey.

There were thousands of people in the arena wearing Hollander jerseys, but on her it looked like a declaration of ownership.

“Aww,” JJ called, and waved up to her. “Your lady love comes to see you win!”

Shane’s face had gone red. “Guys, come on—”

“What, you embarrassed? Don’t be, man, that’s sweet as hell. She pregnant yet? She will be tonight!”

The team was circling around Shane now, everyone chirping him and grinning like idiots, shoving at his shoulders, messing up his hair. Shane was trying to laugh it off but his eyes kept darting toward Ilya. Rose was beaming down at them, and Shane lifted a hand in a small, awkward wave.

“You gonna go see her?” Pike asked. “We’ve got like ten minutes before media. You could —”

“I’ll see her after,” Shane said quickly.

Ilya turned and skated toward the tunnel.

The media availability was a blur. Ilya sat in his folding chair with Shane two seats down, Theriault between them like a buffer, and answered questions on auto-pilot. Yes, it was a hard-fought game. Yes, Tampa was a tough opponent. Yes, they were excited about the Finals. Yes, the team had shown great resilience.

Someone asked about the chemistry between him and Shane, and Ilya heard himself say something about how they’d worked through some timing issues and found their rhythm when it mattered; Shane added something about trusting each other, and Ilya actually laughed, harsh and angry-sounding, though he couldn’t even say for sure who he was mad at, Shane or himself.

Back in the locker room, the celebration was still in full swing. Someone had gotten champagne from somewhere, and Ilya got sprayed right in the face as soon as he walked in the door.

“Rozanov!” Gagnon called after him as he headed into the showers. “Where are you going? We’re celebrating!”

“Shower first,” Ilya said.

He turned the water as hot as it would go and stood under the spray, letting it beat down on his shoulders, his neck, the back of his head. Other players came in, but Ilya kept his face toward the wall and let the water run.

“—fucking incredible.”

“I can’t feel my legs. I am dead, I’m telling you, dude.”

“Where are we going tonight? Mitty’s?”

“This is the Conference Finals, man! Let’s go *out*!”

Shane was in the mix somewhere, but Ilya scrubbed his hair with shampoo for the second time, keeping his eyes shut tight so he didn’t have to see him.

One by one, the other players finished and left, but Ilya stood under the spray until his skin started to prune and the water ran lukewarm, until he was definitely the only person left in the showers.

He shut off the spray, brushed the water off of his skin with his hands, shook out his hair. He grabbed a towel and dried off roughly before wrapping it around his waist.

He knew he couldn't stay in there forever. He gripped his cross, pressed it to his mouth, promised himself that it would be okay. He'd faced worse, didn't need Shane—he just wanted him, and Ilya knew perfectly well how to do without the things he wanted.

He stopped in the hallway between the showers and locker room to get his bearings; he could see some of his teammates—though not Shane, not from here—in various states of undress, getting ready to go out. And he could hear them, clear as day, still giving Shane shit.

“So is Rose coming out with us or what?” Pike was asking.

“I don't know. Maybe. I'll probably just go home, though.”

There was general hilarity at that, along with several lewd suggestions for what he'd do when he got there, and Ilya's hands clenched.

“We're—it's not—” Shane sounded flustered. “We're friends. We've always been friends.”

“Yeah, sure,” Mitty said. “Friends with benefits, and some fucking benefits—shit, dude, what I wouldn't give to be in your shoes.”

“*No—*”

“I think that on-again, off-again thing has gotta be pretty hot, right?” Pike said. “All that pent-up horniness—”

“We've never been on-again! We dated for like a month and that was three years ago.”

“Yeah, sure—”

“And I have told you,” Shane's voice rose sharply, loudly, and the locker room went suddenly quiet, “a million fucking times, *no*. I'm not in love with her. I'm not sleeping with her. I'm not getting back together with her. I'm—”

There was pause, and though Ilya couldn't see him from where he stood in the hallway, he knew that Shane's cheeks were flushing, that his eyes had gone wide and wet the way they did when he was feeling too much, and suddenly Ilya couldn't move, couldn't even breathe.

“I'm fucking gay, all right? I'm in love with a man.”

Ilya's vision went white at the edges. His knees actually buckled slightly and he had to put a hand against the wall to keep himself upright, his palm slapping against the concrete. The towel slipped and he barely caught it, barely managed to keep it around his waist. His heart was pounding so hard he thought he was going to pass out.

There was a long silence in the locker room, and then someone, Biss maybe, said, “Oh. Okay.”

“Right,” JJ said, sounding uncertain. “I mean, that’s cool, Capitaine. That’s—yeah. Cool.”

There was another quiet moment, some shuffling of feet, and then Pike said, “It’s not me, is it?”

Ilya knuckles went white as he gripped the doorframe—fucking Pike, he was actually going to kill him, he was going to do it with a fucking knife—before the room erupted in general laughter, awkward but relieved.

“Jesus Christ, Hayden!”

“No,” Shane said, and Ilya could hear the exhaustion in his voice. “It’s not you.”

“Thank God,” Hayden said. “No offense, I love you, man, but you’re not my type.”

There was more laughter, genuine and relieved, and the locker room began to come back to life, the topic changing back to celebration as if Shane hadn’t just done that thing that Ilya knew scared him probably more than anything else in the world—and just as if he hadn’t nearly stopped Ilya’s heart in the process.

Ilya could not go into that locker room.

He was standing in nothing but a towel, water still dripping from his hair and down his spine—and he was freezing, actually starting to shiver now—and he was pretty sure he was crying. If he walked in there, every single Metro would know exactly how he felt about Shane Hollander.

“So, Ciel first?” JJ was asking.

“Yeah, then we’ll see where the night takes us.”

“Anybody seen Roz? Did he sneak out or something?”

He heard the guys gathering their things, ducked back into the shadows as Gagnon stuck his head into the hallway.

“Yeah, he must have left,” he said with a shrug. “Whatever, dude.”

Ilya listened to the sound of the locker room door opening and closing, again and again as the guys filed out—but he still didn’t come out, couldn’t, until he was sure the room was empty, until all he could hear was the drip of a shower head somewhere behind him and the sound of his own ragged breathing.

He waited another minute, maybe two, before finally stepping into the room—only to find Shane Hollander sitting on the bench in front of his stall, fully dressed in jeans and a too-

large sweatshirt, his hands clasped between his knees.

For a long moment, they just stared at each other, and then Shane got to his feet. “I’m sorry,” he said awkwardly. “I figure you heard that, and...look, it’s not...” he flushed, looked away. “I mean, yes, I’m not going to pretend...of course it’s you. Obviously. But just because I feel...like that...doesn’t mean I think you do, or anything. You don’t have to—”

“I love you, too,” Ilya blurted. “I love you. I love you.” He said it again and again, as if now that it was out he couldn’t stop saying it, didn’t want to. “It’s always been you, Shane, I’m so in love with you—”

And then Shane’s arms were around him and they were kissing even though Ilya’s teeth were chattering from cold and adrenaline, and Shane was saying “I love you so much” into his mouth.

The towel slipped at some point, probably, but Ilya didn’t care—because Shane’s mouth was warm and hot, and Ilya got his hands up under his sweatshirt where his skin was warm and hot, too. Shane made a desperate sound and backed Ilya up until his spine hit cold metal; Ilya gasped at the shock of it, and Shane swallowed it, kissing him harder, one hand coming up to cup the back of Ilya’s head, the other sliding down his bare side, fingers splayed wide.

They stumbled sideways, Shane walking Ilya backwards until the backs of his knees hit a bench and he sat down hard. Shane followed him down without breaking the kiss, straddling Ilya’s lap, tangling his fingers in his wet hair. Ilya’s hands slid up Shane’s back, feeling the shift of muscle beneath skin; Shane rolled his hips down and Ilya groaned, his grip tightening.

“We should—” Shane started, pulling back just enough to speak. “The team—”

“Don’t care,” Ilya said, and pulled him back down.

There were voices outside the locker room; Ilya registered them only dimly because they didn’t matter, nothing mattered except this. The man speaking sounded familiar, but Ilya couldn’t place him, didn’t care enough to try.

“No problem, this is what agents are good for. I’m pretty sure he didn’t leave, anyway—Hayden Pike said he was hanging back for a bit, wanted to talk to Rozanov...Hell, *I* want to talk to Rozanov, he owes me big-time for getting him on the Metros, especially with all the shit he gave me over—”

The door to the locker room swung open, and the man stopped talking.

Shane lifted his head, his face bright red and panicked, and Ilya looked over his shoulder to see his agent, John Landry, standing in the doorway—and next to him, her mouth falling open, was Rose Landry.

“Oh,” Ilya said.

For a moment, nobody moved. Shane was still straddling Ilya's lap, his hands frozen in Ilya's hair. And Ilya was very aware that he was completely naked with only Shane's body covering him, his towel a damp heap on the floor somewhere.

"Oh my God!" Rose shrieked, and clapped her hands, breaking into the biggest smile Ilya had ever seen. "Oh my God, *finally*—I can't believe this, thank God."

Shane made a sound like a dying animal and tried to climb off of Ilya's lap, but his legs got tangled and he nearly fell. Ilya caught him immediately, hands wrapping around his waist to steady him, which just made Shane's face go redder.

"Rose..." Shane said weakly. He got up and grabbed Ilya's towel from the floor, tossed it to him. Ilya took his time draping it over himself, not that it did much to hide his erection. If Rose Landry wanted to walk into a locker room without knocking first, she was just going to have to deal with what she saw.

(Ilya was not unaware that Rose Landry seemed to be quite pleased with this development, he just wasn't able to switch off his jealousy quite as easily as he probably should).

"How long?" Rose demanded, practically bouncing on her toes. "How long has this been happening? When did you finally tell him? Was it tonight? Please tell me it was tonight, that would be so romantic—"

"Rose," John said calmly, "maybe give them a minute to—"

"A minute? Are you kidding? I've been waiting three years for this!"

"Rose!" Shane's voice was muffled behind his hands.

Ilya felt a wide grin spread across his face, didn't even try to hide it.

"Okay," John said, measured and professional even as his lips twitched in amusement. "First things first—congratulations to both of you on the win, on making the Finals, and on..." he gestured vaguely between Shane and Ilya "...this. I'm very happy for you both. Second, we need to talk about how you want to handle this publicly. Shane, perhaps the four of us—you, me, Ilya, and your agent—could get on a call tomorrow and—"

"What? Why? There's nothing to...we're not...I mean, we don't have to—" He looked frantically between Ilya and John.

"Sweetie, there's no way you're going to be able to keep this quiet," Rose told him gently. "I mean, obviously John and I won't say anything—"

"Who are you, anyway?" Shane demanded. "What are you doing back here?"

"He is my agent," Ilya said.

"And my brother," Rose added. "He snuck me back here to come congratulate you. Great job!"

Ilya wasn't sure if she meant the game or the kissing, but either way he thought congratulations were well deserved. "Shane also came out to the entire team," he said, because it seemed relevant.

Rose's jaw dropped. "Holy shit."

Ilya leaned back on the bench, legs still splayed, though at least he was covered with the towel. "Yes. So I will come out also, because it's not fair—Shane doesn't get to be first openly queer—is word, yes?—hockey player. I want that, too."

"Not sure you can both be first," John pointed out, "but I hear you. Though that will definitely confirm your relationship, fyi."

"Oh my God. Oh my God."

Ilya glanced sharply over to Shane, who was bent over with his hands on his knees, breathing heavily. Quickly he got to his feet, wrapped the towel tightly around his hips—Christ, he was still so fucking cold, but at least he was dry by now—and squatted down in front of Shane, put himself in his field of vision. "Hey. Hey, it's okay."

"It's not okay. How is it okay? I just...I just outed you, basically. We're going to get kicked off the team. The league, maybe, and—"

"Yeah, that's not going to happen," John said firmly. "That's a lawsuit all ready to go. Trust me, they won't even try."

"This is a good thing," Ilya said, sliding his hands across Shane's shoulders, pulling him down so he was sitting on the floor. "For me, it is. For three years, I've wanted to be with you. Ten years, probably, or close to that."

Shane's head jerked up, and Ilya's heart squeezed the way it always did when Shane looked at him like that, eyes full and shining, as if all the love he carried was leaking out of him. "Ten years?"

"I think I have always loved you," Ilya said, kneeling in front of him. "It feels like that. I don't remember starting but I also don't remember ever not feeling that way. And I am happy not to have to hide it anymore."

This was enough to startle Shane out of his panic, and the tears that had been threatening spilled over. Ilya did what he'd always wanted to do, and ran his thumbs beneath Shane's eyes, catching his tears, spreading the moisture across his freckles. Shane blinked at him, his lashes wet and clumped together, and then he surged forward, knocking Ilya on his ass—dislodging the towel again—and kissing him frantically, covering him with his body, pressing him down into the floor

Ilya heard, as if from a distance, John clear his throat and murmur to his sister, "Let's give them some privacy." He heard the locker room door open and close, heard their footsteps echoing down the hallway. Shane was still kissing him, desperate and tender all at once, but Ilya was suddenly struck by how cold and filthy the concrete was, how he'd been naked for

the entirety of the most important conversation of his life, how he was so happy he thought he couldn't contain it—and he started to laugh.

Shane pulled back, lips wet and shining. “What? What’s funny?”

Ilya spread his hands, tipped his head back on the cement, laughed and laughed, and after a moment Shane started to laugh, too, and then they were kissing and laughing at the same time, unable to stop doing either.

Shane helped Ilya to his feet and shoved him in the shower to rinse off, got him a fresh towel and rubbed him dry. They had to stop kissing (briefly) for Ilya to get dressed, but Shane kept touching him—his shoulder, his hip, the small of his back—as if he didn't want to let go.

“Come on,” Shane said, yanking Ilya's Metro sweatshirt over his head with more force than was strictly necessary. “Let's get out of here before someone else walks in.”

They took Ilya's car, because Shane's was (he explained, ducking his head to hide his pleasure in Ilya's obvious jealousy) at the shop. “Front door this time?” Ilya asked, but Shane shook his head, leaning against the headrest with a small smile, his eyes half-closed.

“I like your place better.”

For a moment they just grinned at each other, and Ilya thought he would be embarrassed about it, but only Shane could see him and that changed everything. He threaded their fingers together—one more thing he'd always wanted to do—and headed home.

Chapter End Notes

Ilya's dick just hanging out for most of this chapter is very important to me, okay?

The end, thank you all SO MUCH, this was a blast! Come find me on tumblr
[@gorgeousundertow](#)

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